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Pastoral Paper

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10 THINGS I WISH EVERY CHRISTIAN LEADER
KNEW ABOUT GAY TEENS IN THEIR CHURCH

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Introduction

Those gay teens in your church? I was one of them. I didn't really know it yet—I didn't identify as gay—but I was attracted to women. I felt an increasing intrigue towards them, while boys were... kind of gross. I had five brothers (and seven sisters), so I grew up fighting with the boys, playing GI Joes with the boys, longing to be included with the boys.

I dated guys a bit. One of my boyfriends seemed like the male version of me: he was the other youth group superstar. When we secretly caught each other's eye in the prayer circle, we silently agreed dating the other superstar made sense. That was an interesting few months.

Nobody suspected me. I hardly suspected myself. Whenever I felt the draw towards women, I squashed it down. *That's a sin. Not just a sin, but the worst-worst sin, I believed.*

When I share my testimony, this is usually the part where I fast-forward to my secret same-sex relationship in college. I was attending a Christian university, facilitating small groups, and leading worship at the same church where my dad was a pastor. I wished I could tell someone, but I didn't know who I could trust. Every time I heard church people say, "Those gay people," their voices dripping with vitriol, or every time they elbowed me after making a gay joke, I threw up an invisible wall of distrust between us. *I will never be open with them, I promised myself. Staying in the church is harder than leaving.*

I often continue the story to a scene post-college where I wrestled between two choices: kill myself

or come out as a lesbian atheist. I talk about how a wise person taught me these "solutions" were not the answers I was searching for. There was a third way I didn't know was possible, and it was to sink my whole self into the truth of the gospel: "You are broken. You are beloved. But so is everyone. You can live in the tension with hope."¹

Today, though, I do not want to fast-forward through high school. Instead, I want to push pause right at the moment I was first wrestling with my sexuality, and ask High School Laurie: *What do you wish your church knew about you? What do you wish they would do for you?*

Based on her responses, and the desires of many present-day young adults I have mentored, I offer you this paper.² It does not speak for every LGBTQ person who walks boldly or secretly through your church doors, but I hope it speaks for some. Here are ten things I wish my church had known about me:

1. *I Have No Idea Who I Am.*

Sexuality aside, I hardly knew who I was in high school. Some of this was because the human brain is not fully developed until we are 25 years old,³ but some of it was because I was a chameleon.

I am not the first or last chameleon to walk through high school.⁴

Before my senior year, I played many roles at the five different schools I attended: mean girl, flirty girl, smart girl, youth group girl, and mean girl again. It was all an identity based on performance and others' perceptions of me.

Then I had a real, Holy Spirit encounter on a senior backpacking trip with our youth group. God reached below the layers of hiding, pain, cruelty, questioning, self-hatred, and genuine love of God to say, "I see you, Laurie. I know the real you, and I love you."

I wish I had been taught back then how to get to know the real me. God was calling her forth, but I didn't know how to answer him. I didn't know what tools to use to bring the real me before a real God in a real world.

2. *I Need a Gospel-Centered Identity.*

I didn't need self-help books; I needed an identity that was unwavering. The only unchangeable identity out there is found in the God of the Bible. I needed to learn how to read the Bible and let it read me. I needed to learn to express my pain through lament like the Psalmists. I needed to learn how the gospel fuels the joy that equips me to die a thousand deaths every day, and how that same gospel wakens me with more love than a thousand Instagram likes. (Back then, of course, it

was probably "e-props" on my Xanga site, but I digress.) I wish I knew how to listen to God, to fast, to celebrate, to meditate on the word, and to let him into the secret places of my heart.

Had I known—truly known—the foundational truth of the gospel that says I am more sinful than I believe and more loved than I can imagine, *when* I was ready to process some of my pain, I could have done so using the gospel as a template: I am broken. "This is my type of brokenness." I am beloved. "This type of brokenness doesn't make me less loved."

If I had known an identity based not on my goodness or failings but on God's grace, I might have been spared the hours I spent begging a God I thought hated me: "Please, squash me and start over. Just kill me. I am a failure."

I wasn't a failure. I was loved. But my achievement/works-based identity was failing me.

3. *I Am a Prodigal, Too.*

Because I was such a good kid, people assumed nothing painful or messy could be hiding behind my smiling face and shiny blonde hair.

It's easy to forget that the older brother is just as much a prodigal as the younger.⁵ We say it in sermons, but let's be honest: The older brother doesn't cause as many problems. The parent or pastor can take a mental break knowing the hardworking firstborn is getting stuff done. We don't have to have a sit-down, "How's your heart?" chat with them because their heart seems good. It's that darn pig-reeking younger brother who is the problem child—they are messing with our ability to make this family or church operate nicely.

We need to have those heart-to-heart talks with the good kids and the bad kids alike. We need to recognize that a well-behaved faith is not *always* a sign of a healthy heart; sometimes, it's the mark of a heart running from a terrifying reality within.

Some parents of LGBTQ-identifying or questioning teens are incredibly frustrated, shocked because their once-“good” kid is suddenly a prodigal. They feel as if their child has “turned” on them. These parents forget that we are all prodigals—gay, straight, genderqueer, valedictorians, *New York Times* bestsellers, older sisters, or pig-slopping younger brothers.

4. I Need Room To Be Messy.

“Give your child space to be messy,” my husband, Matt, a licensed counselor, often says to parents. *Messy?! Messy! How about switch them back to the good kid I had yesterday!* I see the parents’ faces twitch. “This is not who they are!” And maybe they even say to their child, “This is not who you are!”

What parents and pastors and church leaders often don’t realize is that statements like “This is not who you are” put pressure on a child to make a premature decision about who they are and perhaps even about how they are going to live. They may have already come out as gay, but parents often don’t hear the secret question mark at the end of the sentence: “I am gay...?” To say, “No, you’re not,” pressures the teenager to think of this question as a simple binary with only two possible answers.

Parents cannot contradict attraction. They can lay out for their child a biblical plan for what to *do* with same-sex attraction, but they cannot simply say “No” to their child any more than they could

tell their straight child not to feel attraction to the opposite sex.

The same-sex attracted child may be wrestling primarily with what to do about their attractions. (*Do I want to be a celibate gay Christian? A same-sex attracted Christian? Someone who is open to dating the opposite sex?*) Statements like, “No, you’re not this person” (which the child interprets as, “No, you’re not attracted to the same sex”), will isolate the child from parents at the very moment parental support is most important. That isolation can become a void, a Grand Canyon of misunderstanding. The child may then choose an easier emotion like anger to cover their pain, and double down: “Yes, I am this person, and I’m going to go live it out right now,” or turn their anger inward towards suicidal ideation and self-harm.⁶

We need to let our teens have room to be messy while we instill a gospel-centered identity—no matter how they decide to identify during and after their season of wrestling.

5. If I Come Out To You, Here Is How You Can Respond:

- Thank the child—sincerely. “Thank you so much for trusting me with what you shared. That must have been really difficult to do.”
- Reaffirm your care and love. “I don’t see you • any differently. I love you the same as I did five minutes ago.”
- Don’t say, “I thought so,” or even, “I never guessed it.” It makes the child feel like they are either a walking stereotype or a minority of a minority (by a “minority of a minority,” I mean they may think, “I don’t look gay, but I am gay. I

- Ask if it's okay for you to ask some questions. "Can I ask you more about your experience? Feel free to not answer anything you don't want to."
- Ask questions because you are genuinely curious. "I really would love to know, what has it been like for you wrestling through all of this?"
- Ask how they identify. "Would you mind telling me what words you use to describe yourself? Where are you at in this process? How would you like to be addressed?"
- If you're in a panic about what to say, restate what they just said. "It sounds like you are saying..." Listen for feeling words. "It sounds like it has been really painful to talk with your old friends at school." This is one way of helping them know that they are heard.
- Ask what their support system is like. "With whom have you shared? What has that been like for you?"
- Ask the child how they feel about themselves. You're listening for signs of self-hatred and potential self-harm. Safety is the highest priority based on statistics of LGBTQ teen suicide and harm.⁷ "After all this, how do you feel about yourself?" (Get help if it seems they are a danger to themselves or others).
- Ask the child how you can support them. "I'd love to come alongside you any way I can. How can I support you in this season?" (Then do it. Keep your word).
- Reaffirm your love and care. "Just to reiterate, I love you so much, and I am with you."

- Hug them (but ask first). "Would it be okay if I hugged you?"

6. Know That In Places Of Pain, You Can Speak Jesus To Me.

When I was in a secret same-sex relationship, I remember staring at certain people and wishing they would ask me how my relationship was going. Tone mattered. Words mattered. Trust between me and the inquirer mattered. If someone I hardly knew had asked me directly and rudely, "Why are you doing that!? Don't you know it's sin? That's not who you are," I would have answered with a giant wall: "It's fine! It's great! You just hate who I am!" But if someone had come alongside me with genuine curiosity, I could have opened up about secret pain inside.

In the end, this is what happened to me. "It's so hard," I wept to my pastor-father. Instead of rebuking my same-sex behavior, he grieved with me and pierced my heart with the love of Christ. It opened up my heart to my dad while simultaneously showing me Jesus's love—something I felt for only seconds per week in that season.

In the compassionate counseling ministry I direct, we see such an infusion of hope occur inside of young clients with whom we meet. They come prepared to lob verbal grenades at us, to reject us before we reject them, but we startle them with empathy. "You want to talk about it? You want to talk about the breakup? How's it going with her?" When we courageously, tenderly engage mess (even sin-laden mess), we begin to hear the truth behind the walls: "I hate myself. I hate my life. I actually don't know who I am. Is there something better than this?"

Right there is where Jesus offers living water.⁸ *Right there* is where the gospel is preached: We see you. We love you. We have experienced a better way—not of straightness, but of walking alongside one another through sexual brokenness, looking to Jesus as all of our hope and wholeness.

7. I Still Need To Hear Wisdom Concerning A Biblical Theology Of Sexuality.

In my mess, in my gospel-identity formation, I needed to know what the church believed about sexuality. I was not smart enough to figure out the theology piece on my own, and I needed wise, tender, courageous guidance to teach me. Otherwise, I was going to pick the easiest theology I could find and go with it.

One of my friends, Pastor Johnny McKenna of Engedi Church in Holland, MI, has been making the entire month of February “Sex Month” for his junior and senior high youth groups every other year for nearly a decade. “We believe that it is important to address sex from the stage for a month because the students are making decisions about sexuality every single day,” Johnny said. He’s seen incredible results from taking four weeks to talk about pornography, heterosexual brokenness, same-sex sexual brokenness, and God’s design for marriage. “Being open and honest about sex has led to students sharing past pain and regret, current issues and struggles, and future fears,” he said. “Students feel safe to share anything, knowing it’s okay to talk about sex in the church.”⁹ Johnny is talking and listening with empathy, compassion, and truth about sexuality, and he is seeing it facilitate community.

But he is teaching. As broken humans our default is entropy. Our default is not to “run... the race” (Heb. 12:1), “fight the good fight” (2 Tim. 4:7), “fix our eyes”

(Heb. 12:2), “put off your old self” (Eph. 4:22), or “put to death... whatever belongs to your earthly nature” (Col. 3:5).¹⁰ We slide into sinfulness. We do not slide into holiness. We need to be taught what is holy—not only by our youth pastors, but by our senior pastors.

A lead pastor friend of mine, Pastor Marvin Williams of Trinity Church in East Lansing, Michigan, is unafraid to step into these tough sermons. He told me his reasons why in a recent conversation: “If a pastor is unwilling to speak what is true, I would question their love for their congregation, and I would question their calling. If you love someone, you will say what is true. If you are called to speak, you will be obedient and do it.”

Love me and people like me enough to preach—with empathy and compassion—the truth about sexuality.

8. I Need Protection.

When you speak about same-sex sexual ethics, you are speaking to a highly vulnerable population. LGBTQ teens are 2 to 4 times more likely to attempt suicide than non-sexual-minority teens, and are 4 to 8 times more likely to attempt suicide in highly rejecting families.¹¹ This is why I urge you to speak truth only alongside two very gentle words: empathy and compassion.

When I think of empathy, I envision Jesus’s ability to sit next to us saying, “I get it. I’ve been there.” Because he has. His Spirit walks with us through every joy and pain, and he empathizes with temptation and grief from his tenure on earth (Heb. 4:15, Is. 53:3). Even if a pastor cannot empathize directly with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria, they can unquestionably empathize with wrestling with broken sexuality.

Compassion, on the other hand, is looking *at* a situation and acknowledging, “I can never understand your pain enough. I have not walked in your shoes, but I see the miles they have trudged through the muck.” Straight pastors engaging this conversation will never be able to empathize completely. Though we all experience sexual brokenness, there are unique challenges sexual minorities face. This is where compassion comes in. A pastor must speak from a place of empathy (“I can understand sexual brokenness”), but also from a place of compassion (“I see your specific brokenness, and I can never ‘get it’ enough”).

When pastors take this heart posture of empathy and compassion, speaking out in specific protection for vulnerable populations from the main stage, it could sound something like this: “Everyone in this room is loved uniquely and individually. We want to care well for all of you. Your physical, emotional, and spiritual safety is our top priority. We do not tolerate bullying, unkindness, or rudeness towards anyone based on race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. If we hear about it or see it happening online or in person, we will take it very seriously.”

One more specific way to protect me and people like me is to seek to remove unintentional marginalization through offensive language. Instead of saying “gay lifestyle,” say “someone who is engaging in same-sex behavior.” (What is a gay lifestyle? What is a straight lifestyle?) Instead of saying “homosexuals,” say “LGBTQ people.” Completely remove the air quotes around the words *gay* and *gay marriage*, because those air quotes create an unnecessary divide between LGBTQ people and straight people. “Those people think it’s marriage, but it’s not,” the quotes say disdainfully. You can believe same-sex marriage isn’t marriage as defined by God without using air quotes.

Lastly, stop saying the phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” This phrase is meaningless to an LGBTQ person who affirms same-sex sexual expression. There is no beginning and end to their being gay. It is infused in their identity, and so they simply hear you saying, “I hate your whole person.” Like Jesus does with all of us, begin with the person as they are, where they are, and trust God to work out their sexuality in his timing (see how Jesus interacts with the woman at the well in John 4:4-26 for an example of this). Focus on instilling a gospel-centered identity, speak what is true with tenderness, and let Jesus sanctify them.

9. I Need A Mentor (Or Five).

Chances were high that I would end up leaving the church completely. Chances are even higher for kids in youth group today—no matter their orientation. 40-50 percent of kids connected to a youth group in high school will drop out in college.¹² 59 percent of Millennials have stopped attending church completely.¹³

What’s the solution? A huge role is mentorship—specifically, a 5:1 ratio of adult, intergenerational mentors to kids.¹⁴ According to longitudinal research from the Fuller Youth Institute, “More than any single program or event, kids were far more likely to feel like a significant part of their local churches when adults made the effort to get to know them.” They recommend using the 5:1 model, which means there are five significant adult relationships *per child*.

That may sound like too many people. As I reflect on my own journey and watch the students with whom I work, however, I suspect that young people are far more likely to experience increased support, less shame, and a submission of brokenness to the Lordship of Christ when they see how truth embodies itself in people. They watch their

mentors walk the hard, narrow road of following Jesus. As they broaden their support structure by opening up to more mentors and friends, they see the gospel lived out in others. *Perhaps there is something to living a broken/beloved life, they begin to realize. Perhaps I don't have to be temptation-free. Perhaps I only need to be on the sanctification journey towards wholeness and holiness just like my mentor(s).*

10. Remove Heteronormativity (The Assumption That Everyone Is Only Attracted To The Opposite Sex) Whenever Possible.

You may have heard and perhaps said, “Blue and pink make purple. Don’t make purple.” It is a lighthearted, well-intentioned way to tell kids not to make sexual choices with the opposite sex at events. But what if you’re not into the opposite sex? (Or what if you don’t identify as the gender you were assigned at birth?) This becomes an unintentionally shaming and ineffective statement for the LGBTQ kid going on a weekend trip with church.

Don’t assume every young woman is attracted to guys, and every guy is attracted to young women. Practically, this means making subtle shifts in the ways we talk about sex and attraction. “Guys, I know you want to hang with the girls (wink wink)...” becomes, “Okay, I know you all want to chat...” Rooming may need to be reconfigured at overnight events to ensure everyone feels comfortable (this is a big conversation that must be handled delicately). Additionally, rethinking gender stereotyping at events would be kind to the silent LGBTQ kid who often feels incredibly “other.” Perhaps even once per year the guys’ day out could include painting pottery along with paintballing. The young women’s day could include grilling meat as well as a day of pedicures.

Conclusion

You're not going to get this right every time. If you haven't done it already, you are going to fail your LGBTQ kids—and your straight kids—many times. This is why, when I speak publicly about how to be a “safe” person for LGBTQ kids, I begin by talking about humility. Humility is the most incredible, approachable, attractive characteristic of Jesus, and it can transform our relationships with each other. “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:5-7, ESV).

When stepping into any conversation concerning the above 10 ideas with an LGBTQ student, it would be wise to begin with, “Hey, I want to understand and to care well for you. However, I don't know what I don't know. If I offend you, will you please tell me? I don't want to hurt you.” Humility draws hearts together no matter our differences in theology or life experience.

Humility is unquestionably the reason I stayed in the church even while I lived a secret double life. The churches I attended and the people in them were imperfect, but they were humble. They wanted to grow and to learn. It gave me hope that perhaps one day I would be free to share all of my struggles with them, knowing that they would learn to receive me and my story as another amazing but ordinary example of the gospel:

I am more sinful than I believe, and I am more loved than I can imagine. And so are you.

Notes

1. My definition of the gospel is borrowed and adapted from Tim Keller. His exact quote: "The gospel says you are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, but more accepted and loved than you ever dared hope." See <http://www.timothykeller.com/intro/> for more.
2. I am the executive director of Hole in My Heart Ministries—a compassionate counseling ministry for people wrestling with issues related to sexuality. The goal of HIMH is not orientation change but rather to create safe spaces for and around people wrestling with sexuality. HIMH Ministries has the unique privilege of walking alongside LGBTQ people, people wrestling with pornography addiction, adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and their families and friends.
3. Aamodt, Sandra and Tony Cox. "Brain Maturity Extends Well Beyond Teen Years." *NPR*, 10 Oct. 2011, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=141164708.
4. Choi, Charles Q. "How Teenagers Find Themselves." *Scientific American*, Nature America Inc., 1 Feb. 2009, www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-teenagers-find-themselves/.
5. See Luke 15:11-32.
6. "Facts about Suicide." *The Trevor Project*, www.thetrevorproject.org/pages/facts-about-suicide.
7. For instance, relative to their straight peers, LGBTQ teens are 2-4 times more likely to commit suicide while living with *accepting families* and 4-8 times more likely while living with *families that are not accepting* (Bill Henson, *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones* [Lead Them Home Ministries, 2016], 4).
8. See John 4:4-11.
9. Email conversation with Johnny McKenna, 24 Aug. 2017.
10. All five passages are taken from the NIV translation.
11. Bill Henson, *Guiding Families of LGBT+ Loved Ones* (Lead Them Home Ministries, 2016), 4.
12. Powell, Kara, et al. "The Church Sticking Together." *StickyFaith.org*, *Immerse Journal*, 11 Oct. 2011, stickyfaith.org/articles/the-church-sticking-together.
13. "Americans Divided on the Importance of Church." *Barna Research*, Barna Group, 24 Mar. 2014, www.barna.com/research/americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church/.
14. Eaton, Sam. "59 Percent of Millennials Raised in a Church Have Dropped Out-And They're Trying to Tell Us Why." *Faithit*, 22 Mar. 2017, faithit.com/12-reasons-millennials-over-church-sam-eaton/.

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Pastoral Paper

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15 REASONS FOR AFFIRMING SAME-SEX
RELATIONS— AND 15 RESPONSES

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Introduction

If we were having this discussion 30 years ago, or even 20 years ago, very few people would have expected affirming Christians to defend their view with biblical arguments. For the most part, two positions dominated the dialogue: one that used the Bible and another that didn't. Most Christians thought that if you simply read the Bible, you'd clearly see that the Bible condemns all types of same-sex sexual behavior. End of story. No debate.

Regardless of whether you think the Bible is clear on this issue (and I actually think it is), there are a growing number of Christians, even evangelical Christians, who now hold to an affirming view of same-sex sexual relations. The debate is no longer about what the Bible *says*; it's about what the Bible *means*.

This distinction is crucial, and it means that people who wish to uphold the traditional Christian sexual ethic can no longer be content to ignore opposing views. Even if you are 100% convinced that the Bible condemns same-sex relations, it's still very important for you to know, wrestle with, and even consider the affirming arguments if you want to maintain a traditional view of marriage with any degree of thoughtfulness and credibility.

In this paper, we'll seek to understand why some Christians affirm the sanctity of consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations. We'll start with the biblical arguments used by affirming Christians, most of which have to do with the biblical prohibitions against same-sex sexual behavior found in Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans

1:26-27, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, and 1 Timothy 1:9-10. Then, in the second half of this paper, we'll address some general arguments against the traditional view of marriage.¹

Old Testament Prohibitions

The Old Testament doesn't say a whole lot about same-sex behavior. But there are two laws in Leviticus that clearly condemn it: Lev. 18:22 and 20:13.

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22, ESV)

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them." (Lev. 20:13, ESV)

Both verses condemn male same-sex sexual behavior.² So how do affirming Christians address these two prohibitions?

Reason 1: Old Testament Laws Are No Longer Binding on Christians

Some affirming Christians point out that these commands are in Leviticus—the Old Testament law—and that Christians are no longer under the Old Testament law. Sure, it was wrong for *Israel* to engage in same-sex sexual behavior. But it was also wrong for Israel to eat pork, trim their beards, and gather sticks on Saturday. Christians, however, don't need to abide by these laws. They were for *Israel*. And they've been fulfilled and done away with in Christ.

While this affirming argument can still be found on Google, most thoughtful affirming Christians don't use it any more. It's not a very good

argument, and here's why: *Just because some laws in the Old Testament are no longer binding on Christians doesn't mean that no laws are.* There are many Old Testament laws that are still binding on Christians, including several prohibitions right here in Leviticus: incest (18:6-18; 20:11-14, 17, 19-21), adultery (18:20; 20:10), child sacrifice (18:21; 20:1-5), bestiality (18:23; 20:15-16), theft (19:11), lying (19:11), taking the Lord's name in vain (19:20), oppressing your neighbor (19:13), and many others—all written within one chapter of the laws prohibiting same-sex sexual behavior.

Just because *some* Old Testament laws aren't binding on Christians doesn't mean *no* laws are.

In fact, if you read Leviticus 18, you'll see that this chapter deals almost exclusively with sexual immorality, and all the laws about sexual immorality are carried over into the New Testament—adultery, incest, bestiality, and same-sex sexual behavior.³ Ancient Jews used the word *porneia* to describe all these sexual sins, and *porneia* is roundly condemned by New Testament writers (e.g. Matt. 5:32; 15:19). Scot McKnight, a New Testament scholar, says it like this: "When you double click on the term *porneia*... it takes you to Leviticus 18."⁴ It's hard to imagine why Lev. 18:22 and 20:13 would not apply to Christians, while these other laws would. In fact, when Paul prohibits same-sex behavior in 1 Cor. 6:9, he uses a word that formed from the same-sex prohibition in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13.⁵ According to Paul, then, the Leviticus prohibitions carry authority for new covenant believers.

Reason 2: The Old Testament Was Patriarchal

Another way affirming Christians deal with the prohibitions in Leviticus is to point out that sexuality at that time was profoundly patriarchal. That is, men were more valued than women, and women were seen as little more than sexual receivers and baby makers.

What does this have to do with the same-sex prohibitions in Leviticus? Some affirming Christians argue that men were forbidden from having sex with other men because such an act would *treat another man as a mere woman*. In male same-sex intercourse, one man must act “like a woman” in the sexual act—receiving rather than giving. In a patriarchal culture, where women were viewed as property and much less valuable than men, such an act would be disgraceful.

So was a low view of women driving the same-sex prohibition? And if so, should we follow a command that’s inherently demeaning towards women?

Here are two responses to this challenge. First, while the Old Testament *world* was deeply misogynistic (that is, it devalued women), the Old Testament itself is not. Certainly, there are some laws and statements that seem to uphold men as more valuable as women, but when considered against the backdrop of the rest of the ancient world, the Old Testament is quite liberating towards women. Several women are held up as heroes of the faith, more courageous than the men around them (Rahab, Ruth, Deborah, and Abigail, to name just a few). Plus, the creation account of Genesis 1 makes the claim—radical for that time—that women and men equally possess the image of God. Many ancients believed only kings possessed God’s image. The Old Testament says all people, including every single female on the planet, were created in

God’s image. So, while the ancient world was misogynistic, it doesn’t seem that the Old Testament itself reflects the same degree of patriarchy.⁶

Second, and most importantly, there’s nothing in the actual text of Scripture (in Leviticus or elsewhere) suggesting that the *reason* men shouldn’t have sex with each other is that they shouldn’t act like “mere” women. Read through Leviticus 18 and 20 for yourself. Or read through the entire book of Leviticus. There’s nothing in Scripture which says that men shouldn’t have sex with other men *because* this would treat another man as a lowly, baby-making, kitchen-bound woman. The commands in Leviticus simply state in absolute and unqualified terms: Men shouldn’t have sex with other men. Affirming Christians who pump these commands full of patriarchal assumptions assume things about the text that are not clearly there.

Reason 3: Same-Sex Prohibitions Were Really about Domination and Exploitation

Another point sometimes raised by affirming Christians is that consensual, monogamous, same-sex relations didn’t exist in the ancient world. Sure, it was common for masters to have sex with their male slaves, older men to have sex with younger teenage boys, or victims of war to be raped by their male conquerors. But these are acts of *sexual exploitation*, not consensual love.

So are the prohibitions in Leviticus only talking about *exploitative* same-sex acts (for instance, a master raping his male slave)? Or do they ban *consensual* same-sex acts as well?

The answer is both. Of course exploitative acts are forbidden. The Bible would never sanction a master raping his slave, or any other act of sexual violence.

But there's nothing in the biblical text that limits the prohibition to such acts of sexual exploitation. Again, don't just believe me. Go back and carefully read the prohibitions. Do they mention masters or slaves or prostitutes or rape or older men having sex with teenage boys? The language of Leviticus simply says that men (not just masters, or older men, or victors of war) shouldn't have sex with other men (not just slaves, or younger boys, or war victims). There's nothing in the text or around the text that limits the prohibition to acts of exploitation.

Some affirming Christians say that the biblical text doesn't need to specifically mention exploitation since *every same-sex relationship in the ancient world was exploitative*. But this simply isn't true either. For what it's worth, we know very little about same-sex relations in the ancient world. But the evidence we do have is somewhat diverse. Sure, we have evidence of exploitative same-sex relations, but we have evidence of consensual relations as well.⁷ So we can't just assume that all relationships back then were abusive. Some were, but some weren't. And Leviticus doesn't limit its same-sex prohibitions to abusive acts. All types of male same-sex behavior are condemned.

In short, if you *look at the text and study its historical context*, there's no evidence that Leviticus was only prohibiting certain types of same-sex behavior.

Reason 4: The Sin of Sodom Was Not Homosexuality

Before we leave the Old Testament, we need to mention the story of Sodom (Genesis 19). As you may recall, a couple of angels show up to Lot's house in the city of Sodom and the men of the city mistake the angels for men. After trying to have sex with the two angels, the Sodomites are struck with blindness as divine punishment for their evil attempt.

Some Christians point to this passage as clear evidence that God condemns same-sex sexual behavior. However, it's important to notice that what's happening in Genesis 19 is *not* consensual same-sex love; it's *attempted sexual violence*—like an ancient version of modern-day prison rape. If a man in prison rapes another man, it's usually not because the perpetrator was gay. It's an act of domination and power. Likewise, the men of Sodom were trying to gang-rape Lot's guests. If we're going to examine the text fairly, in this case, exploitation *is* the issue. The men of Sodom were not courting Lot's guests, bringing them flowers and asking them out for a romantic stroll under the moonlight. Consensual same-sex love is not the focus; sexual violence is. And, for what it's worth, whenever the Bible refers back to the sin of Sodom, it never mentions same-sex sexual behavior.⁸

It's true that *if* the men of Sodom had gone ahead and raped the two men (or angels), they would have violated Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. But it's important to stay focused on the main point of the passage and the main sin depicted there. Consensual same-sex sexual activity is nowhere to be found in Genesis 19, and yet consensual same-sex love is the pressing ethical question facing the church. To use the Sodom story as evidence that God prohibits consensual same-sex love is like using Donald Trump's Twitter account as evidence that cell phones are sinful.

Those of us who do hold a traditional sexual ethic must resist the temptation of racing uncritically to certain passages and overlooking what they actually say in order to find support for our view. We need to step back and think through how we're interpreting the Bible and how we're applying it to this discussion.

For an in-depth investigation of the story of Sodom,

see our Pastoral Paper "Was Homosexuality the Sin of Sodom?" (Available at centerforfaith.com.)

New Testament Prohibitions

Three passages in the New Testament prohibit same-sex behavior. The most important is Romans 1:

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error (Rom. 1:26-27, ESV).

The other two times same-sex sexual behavior is mentioned are in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, *nor men who practice homosexuality*, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10, ESV).

[U]nderstanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for

those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, *men who practice homosexuality*, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine (1 Tim. 1:9-10, ESV).

In English, at least, these passages seem rather clear. So how do affirming Christians interpret them? Again, it's important to make sure we actually listen to and try to understand these arguments. Listening doesn't necessarily mean *agreeing*. But you can't disagree until you actually understand what it is you're disagreeing with. Real dialogue in search of the truth only happens when people on *both* sides of a conversation are willing to hear all the evidence, even evidence that threatens to change their minds. You can't be proven right unless you take the risk of being proven wrong

Reason 5: It's Exploitation—Again

One of the most popular affirming interpretations for these New Testament passages is the same "exploitation argument" we saw in the Old Testament. Again, some say that the only type of same-sex relations that existed in the ancient world, including the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, was exploitative—rape, prostitution, and pederasty, which refers to older men having sexual relations with teenage boys.

Our two-fold response to this argument is same one we gave above. In short, *look at the text and study its context*.

As with the Leviticus passages, there's nothing in these New Testament passages that mentions masters or slaves or prostitutes or rape or older men having sex with boys. In fact, there are several different Greek words for "pederasty," and none of them are used in these passages.⁹ (None of them actually occurs in the New Testament.) Of course, the biblical writers would have condemned pederasty, but they didn't *only* condemn pederasty. All types of male-male sexual relations were considered to be outside of God's will and design.

What's fascinating is that several affirming scholars actually agree with this point. For instance, the late Louis Crompton, a self-identified gay man, was a brilliant scholar who wrote a 500-page book called *Homosexuality and Civilization*.¹⁰ In it, he says:

According to [one] interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems strained and unhistorical. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstance. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any other Jew or early Christian.¹¹

Bill Loader is the world's foremost scholar on sexuality in ancient Christianity and Judaism, and he's an affirming Christian. He's published thousands of pages in eight books on the topic.

Still, he rejects the argument that the only same-sex relationships in the ancient world were *exploitative*. Loader says that Rom. 1:26-27 included, but was by no means limited to "exploitative pederasty," "sexual abuse of male slaves," or "same-sex acts ... performed within idolatrous ritual contexts."¹² And again: "It is inconceivable that [Paul] would approve of any same-sex acts if, as we must assume, he affirmed the prohibitions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 as fellow Jews of his time understood them."¹³

The idea that New Testament writers were *only* prohibiting exploitative same-sex relations is neither biblically nor historically accurate.

Reason 6: Paul Condemns Having Sex Against One's Own Nature

This argument is based on Rom. 1:26-27, where Paul says, "For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are *contrary to nature*." Some affirming Christians argue that God is only condemning heterosexuals who have abandoned their natural desire for the opposite gender and pursue sexual relations with the same gender. In other words, the "nature" Paul's referring to is their natural sexual orientation. Straight people shouldn't have gay sex.

This interpretation, however, doesn't follow what Paul is actually saying. He does not say "contrary to *their* nature," but "contrary to nature" (*para physin* in Greek). The Greek phrase *para physin* was often used by other ancient writers to describe same-sex sexual relations.¹⁴ The phrase wasn't used to describe sexual orientation. The Stoics, for instance, believed that same-sex relations were *para physin* since they went against the order of nature—a sort of moral code built into creation. Christians and Jews believed

something similar, though they spoke in terms of a personal Creator who could be known through creation (a point made clear in Rom. 1:19-23). The point is, Paul is not saying some people left behind their innate heterosexual urges to pursue same-sex partners for whom they felt no innate desire. He's saying that some people have gone against the Creator's will and design for sexual expression (that is, male-female marital relations) to pursue sexual relations with members of their same sex.

Given the context of Romans 1 and how *para physin* is used by other writers in Paul's day, it's unlikely that Paul is talking about people simply deviating from their own sexual orientation.

Reason 7: The Real Problem was Excessive Lust

A similar affirming argument says that same-sex relations were condemned because Paul considered them the result of excessive lust. That is, straight men got bored having sex with women, and out of their lust, they explored new and kinky territory with other men.

Whereas the previous argument focuses on the *types* of same-sex relations, this argument focuses on the *reasons why* men were having sex with other males. Both arguments are trying to distinguish between same-sex relations back then and same-sex relations today.

It's easy to see how someone reading Romans 1 might come to this conclusion. Paul says that men "were consumed with passion for one another" (Rom. 1:27), which sure sounds like lust. But pay close attention to what Paul is writing. Is lust the only reason why these relations were wrong?

Paul doesn't actually say this. If you look at the broader context, Paul's point is that men departed from their Creator's intention by having sex with other males. Of course there's passion and desire involved. That kind of goes hand in hand with any sex act—gay or straight! (Could any couple have sex and *not* be "consumed with passion for one another?") But the passion or lust is not the reason why Paul says same-sex sexual behavior is wrong.

Other Theological and Relational Arguments

The arguments we'll cover in the second half of this paper deal with broader themes and questions that go beyond interpreting the five prohibitions against same-sex sexual behavior.

Reason 8: Understanding Same-Sex Laws along a Trajectory Ethic

This one has arguably become *the* leading argument by thoughtful affirming Christians. In many ways, it's an attempt to get around the counterarguments I've given to the previous affirming arguments.

A trajectory ethic assumes that the Bible doesn't always give us a complete or fully developed position on all ethical matters. Take slavery, for example. The Bible never comes out and condemns slavery as an institution. However, we can see some rumblings of the institution being challenged, especially in the New Testament. That is, we can identify a *trajectory in the Bible that doesn't quite condemn slavery but is moving towards this goal*.

Some argue the same thing with women in the Bible. (The trajectory argument isn't the *only* argument for women's ordination, by the way.) The Old Testament appears to be patriarchal, but the New Testament is moving towards full equality and liberation. Some argue, therefore, that the biblical trajectory is headed towards the full inclusion of women into all areas of ministry and leadership. Since the Bible gives us an incomplete ethic (so the argument goes), we still

see a residue of patriarchy in passages where Paul tells women to keep silent in church (1 Corinthians 14) and forbids them from holding leadership and teaching positions (1 Timothy 2). Follow the trajectory towards its logical conclusion, and these patriarchal commands fade away.

Let's just assume a trajectory ethic for slavery and women. The question is: Can we also identify the same trajectory for same-sex relations? Does the Bible begin to move away from prohibiting same-sex sexual behavior? Is there anything in the Bible to suggest that gay marriage might be included as part of God's intention?

Many affirming Christians say, "Yes!" But there's really no evidence for this. From Genesis to Revelation, there are almost no changes to God's parameters for sexuality and marriage. I say "almost" because there are some. Polygamy, for instance, is allowed in the Old Testament, but we see the New Testament moving away from it. Divorce too was allowed in the Old Testament, but Jesus himself tightened up on those laws in the New. Think about it. *When the Bible augments its vision for marriage and sexuality, it moves towards a stricter ethic, not a more expanded one.* We see movement towards the Genesis 1-2 ideal of one man and one woman bound together in an inseparable one-flesh union.

Reason 9: Christians Have Often Been on the Wrong Side of History Before

I often hear people point out that for hundreds of years, the church believed slavery was okay. We only recently realized, they say, that slavery is a horrible evil. Is not the current debate about same-sex relations the same thing?

Non-affirming Christians are like our slave-owning forefathers. One day, we'll realize that we were on the wrong side of history.

In some ways, Christians have been on the wrong side of history when it comes to the LGBT+ conversation. Some Christians have mistreated, shunned, dehumanized, and failed to love LGBT+ people. We've not taken the time to listen or to learn from LGBT+ people, and some Christians wish that gay people simply didn't exist. History will look back and say, "What was wrong with you Christians?" just as we look back on our slave-owning forefathers and say, "What was wrong with you people?"

But this is a posture problem, not a theological problem. Believing that marriage is a one-flesh union between two sexually different persons and that God intends sexual expression to take place within this covenant of marriage doesn't mean we should mistreat or shame LGBT+ people.

Plus, the church's historic view of slavery is not the same as its historic view of same-sex relations. For the last 2,000 years, the church has always and unanimously viewed same-sex sexual relations as immoral. But the same unanimity has not existed in its view of slavery. Throughout church history, various religious and political leaders have opposed slavery. William the Conqueror (1027-1087), Saint Wulfstan (1009-1095), Anselm (1033-1109), Pope Paul III

(1468-1549), and even the great theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) all said slavery was sin. Sociologist Rodney Stark writes, "The problem wasn't that the leadership was silent. It was that almost nobody listened."¹⁵ In fact, not only did historic Christians dissent against slavery, but Christians also led the way in ending slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Christians are far from perfect; it's why we need a perfect Savior. But it's not as if the entire body of Christ for 2,000 years was pro-slavery. The church *has*, however, held to a uniform belief about same-sex relations until the late 20th century (in the West). Yes, we should consider the possibility that we might have been wrong side of history. But we also need to consider the possibility that we might have been right—that perhaps 2,000 years of unanimity are not mere coincidence.

Reason 10: I Was "Born this Way," How Could it Be Wrong?

This argument is often invoked on blogs and in popular media, even though scholars realize that it's not scientifically accurate. Some affirming Christians argue that gay people are "born gay" and should therefore be allowed to express their love within the context of a consensual, monogamous relationship. Put differently, since God made some people gay, he shouldn't punish them for engaging in same-sex relations.

There are several things wrong with this line of reasoning. First, it misunderstands God's involvement in human birth. While God is Creator and He gives life to the womb, every human since Adam is born into a fallen world where things "aren't the way they're supposed to be."¹⁶

People are born with all sorts of biological, mental, and emotional traits that aren't naturally aligned with God's will. Simply because a person experiences a desire that appears to be inborn doesn't mean they should act on that desire—no matter how strong or seemingly fixed that desire is.

So even if some people were born with a fixed same-sex orientation, this wouldn't in itself mean they should engage in same-sex behavior. Even Justin Lee, founder of the Gay Christian Network, doesn't buy into this argument. He says:

Just because an attraction or drive is biological doesn't mean it's okay to act on... We all have inborn tendencies to sin in any number of ways. If gay people's same-sex attractions were inborn, that wouldn't necessarily mean it's okay to act on them, and if we all agreed that gay sex is sinful, that wouldn't necessarily mean that same-sex attractions aren't inborn. "Is it a sin?" and "Does it have biological roots?" are two completely separate questions.¹⁷

And Justin is an affirming gay Christian. Still, he believes that the "born this way" argument isn't a good way to construct a Christian sexual ethic.

But are people "born gay?" Without getting caught in the weeds of research, the best scientists who have studied the question of orientation say that it's not that simple. There's most likely a complex blend of nature (biology) and nurture (environmental influences) that shapes same-sex desires. According to the

American Psychological Association,

[N]o findings have emerged that permit scientists to conclude that sexual orientation is determined by any particular factor or factors. Many think that nature and nurture both play complex roles.¹⁸

A recent major study on sexual orientation by Johns Hopkins University comes to similar conclusions.¹⁹ Keep in mind, these aren't fundamentalist Christians trying hard to prove the "born this way" argument wrong. These are just scientists doing good scientific research.

So whether the cause of same-sex attraction is nature or nurture (or both), the Bible still prohibits same-sex sexual behavior.

Reason 11: Shouldn't Christians Just Love Everyone?

Many people say that the non-affirming view is inherently unloving. It's unloving, they say, to "deny a person's right" to pursue the romantic relationship they desire. After all, a same-sex relationship isn't harming anyone. Why do Christians care about what two people do in the bedroom? And didn't Jesus teach his followers to love people—all people—especially those have been marginalized?

Before wrestling with this argument, we must all check our hearts and ask: Have we been unloving towards gay people? Have you told a gay joke, laughed at a gay joke, looked down upon a gay person, or ignored someone who's wrestling with same-sex attraction? There are many ways in which straight Christians have not been loving

towards gay people. When we hear the “What about Love?” argument, we need to first repent from any unloving thing we’ve said or done.

We also need to make a clear distinction between a societal ethic and an ethic for the church. I don’t think it’s the church’s job to project a Christian ethic on the rest of society. When we talk about same-sex sexual relations or same-sex marriage, we are embodying and articulating a distinctive *Christian* ethic for the church—one that’s based on Scripture and confirmed by tradition. Christians should be able to love people without forcing them to adhere to a Christian ethic.

As for the argument itself—that we should just love everyone—it rightly prioritizes love but wrongly defines it. Jesus tells us to “love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12), and that last part is important. When Jesus loved his disciples, he didn’t always (or usually) affirm their behavior or desires. It’s worldly love, not Christian love, that says: if you love me, you’ll affirm everything I desire to do and everything I believe to be true about myself. When Jesus loved people, He loved them towards holiness, not away from it. And this includes sexual holiness—as defined by Scripture.

Christian ethics can’t be reduced to the secular code of “do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.” It’s true, most sins end up hurting other people. But some don’t. If I bow down to an idol in the secrecy of my basement, I’m not hurting anyone. If my wife and I didn’t have kids, and we happened to “fall out of love with each other,” we wouldn’t hurt anyone by getting a divorce. But the Bible never uses the “do whatever you want as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone” logic for determining what is right and

wrong.

As we love people, we must love them as Jesus loved them—towards holiness, not away from it.

Some people describe this posture with the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.” I actually don’t like this phrase. It sounds too self-righteous—as if we are standing over here shrouded in all our holiness, while loving all those other dirty sinners over there. At least, that’s how the phrase sounds when gay people hear it.

Instead of “love the sinner, hate the sin,” how about “love the sinner, hate your own sin, and let’s pursue Christ together!” That’s the texture of Christian love.

Reason 12: The Bible Hardly Talks about Homosexuality

It’s true that Scripture mentions same-sex relations less than a dozen times. And for “verse counters,” this must mean that it’s not all that important. After all, the Bible mentions greed and the misuse of money in more than 2,000 passages! Why aren’t we more concerned about the abuse of wealth than we are same-sex sexual behavior?

Let’s linger on that last line for a second. Are we more concerned about same-sex sexual behavior than we are about the misuse of wealth? Why? Do we have a strong biblical case for our concern? Do we misuse wealth? Do we give generously to the poor? Will we inherit the kingdom of heaven if we haven’t clothed the naked, feed the poor, and visited those in prison? Are you regularly practicing these things—things that Jesus said are essential for salvation (Matt.

25:31-46)?

God addresses the misuse of wealth and calls it a crime 400 times more often than He addresses same-sex sexual behavior.

Now, to be clear, just because some sins are addressed more often than others doesn't mean they're worse sins; or, if some sins are only addressed a few times, that doesn't mean they are merely misdemeanors in God's court. Followers of Jesus should pay close attention to both frequently and infrequently addressed sins. And just because something is mentioned only a few times in the Bible doesn't mean it doesn't matter to God. I may rarely tell my kids that they aren't allowed to drive my truck, but that doesn't mean it's not an important prohibition. And I may delve into lengthy sermons twice a day about why they need to brush their teeth, but this doesn't mean dental hygiene is more important than underage driving.

The point is, if we truly love Jesus, we will pay close attention to all of God's commands and not try to weigh them on the scale of significance based on frequency. God may have reasons unknown to us (and there are cultural and historical reasons as well) that explain why he mentioned some things only a few times while other commands seem to inhabit every other divine breath.

Reason 13: Jesus Never Mentioned Homosexuality

This is true. Jesus never explicitly mentions homosexuality. And some people have understood this silence to mean he either doesn't care about it or he probably would have affirmed same-sex relations. But this is reading way too

much into Jesus's silence. Here's why:

First, Jesus was a Jew, and first-century Judaism was the context of his life and teaching. The topics debated with other Jews were always ones that were disputed within Judaism (like divorce or how to keep the Sabbath). But same-sex relations were never disputed within Judaism. Every Jew in and around Jesus's day believed that same-sex relations were against God's will. And this is probably why Jesus never mentions it. It wasn't relevant for his specific, Jewish context.

Second, although he doesn't mention same-sex relations, Jesus does mention "sexual immorality" more broadly. In Matt. 15:19, for example, he says, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander." Again, every Jew in Jesus's day considered same-sex relations to be immoral based on the sexual laws in Leviticus 18. Even though Jesus doesn't directly mention same-sex sexual behavior, he does so indirectly.

Third, when Jesus *does* depart from a traditional Jewish sexual ethic, he doesn't expand that ethic but tightens it. For instance, divorce was debated within Judaism. Some Jews were strict about appropriate grounds for divorce, while others were more lenient. Jesus holds to a stricter view. The same is true with adultery. Many Jews believed that you hadn't committed adultery unless you actually slept with another person's spouse. But Jesus tightens the Jewish ethic: "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28). Again, when Jesus does depart from a Jewish sexual ethic, he moves towards a stricter ethic, not a more lenient one. Based on what Jesus does say about sexual ethics, there's no evidence that he

would have affirmed same-sex relations if the question came up.

In sum, Jesus's silence on same-sex relations cannot be taken as indifference or affirmation. We must interpret Jesus within his first-century Jewish context (and not our 21st-century Western one). For an in-depth paper on Jesus and homosexuality, see our Pastoral Paper "Why Didn't Jesus Mention Homosexuality?" (Available at centerforfaith.com.)

Reason 14: Isn't This Just an Agree-to-Disagree Issue?

This isn't precisely an argument for the affirming view, but it's often raised by people who question whether non-affirming Christians should even care about this issue at all. Is it really a big enough issue for Christians to fight about and divide over? Can't we all just agree to disagree—like some people do about, say, the timing of the rapture—and not let this divide us?

While I'm not a fan of creating disunity, Scripture always considers sexual immorality to be a very serious issue. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus shrug his shoulders at sexual sin and say, "Well, there are different viewpoints on this issue, so let's not make a big deal about it." Whenever same-sex relations are mentioned, they are treated as serious deviations from God's will (Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:26; 1 Cor. 6:9-10).

The Bible does talk about some ethical questions as "agree-to-disagree" issues. Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-9 mention some so-called "grey areas" that Christians can disagree on, but sexual sins aren't among them. Whenever sexual sins are mentioned, they are profoundly serious and nonnegotiable. I'm not saying that Christians

should just assume that the traditional view is correct. I believe every Christian should consider the reasons for each view and weigh them against Scripture. But I also think that Christians should consider the grave danger of calling something "righteousness" when God calls it "sin." We can't afford to throw up our arms and plead the fifth.

I don't think the question of what marriage is, or whether same-sex sexual relations are morally permissible, are agree-to-disagree issues. Our God, who created us as sexual beings and instituted marriage in the Garden of Eden, has revealed to us his guidance on how to honor him with our sexuality.

Reason 15: Christians Don't Care about Gluttony and Divorce but Still Condemn Same-Sex Relations

This argument doesn't give any evidence for affirming same-sex relations; it simply points out that non-affirming Christians brush over other sins—like gluttony and divorce—so why should they care about same-sex relations?

Yes, it's true, some Christians (certainly not all) have been lax in their view of gluttony and have ignored the wide-spread problem of unbiblical divorces and remarriages. There's no excuse for this. We shouldn't respond in turn with another, "Yeah, but..." We should acknowledge it. Own it. And repent from it. In fact, I would go so far as to say that one of the blessings of the LGBT+ conversation is that it has forced the church to reflect on its own sins and ask the question, "How can we be more holy in our marital and sexual lives?"

That said, there's no logical or ethical or biblical reason why laxity in one area (gluttony or

divorce) should encourage laxity in another (same-sex behavior). I can't imagine Jesus looking at the church's gluttony and divorce rate and saying, "Well, since you all have really dropped the ball by overeating and divorcing your spouses, I think it's only fair that you lighten up a bit more on my Father's sexual ethic."

With the divorce question in particular, we should acknowledge that not every divorce is against God's will. Jesus allows for divorce if there has been sexual infidelity (Matt. 5), and Paul says that if an unbelieving spouse leaves, the believing spouse is no longer bound to that marriage (1 Cor. 7). While divorce is never encouraged, the Bible does make some allowances. But the same cannot be said of same-sex sexual behavior. There's nothing in the Bible that views some types of same-sex behavior as permissible.

In short, we should respond to the "What about Gluttony and Divorce?" response by taking the gluttonous log out of our own eyes, so that we can help others who are struggling with sexual (including same-sex) temptations.

Conclusion

Here's the thing about these arguments—they're not the real issue. Logically and biblically, the traditional view of marriage makes the most sense of the Bible and Christian tradition. It's not primarily because of these arguments that so many Christians are changing their view about the historic Christian sexual ethic. Most often, Christians are changing their view because they want to show compassion toward LGBT+ people. Most affirming Christians think that the traditional view of marriage is incompatible with compassion, and they think that the only way to love LGBT+ people is to redefine the Christian view of marriage. The arguments discussed in this paper are important, but refuting these arguments won't usually change people's hearts. Love, not logic, contains more power in demonstrating the credibility of your view.

Until Christians can show compassion and empathy toward people LGBT+ people, our views will not carry much weight. Our ethics will feel cold and depersonalized—detached from the lives of real people. Compassion without truth is empty sentimentality; truth without compassion is lifeless and powerless in an age of justice. What we need is both. The gospel demands both: faithful allegiance to God's intention for human sexuality, and radical love extended to the marginalized.

Further Reading

For a more thorough response to some of the affirming arguments mentioned above, please see the following books:

Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible, and Same-Sex Attraction* (The Good Book Company, 2013)

Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015)

Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015)

For a book that contains scholarly arguments for both affirming and non-affirming views, see:

Preston Sprinkle (ed.), *Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016)

Notes

1. This paper originally appeared as chapters 4-5 of a discussion guide by Clare De Graaf and Laurie Krieg titled *Leading your Church to be as Gay-Friendly as the Bible Teaches*. This paper has been slightly modified from its original form.

2. Female same-sex relations aren't mentioned in this text, or anywhere in the Old Testament. (The only place they are mentioned in the Bible is in Rom 1:26.) Female same-sex relations are rarely (perhaps never) mentioned outside the Old Testament during this time either. The first clear reference we have of lesbian relations comes in the writings of the 7th-6th century B.C.E. poet Sappho. So the Old Testament is not alone in its silence about female homoeroticism. Perhaps romantic love between women didn't exist in the Old Testament world, or, more likely, it was kept secret. Either way, it would be unnecessary for Leviticus to prohibit something that wasn't being practiced or was simply unknown.

3. The only possible exception is Lev. 18:19, which says that a man shouldn't have sex with his wife while she is menstruating. Some people say that this law is no longer binding, but I've never actually seen a good argument that shows why it's totally okay for a husband to have sex with his wife while she is menstruating. There's nothing in the Bible telling Christians that after Jesus's resurrection, the Old Testament ban on menstrual sex is overturned.

4. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2015/04/06/did-jesus-talk-about-homosexuality/>

5. Paul uses the Greek word *arsenokoitēs* (1 Cor. 6:9) to describe male same-sex sexual behavior. This word is made up of two Greek words: *arsēn* and *koitē*. *Arsēn* simply means "male," while *koitē* means "bed" but is often used in a sexual sense (i.e. "to sleep with"). The exact word *arsenokoitēs* does not occur in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but the individual parts (*arsēn* and *koitē*) do appear. In fact, we

see both *arsēn* and *koitē* in close proximity in Lev. 18:22 and 20:13. The Greek reads: *kai meta arsenos ou koimēthēsē koitēn gynaikeian* ("and you shall not lie with a male with the lying of a woman," Lev 18:22) and *kai hos an koimēthē meta arsenos koitēn gynaikos...* ("and whoever lies with a male with the lying of a woman..." Lev 20:13). Paul almost certainly has these Levitical passages in mind when he mentions (and prohibits) same-sex sexual behavior in 1 Cor. 6:9.

6. See Paul Copan's book *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011). He does a great job looking at the seemingly harsh treatment of women in the Old Testament against the background of the ancient world.

7. See Preston Sprinkle, "Same-Sex Relations," in *Dictionary of Daily Life in Biblical and Postbiblical Antiquity*, Vol. IV (ed. Edwin Yamauchi and Marvin Wilson; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2017).

8. See Isa. 1:10-17; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Matt. 10:5-10. Some think that Jude 7, which mentions the men of Sodom going after "strange flesh" (*sarkos heteras*), supports the traditional interpretation. But in the context of Jude's epistle, "strange flesh" refers not to people of the same sex, but to angels—the ones whom the Sodomites were seeking to rape. The phrase "strange flesh" literally means "other flesh" and ironically contains the Greek word *heteras*, from which we get *heterosexual*. If *homosexual* relations were what Jude meant, it would have made much more sense for him to say "same flesh," not "other flesh."

9. The Greek word *paiderastēs* was widely used to refer to "the love of boys," as was *paidophthoros* ("corruptor of boys") or *paidophthoreō* ("seducer of boys"). Another pair of Greek words, *erastēs* and *erōmenos*, was often used to describe the older man (*erastēs*) and his boy-lover (*erōmenos*). Again, none of these words is used when the New Testament prohibits same-sex relations.

10. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

11. Ibid., p. 114.

12. *The New Testament on Sexuality (Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the Hellenistic Greco-Roman Era*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 325.

13. Ibid., p. 322.

14. See, for instance, Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 3.37-42; cf. *Abr.* 133-141; Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.199; 2.273-275; Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, 122.7; Rufus, *On Sexual Matters*, 12; Plutarch, *Dialogue on Love*, 5; cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 16.4.3; Aeschines, *Tim.* 185; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 13.84 (605d); Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 32.10.9.3.

15. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/julyweb-only/7-14-53.0.html>

16. This is the title of Cornelius Plantinga's excellent book on sin: *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

17. Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate* (Jericho Books, 2013), 62.

18. <http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/orientation.aspx>

19. <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/number-50-fall-2016>

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Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at www.centerforfaith.com/leadership.



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Pastoral Paper

WRITTEN BY:
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6

A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON
PARENTING A GAY CHILD

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Introduction

For a decade now, Christian parents have been asking my wife and me for help in parenting their gay kids. As a Christian dad of a gay son, I wish there had been someone to talk me through the issues raised by my son's disclosure of his sexuality. But the evangelical church has until very recently said very little about homosexuality, except that it is a sin and that those who practice it are worthy of condemnation.¹ As a result, most gay young people in the church stayed silent about their sexuality until they could no longer ignore it. Upon coming out, the majority left the church, and often their faith as well.

Most parents, if they knew their kid was gay, told no one about it and had no one to talk to. Some decided to stay in relationship with their children by ignoring the issue; others watched their relationships fall apart in the midst of a sea of misunderstanding, rejection, and anger.

In order to love these families and their gay kids well, the church needs to offer a better model to parents. What follows are a few suggestions rooted in my own journey with my son Drew. (We've written extensively about this journey in our book, *Space at the Table: Conversations Between an Evangelical Theologian and his Gay Son*.)

My responses here are directed specifically to parents of gay kids, not to the kids themselves. I should add, too, that I am only speaking from my own experience as a parent of a gay kid, not speaking on behalf of all parents of LGBT+ kids. Each situation will have unique challenges. In addition, while the opinions here are my own,

they have been worked out in conversation with Drew and so in some way bear his imprint as well.

I hold to a traditional biblical understanding of sexuality and marriage, one that affirms God's creation of sex for marriage and marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman. I am writing here to parents who share this perspective, and so I will assume it throughout this paper. Finally, while I believe my words of advice are rooted in the principles of the Christian Scriptures, the issues are often complex and open to dispute. I hope you will take what is helpful to you and leave the rest behind.

When Your Child Comes Out

For many gay kids, coming out to their parents is unthinkable. They would prefer to come out on social media, risking whatever backlash and damage might follow, rather than to tell their mom and dad directly. And for many evangelical parents, there is simply nothing worse a child could tell them than that he or she is gay. When kids do come out in person to their parents, those coming out moments often result in damaging reactions that may take years to heal. Here are some thoughts about how to minimize the damage and create opportunities for redemptive responses instead.

Just Listen

When I was a gregarious young person with strong opinions on everything, someone said to me, “Brad, God gave you two ears and one mouth for a very good reason!” The point was not lost on me, not least because I had already read the book of James, which states that the godly and wise person should be “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger” (1:19, HCSB). Perhaps there is no better thing parents can do when their child comes out to them as gay than this: Listen!

Why is a posture of listening so crucial? It will help you remember that your child’s coming out is not fundamentally about you, but about them. In their widely read book *Someone I Love is Gay* (1996), Anita Worthen and Bob Davies discuss the pain, guilt, and shame that evangelical parents often feel when their children come out. Some parents, Worthen and Davies report, consider their child’s coming out a “betrayal” and respond with nausea and disgust. They must deal with the

loss of their future dreams about grandchildren and even the loss of their reputations.

While such reactions are understandable, they are also fundamentally self-centered. They are rooted in love of ourselves, not love for our children, and so we miss the opportunity to embody God’s *agape* love as we respond to our children’s coming out.

Take Time to Deal with Shock

For some parents, the shock of your child coming out will be like a scene in a war movie: as if a grenade has exploded far enough away from you not to kill you, but close enough that for several minutes you cannot hear or speak. In this case, it is probably best not to react immediately. You might simply say to your child, “Thanks for telling me this. I’m sure it was very difficult for you and took a lot of courage. I want to talk to you about this, but I think I am going to need some time to gather my thoughts and feelings before I do. Is that okay with you? For right now, though, I want you to know that I love you. I’ll never stop loving you, no matter what.” Even without hearing all your thoughts immediately, your child will likely be incredibly relieved, because the experience of finally telling you their secret may have been like leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge with a frayed bungee cord. A few hours or even a day to think and pray might be helpful for both of you.

Refrain from Immediate Negative Reactions

This is one of the most important pieces of advice I can give you, and I wish someone had said this

to me before I started to react. Some Christian parents, especially if they have very strong opinions about homosexuality and also happen to be “fixers,” are likely to respond with something like the following: “No, you are not gay. That is simply a lie that Satan is telling you. You are a child of God and he has designed you to live according to his standards. So you are not going to be allowed to pursue this direction in life and we are going get you help. Through prayer and counseling God will show you the truth and will get you back on the right track. Now, how about mowing the lawn like I asked you to?”

Even if your child willingly cooperates with such an approach, it is highly unlikely to end up turning them back into a straight evangelical Christian with traditional sexual and marriage visions for their life. Much more likely, one of two things will happen: either they will shut up and grudgingly follow your directions, making you feel better at first but not resolving their inner turmoil; or they will blow you off and beat themselves up for being stupid enough to come out to you in the first place.

If your only reactions are negative reactions, then I urge you (as difficult as it may be) not to react at all. Instead . . .

Ask Questions about Their Experience

Asking your child how they have reached the conclusion that they are gay does a couple of really important things. First, it communicates that you are going to listen and try to understand where they are coming from. Second, it will give you a window into what has undoubtedly been a period of great struggle in your child’s life, leading you to a posture of compassion rather than anger or disgust.

It is important to understand that listening to and

even validating your child’s narrative of coming to the conclusion that they are gay does not necessarily communicate that you are fine with same-sex sexual relationships. It simply recognizes that this is how they are experiencing their life. But to negate their story at this early stage will make trust and open communication more difficult in the future.

Show Unconditional Love and Acceptance

Once you have listened to your child’s story and you come to the place of giving a response, begin by affirming your love and personal acceptance for your child no matter what. Your gay child probably expects that your reaction to their revelation will be negative, and they are worried about that. What they need most of all is to hear from you that, regardless of their sexuality, you will never stop loving them.

As parents, God calls us to respond to our children in the same way he engages us. While he certainly wants me to grow to be different than I currently am in some ways, he loves me just as I am. Your gay child needs to know from the very beginning that your love for them will never change, even if they choose to live their lives in a way that you disagree with. This response makes it possible for you to continue to move forward in a loving relationship, which will keep you in a place of influence in your child’s life for the long haul.

Talk Briefly about Your Biblical Convictions

At some point in your response to your gay child, you are going to need to discuss your biblical convictions about sexual ethics. As you discuss these convictions, it will be important to help your child distinguish between sexual *orientation* and sexual *activity*. Simply being attracted to the same

sex—which is what most teens probably mean when they say “I’m gay”—is not in itself sinful. (For a thorough defense of this claim, see the Pastoral Paper “Is Same-Sex Attraction (or ‘Being Gay’) a Sin?” available at centerforfaith.com.) It’s crucial that your child does not feel they are being blamed for their unchosen attractions.

Having clarified this distinction, talk to your child about what they believe the Bible has to say about same-sex sexual expression. Although the Bible does not work very well as a hammer for pounding your child into submission, it is your duty as a parent to talk to your child about your deeply held convictions regarding their life. Of course, all of this presupposes that you actually have an intelligent understanding of what the Bible says about same-sex sexual expression. There are plenty of texts on this topic, and I particularly recommend Preston Sprinkle’s *People to be Loved*.

In any case, as you have allowed your child to tell you where they are coming from, they need to understand your own convictions as well. Whether your child chooses to follow a biblical sexual ethic depends not on your extensive Bible teaching but on their own relationship with the God who wrote the book. Accordingly, I suggest you just let them know what your biblical convictions are, give them the opportunity to respond, and then move on to the next stage.

Don’t Kick Your Gay Kid Out of the House

When Drew and I were writing *Space at the Table*, he met a woman from a local Christian university who was writing a research thesis on homeless youth. She volunteered several days a week with various homeless outreach centers and youth shelters, some church affiliated, some not. Day in and day out she encountered many young people

who lived on the streets because their Christian parents had sent them packing as soon as they discovered they were queer. In fact, 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT and 68% of homeless LGBT youth report serious family rejection.²

Such family rejection often happens because these parents feel like they have to stand up for their Christian convictions about sexual identity or behavior. They may also feel like rejecting their LGBT child is the most loving way to save them from ungodly behavior. My wife and I did not respond this way because, from the beginning, we recognized that whatever influence we wanted to have in Drew’s life would be most effectively expressed through staying in relationship with him as far as it was possible from our end. And there’s nothing in the Bible that encourages parents to kick their LGBT kids out of the house.

Recently, I read a story about the death of a young person kicked out of his home for being gay. His mother told him to get out of the house and come back when he stopped being gay. Desperate and without enough money to survive, he tried calling her to talk out their differences, but she would not take his calls. The next time she saw him he was in a casket, dead of a drug overdose. I wish this story was the only one of its kind, but I’ve read far too many of them. It’s no wonder that LGBT youth are 4–8 times more likely to commit suicide when they experience rejection from family, and 62% of homeless LGBT youth have attempted suicide—often after being rejected by their family.³

Disconnection, while it may not result in death for your child, will surely lead to destruction of some kind. I suppose this is the most fundamental reason not to kick your gay kid out of the house. What follows are a few more.

First, there is a theological principle here. When we read the narrative of the Bible, we see that God's overwhelming posture towards the disobedient is one of working for reconciliation. Ours should be as well. This is not to say that God never judges sinners. Of course he does. But as Paul remarks, it is God's kindness that is intended to lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). And the whole Gospel of John shows us that God responds to a humanity at odds with him through love, entering into our world and taking our pain and suffering upon himself. It is God's loving entrance into our world that draws us to him, not his judgment.

Second, kicking your gay kid out of the house is not the best way to keep from compromising your convictions. Jesus spent tons of time in the homes of people the religious elite had dismissed as sinners. Our experience is that your gay son or daughter does not need you to disown them to know what you believe and stand for, and God does not need you to disown your son or daughter to defend his honor. Jesus didn't think he was sacrificing his convictions by having dinner with "immoral" persons in their homes. Rather, he was living them out.

Next Steps

Where you and your child go from here is enormously affected by a couple of things. First, is your child a minor living with you, or an adult child living on their own? Second, is your child interested in pursuing biblical values of sexuality? No matter what the age of the child, consider starting with something like the following: “Talk to us about your relationship with Christ. If the Bible says no to gay sex, do you want help living according to those values, or are you going to choose to pursue same-sex sexual expression?”

If the answer is that the child is not interested in following a biblical model, you’ll want to discuss a number of issues and questions that will arise as a result:

- Disagreement with your child’s choice and your conviction that it is not the best for them, including your concern that it will damage their relationship with God.
- Affirming your love and personal acceptance of them in spite of the disagreement.
- Talking about how to live together and/or stay in loving relationship with each other. This might include sharing with your child behaviors which, because of your biblical convictions, you will or will not allow as long as they are living in your home. (Of course, your household rules should apply equally whether your child is gay or straight. For example, if you don’t allow your unmarried children to spend the night with a partner, this rule applies regardless of each child’s sexual orientation.)

If the child does want to follow a biblical model, here are a few next steps to consider :

First, let your child tell you how you can be most helpful. It may not be in the way you expect. They might want help thinking through the church’s debate on sexual ethics and why the traditional biblical model is correct. They may want to talk with you about options like celibacy or marriage to someone of the opposite sex. Or they may simply want you to continue encouraging them in their pursuit of Jesus and not talking about their sexuality a great deal.

One of the first things many Christian parents think about at this point is counseling. And that may be an important step at some point. But I encourage you not to rush into it.⁴ If you do pursue counseling, be careful that your main agenda for counseling isn’t to stop your child from “being gay” or to make them adopt your beliefs about marriage and sexuality. Consider getting counseling to help you and your child communicate well about the issue, or to help them understand and work through their own feelings and concerns. Or perhaps you should consider seeing a counselor to help you and your spouse cope with your feelings so you can react to your child in healthier ways.

Second, consider talking to your pastor. But make sure before you do that your pastor is well-educated on LGBT issues. Some are, but many aren’t—even if they are well-educated on many other topics. I’m encouraged by the increasing number of pastors who are moving away from quick, knee jerk reactions to gay

church members and are working much harder at listening, understanding, and offering guidance and community. If you have this kind of pastor, a visit could be helpful. But if your pastor is not prepared to handle this unique conversation or has unhealthy or unbiblical views on the topic, it may be best to seek counsel elsewhere. A pastoral visit to the wrong pastor might only lead to discouragement or increased self-hatred.

Third, help your child think through what it will look like for them to pursue a biblical sexual ethic. The fundamental biblical posture towards sex is that God designed it for marriage—and marriage is a one-flesh union between a man and a woman. If a person believes in the God of the Bible and wants to follow his lead, one thing that means is a determination to refrain from sex outside of marriage. Since this biblical value is the same for heterosexual persons, the commitment does not single out the gay person. It is just a posture that says, “If I want to follow Jesus and I am not married, now is not the time for sex.” But when we say things like this to our gay kids, we must not do it without recognizing the brutality of the message. What the gay person often hears us saying is, “I can pursue my natural desire for sexual relationality and be pleasing to God, but you can’t.” We need to acknowledge the unique challenges our gay kids may face if they choose to follow Jesus, as well as helping them think creatively about the unique joys and opportunities they might receive by their obedience.

Continuing Questions

My child wants to come out at church, but I'm concerned.

Your concern is probably justified. Drew felt that coming out at church as a high schooler would be a disaster in terms of his ability to have guy friends in the youth group. That was ten years ago, and attitudes have changed some since then, but you'll need to do some work to have at least an idea of what your child will face.

Still, coming out at church may actually be the healthiest thing for your child. One good first step would be to have your child talk to a youth pastor. Drew's experience with this approach was very good. His youth pastor responded to Drew with love and grace and took him to breakfast regularly for some time, really just for the purpose of listening and communicating to Drew that he was safe. To this day Drew feels a deep love and respect for that pastor. The advantage of this situation is that a good youth pastor can help your child predict how a youth group will respond to them if they come out. The youth pastor might also be able to help your child devise a way to come out that will minimize negative reactions and promote helpful conversation. Coming out on Facebook or Instagram, for instance, will likely create the kind of polarization that social media is famous for and end up much more hurtful than helpful.

Is my child's attraction to the same sex a choice?

No. Attractions are almost never choices and may

have a variety of causes. I've talked to dozens of young gay Christian men over the years, and every one of them has told me, "Brad, as soon as I realized I had sexual attractions, I was attracted to men." Middle school boys do not stand around waiting for the school bus one morning and say to themselves, "Okay, today I need to decide what I'm going to be—gay or straight, gay or straight?" What a person decides to do with attractions is a choice, but the attractions themselves are not.

Is this my fault?

Very unlikely. The medical, psychological, sociological, and even theological worlds are all over the map on the issue of causes for homosexuality. Some people have assumed that an absent father or a domineering mother (among other environmental factors) shape same-sex attraction. But studies have shown that causation can't be reduced to this simplistic narrative. Some LGBT people didn't have an absent father or a domineering mother, whereas many straight people did—and they still ended up straight. The one thing scientists agree on is this: the cause of same-sex attraction can't be reduced to one simple factor like bad parenting. The best work by an evangelical that I have seen on the issue of causation is by Dr. Mark Yarhouse, a professor of psychology at Regent University.⁵ According to his report, the best research shows that there are many possible causes for homosexuality. Finding out the cause of same-sex orientation in any particular case can be very problematic. The most important issue is

not finding the cause, but answering the question, “Where do we go from here?”

How do we stay in a loving relationship even if our deepest convictions are at odds?

You need to come to grips with the fact that your child is gay, and that the way they live their life may never change.

I know a number of gay Christians who decided as young persons either to live a celibate life or to enter an opposite-sex marriage (often called a “mixed-orientation marriage”) in order to enjoy the benefit of the traditional nuclear family. Some of these persons have stayed true to their decisions for many years and are very happy. None of them, however, have simply become straight. And as far as I am aware, they all still deal with attraction to persons of the same sex even after having been single or married to someone of the opposite sex for years.

On the other hand, I also know many Christian families whose gay kids have decided that celibacy or mixed-orientation marriage is simply not for them and have opted to live either multi-partnered or monogamous gay lives. Some of them, in the process, have left the church and even their faith. Others have stayed committed to the church and still identify as faithful followers of Jesus, but they believe that God is fine with them pursuing a same-sex relationship.

My point in all this is simply to urge Christian parents of gay kids to prepare themselves for a number of possible outcomes, especially as their child leaves the home and begins to live an adult life. If your adult gay child, out of a commitment to follow Christ, decides to be celibate or enter a

mixed-orientation marriage, this decision may make you very grateful; however, don’t think that things will now just get back to normal and you can go on with your life. A gay person who makes one of these choices is going to need an enormous amount of support from family, friends, and church. This person labors under a weight that few of us can possibly understand—a burden that can result in deep loneliness, depression, and for some, one or more forays into homosexual encounters which then become the source of guilt, broken relationships, and despair. So while this may be the decision you want your son or daughter to make, and while you will very likely believe it is the right decision and will even be blessed by God, know that it comes with a price.

What should I pray for my child?

From the time Drew came out to us, my life was filled with prayer for him. For a while my prayers went something like, “God, you are all powerful and loving. You can make Drew straight. Please make him straight.” But that kind of prayer was pretty short-lived. I just knew too many stories of gay Christians who prayed themselves for years that God would make them straight. I don’t know a single person for whom that prayer worked. God can do anything. He can part the seas, turn water to wine, or make a gay person straight. But experientially, these don’t seem to be the typical way in which God works.

So I stopped praying that God would make Drew straight. I stopped praying that he would not have gay sex. I didn’t even pray that he would have sex with a woman and find it surprisingly more fulfilling. I also did not pray that God would make Drew miserable in his sin, a kind of prayer that we

evangelicals are oddly drawn to. No, my prayer for Drew began to take on a whole new character. I just stopped praying about Drew's homosexuality and started praying about something much more important. I began to pray that God would be gracious to allow Drew to be so captivated by Christ's love for him that he would want Jesus more than anything else. And if that began to happen, I would let God worry about Drew's sexuality.

How do we talk about the issue in a healthy way, instead of constantly arguing or pretending it doesn't exist?

As I mentioned above, make sure you have explained to your son or daughter your biblical convictions about same-sex sexual activity. But once you have made yourself clear on that issue, it probably does not help to keep coming back to it. If you have raised your child in the church, it is very likely that they have already heard the biblical arguments numerous times.

Another crucial issue at this point is to make sure that your conversations with your child about their sexuality are not about your anger or shame. If they are, then your child will eventually recognize that the conflict is really about you and not them. When you get to the point that you and your gay child clearly do not agree on the moral issues of their sexuality, the conversation needs to move in a different direction—one that is about how to stay in a loving relationship in spite of being at moral loggerheads.

If your child is still living with you at this point, the conversations will include negotiations about behaviors and rules you can both live with. But if your child is an adult living on their own, the conversations will be somewhat different. Here

are a few suggestions based on the way Drew and I talked for the first couple of years after he left home.

Some topics need time before they can be addressed productively. For us, conversations about possible causes of Drew's sexuality, for example, did not work for several years. One of the reasons for this is that if you focus on cause, your child will likely perceive this as your attempt to find ways to "fix" them. Your child becomes a "project," like repairing the dry rot in the deck. Press this far enough and your child will eventually begin to feel that the only way you will really love them is if they stop being gay. Many gay young persons, even from Christian families, don't want to be fixed. If you keep bringing it up—"we can fix this!"—it will likely cause them to stop trusting you as a reliable guide.

On the positive side, it is really important to talk about the process each of you is going through. Learn to share your fear and guilt with one another, moving purposefully towards each other even when beliefs or behaviors threaten to push you apart. For most evangelical parents, the journey of embracing your gay child is one filled with lots of barriers. The point here is not to pretend those barriers don't exist, but to figure out how to keep them from sabotaging a loving relationship.

You also cannot ignore your fears, including possible fears about HIV. While HIV is not the death sentence it used to be, thank God, it is still a very serious health threat that changes a person's life forever. Robin and I have lived with this fear ever since Drew left home. There have been numerous phone calls where Drew, sometimes fairly casually, has remarked that he is waiting for the results of an HIV test. In these moments, I

usually feel as if my stomach has just launched a grapefruit into my throat. I've learned that neither silence nor a high school health lesson works best at that point. Instead, I respond with raw honesty; something like, "Wow, Drew. That's pretty scary for me. It must be scary for you too." Drew answers, "Yeah, I'm kind of nervous about it too." Honesty. Recognition of each other's fears. No condemnation or lectures. And we move on.

How can I acknowledge my child's sexuality without reducing him or her to "a gay person"?

We human beings have a propensity for categorizing people. From the time we are little kids on the playground, the girls and boys each saying that the other gender has "cooties," we learn to judge people on the basis of one simple characteristic. As evangelicals, because we have focused so much attention on the issue of homosexuality, it is sometimes difficult for us to think about a gay person through any lens other than the lens of their sexuality. It's not uncommon for a group of evangelicals talking about a celebrity or artist to be interrupted by someone piping up, "Yeah, but you know he's gay, right?" As if being gay somehow negates a person's admirable qualities or contributions.

My experience is that for many evangelical parents of a gay son or daughter, their child's sexuality becomes so overwhelming that they have difficulty thinking of their child in any other terms. Even when they talk about their kid's many wonderful qualities, they still often end their thoughts with a "yes, but..."

As a parent who understands this tension, my advice is that parents need at some point to begin to move their son or daughter's sexuality to the

back burner of consciousness and relationship. Your son or daughter is a human being made in the image of God. As a result, everything they are or do that is beautiful is reflective of God and is good. Their sexuality does not negate those things. So parents need to make a conscious effort to conceive of and relate to their children in terms of all the things they are and do, to refuse to let their convictions or feelings about their children's sexuality dominate how they see them.

How should I engage my adult gay child's relationships?

This is a complex issue, and not one that I have all nailed down. But allow me to offer a few thoughts that may help you as you think through this issue.

First, it is important to recognize that love, acceptance, and even participation in your child's life does not mean approval or agreement. A mother who loves and accepts her three-month-old son will not necessarily endorse his decision to scream for hours in the middle of the night. A college student might love Broadway musicals while disapproving of exorbitant ticket costs. If you have had thoughtful conversations about your Christian convictions, accepting your child's partners and participating in their lives will not make them assume you have changed your views. Again and again, Robin and I have found that our decision to embrace Drew's gay friends and partners has never—and I really mean never—led either Drew or his friends to come to the conclusion that we agree with the way they live out their sexuality.

What embracing them has done is create bridges for relationship that have allowed some of Drew's friends and partners to believe that a person can have conservative Christian beliefs about

homosexuality and still love and embrace them exactly as they are. This, I believe, is how God engages the world in Christ. So while embracing Drew's partners has not compromised our Christianity, it has allowed Robin and me to welcome into our lives some delightful, intelligent, and engaging persons who have made our lives richer.

Second, ask questions about your son or daughter's relationships, both friendships and romantic ones. I remember a telephone conversation where Drew said to me, "Dad, when I am in a relationship with someone, you never ask me about it. If my siblings are in a dating relationship, you ask how things are going because you care about them. Can you see how that might make me feel? Dad, if our relationship is going to move forward, you need to ask me about the men I am dating."

Of course this commitment to engage your child's friends and partners positively will result in some challenging questions: Can they stay at your house? Will you go to their wedding? If so, will you participate? I cannot answer these questions for anyone but myself. (For more thoughts on the wedding question, see the Pastoral Paper "Should Christians Attend a Same-Sex Wedding Ceremony?" available at centerforfaith.com.) My advice is simply this: Always opt for positive relational connection as long as it does not compromise your principles. Remember, God does not need you to "defend his honor."

How do I keep living out my faith?

To be a follower of Jesus means living out our faith and even talking about it regularly. What

makes that stressful to many gay persons with Christian parents is that your Christian values include a sexual ethic which forbids same-sex sexual activity. But putting your faith on the back burner is not an option, and doing so would mean being untrue to who you are. While it might lessen the open conflict, it would not move you and your child forward in authentic relationship.

In our family, living out our faith meant that we were regularly involved in and talking about Christian aspects of our lives. I am a professor at an evangelical Christian university. Much of my life revolves around the events of that world. And Drew has been involved in that world. We go to church, we have friends over from our prayer group, we pray at mealtimes, we read and talk about the Bible. Once Drew left the church and began pursuing gay relationships, I became acutely aware that the habits of our Christian life were probably irritating to him. I wondered if they would cause him to want to spend less time with us. But Robin and I decided that we are who we are, and if Drew wants us to accept him for who he is, we need to be accepted on the same terms. Healthy family relationships can't be fostered unless each person is able to be sincere around the others.

But here's the kicker. Don't try to cleverly insert subtle Jesus jabs into the conversation, like some Christian parents and grandparents do all over Facebook. Don't send your gay child podcasts of sermons or links to Christian websites—unless, of course, your child has indicated a desire for this kind of interaction and has initiated by sending you media that articulates the view from their side of the fence. In short, live out your faith when your adult gay child is with you in the same way you do when they are not. But don't make

your Christian life a constant opportunity for you
to subtly put pressure on your gay child.

Pastoral Implications

At the end of this rather lengthy paper, I find myself thinking about fifteen other questions that I simply did not have the space to address. If you want more help, I'd highly recommend that you check out the Resources page at centerforfaith.com, including the book Drew and I wrote together titled *Space at the Table*.

Let me close with just a few big-picture pastoral recommendations. First, do everything you can to stay relationally connected to your gay kid. You may disagree with their sexual morality, you may struggle with their behavior, you may even believe that they are in store for some tough judgment from God. But the truth is that, without Christ, this is the situation we all find ourselves in before a holy God. In his holy love, God embraces us in Christ, pursuing us relentlessly without ever sweeping our behavior under the rug.

Disconnection from your gay child will not make them see the error of their ways and repent. It won't make them return to the church and become celibate, much less straight. More likely it will lead to a lifetime of pain and suffering for you both that embitters your child against Christ and you.

Second, open your hands and give your gay kid to God. At the end of the day, your child's life is in God's hands, not yours. It is not your job to judge them, to get them to agree with your convictions, or to "fix" them. Your job is to do your very best in word and deed to point them to the God who loves them unconditionally in Christ. It is God's job to captivate their hearts by the Holy Spirit, leading them to a place where they desire

nothing more than him so that they surrender their lives to following his ways. If you make it your mission to manage your gay kid's life so that they come back to your way of thinking and living, and they never do, you will find yourself mired in a sea of anger, frustration, and guilt that can only further degrade your relationships with both God and your child. Let God be responsible for your gay kid's life and future. It's his job.

Third, refuse to see your child's identity mainly through the lens of their sexuality. Your gay son or daughter is a beautiful creation of God. They are endowed by God and their family with talents and gifts, relational instincts, personality traits, commitments and behaviors that are profound, attractive, beneficial for others, and reflective of the character of God. Choose daily to focus on those. Only then can you continue to build a relationship with your child that brings joy to you both and creates space for honest, loving conversations about the tough issues. Only then can you, perhaps, find healing for everyone involved.

Notes

1. The fact that this is all we typically say about homosexuality is problematic in many ways. First, this framing draws no differentiation between same-sex orientation and same-sex sexual expression. Second, it says nothing about gay persons who are actually desiring to follow Jesus. And third, it often singles out same-sex sexual behavior as an exceptionally bad sin while ignoring the gravity of other sins treated with equal or greater severity in the Bible.

2. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/americas-shame-40-of-homeless-youth-are-lgbt-kids/>

3. Bill Henson, *Guiding Families*, 4 (available online at <http://www.leadthemhome.org>).

4. Let me make a brief comment here about ex-gay ministries. My observation over the last decade about the effects of ex-gay ministries for same-sex-attracted Christian men is that it is a mixed bag. I have talked to many young men who have been through ex-gay programs. For some it has been helpful; for others it has not. And all these young men I am thinking about are men who want to follow Jesus with their lives. The bottom line for me is that the only person who should go to an ex-gay ministry is an adult who understands the process and who really wants help to live out their sexuality in a way that reflects their biblical convictions by participating in a specific program with other men or women who want the same thing.

5. *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2010).

About the Author

Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at www.centerforfaith.com/leadership.



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Position Papers/ Articles

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[The Conversations the Church Needs to Be Having About Mental Health and Depression.-](#)
[Juli Wilson and Kayla Stoecklein, Church Pulse Weekly Podcast](#)

[5 Key Findings about LGBTQ+ Americans,-](#)
[Anna Brown, Pew Research Center](#)

Book and Other Resources

[Living in a Gray World: A Christian Teen’s Guide to Understanding Homosexuality,](#)
Preston Sprinkle

[Embodied: Transgender Identities, The Church and What the Bible has to Say-](#)
Preston Sprinkle

[Irreversible Damage: The Transgender Craze Seducing Our Daughters-](#)
Abigail Shrier