

identity & sexuality
a biblical perspective

Frequently Asked Questions on Homosexuality

Selected from Sam Allberry's book, *Is God anti-gay?*

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Surely a same-sex partnership is ok if it's committed and faithful?

One of the arguments commonly made today in favor of same-sex partnerships is that what must surely count above all else is faithfulness and commitment. Shouldn't faithfulness within a relationship be what determines its moral goodness rather than the gender of those involved in it? A promiscuous gay lifestyle with multiple partners and one-night stands might be wrong, but two people who love each other and are faithful to whatever promises they have made—surely that's ok?

It can seem a compelling argument, and it is increasingly common to find Christians allowing for this kind of expression of homosexual practice. But a number of important things need to be said in response.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for its acceptance of an illicit relationship. A man is in a relationship with his father's wife, most likely his stepmother—an arrangement expressly forbidden in Leviticus 18. Paul is dismayed. Even the pagans in Corinthian society would not allow such a thing (1 Corinthians 5:1), and yet here it is going on in plain sight among God's people.

Paul's response to this situation is instructive, as much for what he doesn't say as for what he does say. There is no question about whether this particular couple love each other. Paul does not ask about their level of commitment or whether they are being faithful. That is not the issue. Whether or not they are in a long-term committed relationship is beside the point; the fact remains that it is wrong and should not be happening.

Paul does not distinguish between faithful illicit relationships and profligate illicit relationships, as if the latter are out of bounds but the former might just squeak in by virtue of their faithfulness. Consistency and faithfulness while sinning in no way diminish the sin. Paul calls for the church member in question to be expelled from the fellowship, and for the whole church to express remorse at what has happened (1 Corinthians 5:2). Faithfulness demonstrated in an otherwise prohibited relationship does not make it less sinful.

In many areas of life, it is possible to demonstrate good qualities while doing something wrong. A thief in a gang may demonstrate impeccable loyalty to his fellow gang members during the act of stealing: looking out for them, protecting them from danger, being sure to give them a generous proportion of the takings. None of this in any way lessens the immorality of the act; it just means he is being a “good” thief rather than a “bad” thief. As we have seen, scripture is clear in its prohibition of any homosexual activity. Activity that is faithful and committed is no more permissible than activity that’s promiscuous and unfaithful.

Is it sinful to experience same-sex attraction?

Same-sex attraction is not a good thing. It is (along with many other things) a consequence of the fall. It did not exist before the fall in Genesis 3 and it will not exist in the new creation. This kind of attraction is not something God designed for us, and it contradicts his design.

We know from the Scriptures that temptation comes from our own fallen hearts. James is very clear on this (see James 1:13-14).

We cannot blame temptation on anyone else, certainly not God. Homosexual temptations reflect our own fallenness.

But this is not the same as saying the presence of temptation itself is a sin to be repented of. Christians have always made a distinction between temptation and sin. After all, Jesus himself taught his followers to pray (see Matthew 6:12-13).

In other words, we seek forgiveness for sin and deliverance from temptation. We are not asked to seek forgiveness for being tempted, but only for any sin committed when we succumb to it. Instead, we are called to stand up under temptation, to endure it faithfully (1 Corinthians 10:13).

At the very moment we experience inappropriate attraction toward someone of the same sex, then we are to resist impure thoughts and emotions that we may be encountering, acknowledge that we want to flee from such things and not embrace them, and seek his help and strength to do so. We remember that such experiences are not God's design for us and trusting that he is faithful and will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear.

To say that the very experience of same-sex attraction is a sin seems to suggest that even having the capacity to be tempted is itself a sin, something that I do not believe Scripture says.

And as we would expect, saying something that is unscriptural can cause significant pastoral damage. Many Christians experiencing same-sex attraction feel intense shame as a result. They know these feelings are not part of God's design, they long not to have them, and they strive to be obedient to Christ. In my experience, Christians with same-sex attraction typically feel deeper shame over their sexual temptations than their opposite-sex attracted counterparts. To hear that the very presence of this temptation (irrespective of the extent to which they have endured faithfully under it) is itself a sin to be repented of might easily crush an already very tender believer.

Can't Christians just agree to differ on this?

There are Christians and even leaders in churches today who argue that some forms of homosexual activity are acceptable to God, and many more who argue alongside me that any such activity is forbidden by God. In our churches and wider Christian communities, we can differ on certain issues while keeping fellowship in the gospel. So, isn't homosexuality an issue over which Christians may legitimately disagree?

The Bible allows for disagreements on certain issues. In Romans 14 Paul speaks about "disputable matters" and calls on his readers to be convinced in their own mind of what they think (Romans 14:5). But Paul also argues that there are other issues that are nonnegotiable: issues where the gospel itself is at stake. In 1 Corinthians 15, he reminds his readers of the matters of "first importance" that he had earlier taught them, and which stood at the heart of their gospel faith (1 Corinthians 15:1-11). Into which category does homosexuality fit? Does it affect the gospel? Two passages indicate that homosexuality is a gospel issue.

As we saw earlier, Paul talks about homosexual practice in the context of warning his readers that the unrighteous will not enter the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9). In this category he includes those who practice homosexuality. Along with all who are unrighteous, such people are heading for destruction. Their only hope is the gospel, the outworking of which will include a new identity and repenting of their former lifestyle. To deny this truth has huge consequences. A church leader who teaches that even certain kinds of homosexual activity are ok is actually sending people to destruction. It is not the same order of disagreement as Christians have over, say, baptism, or the practice of certain spiritual gifts. In the case of homosexual practice, the gospel is very much at stake.

In Revelation 2:20-21 Jesus rebukes the church in Thyatira for their tolerance of a false teacher.

This is someone whose teaching leads others in the church into sexual sin. Jesus promises judgment on her and any of her followers who do not repent (see Revelation 2:22). But the responsibility lies not just with them. The church—including the many who do not follow her—are rebuked for tolerating her.

So, we are not to tolerate in our churches those whose teaching leads people into sexual sin. They must be confronted, their ministry forbidden, and their teaching refuted. This is a gospel matter. If we allow this to be a matter of acceptable disagreement within our fellowships, Jesus will hold it against us. Some forms of tolerance are sinful.

Isn't the Christian view of sexuality dangerous and harmful?

One of the most common and significant charges leveled against the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality and marriage is that it is deeply damaging to individuals.

Denying someone's sexuality is seen as denying who that person really is. It is telling them to repress something central to their identity, and consequently, to their ability to flourish. This is harmful to anyone, but especially to teenagers who are coming to terms with their sexuality while still at a formative stage of their lives. Christians, it is claimed, are to blame for gay teenagers growing up stunted and guilt-ridden, or killing themselves.

This charge has perhaps been made most forcefully by Dan Savage: "The dehumanizing bigotry set forth from the lips of faithful Christians give your straight children a license to verbally abuse, humiliate, and condemn the gay children they encounter at school. They fill your gay children with suicidal despair. And you have the nerve to ask me to be more careful with my words."

It goes without saying that this is an incredibly serious charge. It is troubling enough that many Christians are beginning to think that traditional understanding must be wrong if it is having this sort of effect on people. Surely anything that results in this kind of self-loathing and despair cannot be the fruit of God's truth.

The first thing to say in response to this is that there have certainly been instances of young people feeling driven to despair and even suicide in recent years and attributing their distress to real or perceived pressure from Christian disapproval of homosexuality. This is a real situation. Young people both inside and outside the church are hurting profoundly on this issue.

And who can deny how unspeakably tragic it is that anyone should feel such despair over their own sexuality? Of all people, we Christians should feel most grief at this, knowing as we do the supreme value that God places on all human life. We should care more than anyone when we hear of young people in such torment—especially those growing up in Christian households and part of a local church.

And we must also recognize that some believers have undoubtedly been abusive in their behavior and language toward gay people and thought that by being like this they were somehow advancing the cause of Christ. But we must also recognize that such behavior is not itself Christian in any way. It comes not by adhering to the message and example of Jesus, but by contradicting it.

But it is not true to say that such personal torment is the inevitable result of traditional biblical teaching on this issue. It is true that the convicting work of the Spirit can be very painful indeed. There is even a kind of self-loathing that can result when God makes us aware of the extent of our own sin (see

Ezekiel 36:31). But though the genuine work of God might take us to such a place, it never leaves us there. If we are convicted, it is so that we can be restored. The Spirit breaks us only to put us back together as God intended. Jesus promises that we will find rest and comfort in him and that “a bruised reed he will not break” (Matthew 11:28-29, Matthew 12:20).

It is not the teaching of Jesus that tells you that life is not worth living if you can't be fulfilled sexually—that a life without sex is no life at all. It is not biblical Christianity that insists someone's sexual disposition is so foundational to who they are, and that to fail to affirm their particular leaning is to attack who that person is at their core. All this comes not from biblical Christianity but from western culture's highly distorted view of what it means to be a human. When an idol fails you, the real culprit turns out to be the person who has urged you worship it—not the person who has tried to take it away.

The teaching of Jesus does two things: it restricts sex and it relativizes its importance. Jesus shows us that in its God-given context the value of sex is far greater than we might have realized—and yet even there it is not ultimate. Sex is a powerful urge, but it is not fundamental to wholeness and human flourishing. Jesus showed that both in this teaching and in his lifestyle. After all, Jesus—the most fully human of all people—remained celibate himself.

The gospel shows us that there is forgiveness for all who have sinned sexually. And the gospel also liberates us from the mindset that sex is intrinsic to human fulfillment. The gospel call that no one need cast all their happiness on their sexual fortunes is not bad news but good news. It is not the path to harm but to wholeness.

Should Christians attend gay weddings?

As more and more parts of the western world legalize and

promote same-sex marriage, Christians will increasingly find themselves in the position of being invited to gay weddings. Should we go or not?

We are meant, like Christ, to be a “friend of sinners,” and should therefore strive to be the sort of friend someone would want to invite to their wedding. Figuring out what to do with such an invitation is therefore a good problem to have!

There are two very important aspects of our relationships with such friends that we must do all we can to preserve: our witness and our friendship.

First, we want to be careful as Christians not to appear to endorse something we understand to be a sin in God’s eyes. Attending a gay wedding could easily look as if we are commending and celebrating gay marriage. It would be difficult to see how believers could attend without sending that kind of message. I know of some Christians who have attended simply to be a godly presence in an otherwise non-Christian environment, and who felt that their position on gay marriage had already been made sufficiently clear so as to avoid the risk of their attendance being misunderstood. But for many other Christians, it will not be possible to attend in good conscience.

But our public stance on gay marriage is not the only important factor to consider. We also want to take great care to preserve and deepen our friendships with gay friends, so that we have the continuing opportunity to share the love of Christ with them. So, we must be careful to maintain a good witness on this issue, but that will also involve being equally careful about making sure they know how much their friendship is valued.

If accepting an invitation risks implying approval of gay marriage, declining one risks implying that their friendship is not important to us. So, if we do need to decline a wedding invitation, we need to make sure we are investing in the

friendship at the same time. That might mean extending an invitation to them; while not able to attend the wedding, nevertheless we should ask them round or out for an occasion as soon as we can.

What should I do if a Christian comes out to me?

Many Christians find it hard to talk openly to others about their struggles with same-sex attraction. If they are still coming to terms with it, there may be the fear that talking about it will somehow make it more real, as though the very act of speaking of it gives it a greater presence and significance.

There is also often a fear of how other Christians might respond: that friends will feel uncomfortable and might distance themselves; that church leaders will think anyone experiencing such feelings and temptations must be a great disappointment; or that admitting such things will only be letting the side down. The battle can feel lonely enough; the prospect that others might reject you if they knew can be enough to keep many Christians silent about their struggles for many long years.

This is all by way of saying that perhaps the first thing to do if a Christian ever discloses personal struggles with sexuality is to thank them. It will almost certainly have been a big deal for them to have shared this with you. They may have been psyching themselves up for months, getting to the point of raising it to only bottle it and put it off. That they have come this far and finally spoken of it—and done so to you—is no small thing. You may be the first or one of only a handful of people to have been told this. Any time someone shares something deeply personal, it is a sign of enormous trust. Acknowledge that. Thank them.

Let them take a few deep breaths and assure them that the world is still spinning, that you're still there, and that they're not about to burst into flames.

The next thing to do is to listen—carefully. Experiences with same-sex attraction vary enormously. Points of sensitivity, triggers for temptation or despair, the issues surrounding and feeding into the feelings of attraction can differ enormously from one person to the next.

If they're happy to talk, find out how they are. Ask them how long they've known, what it's been like; what moved them to tell you. This may take some time. But it will help you get a sense of where they are with the issue, how it affects them and how they are responding to it as a Christian. Sometimes the experiences of same-sex attraction are just the symptoms of deeper issues of idolatry or insecurity. Sometimes there is family unhappiness in the background. Other times there is no obvious rhyme or reason to the feelings at all.

Gentle probing and careful listening will help to shape what sort of wisdom and counsel they may need. The Christian actively wrestling with these feelings, striving to flee from temptation, wanting to honor Christ and walk faithfully with him—they'll need encouragement, prayers and people to talk to from time to time.

Others may not be clear on the Bible's teaching on sex and sexuality and will need some gentle instruction. Some may be in the depths of despair, imagining the presence of these feelings puts them spiritually beyond help, or feeling overwhelmed with guilt from past sins in this area. It may well be that they need some mentoring and help from a more experienced Christian or specialized ministry.

Selected from Cooper Pinson's booklet, *Helping Students with Same-Sex Attraction*

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Never say that same-sex attraction is a choice.

Let's stop making it seem like students can flip a sexual light switch and change everything. None of us chose the temptations and struggles that we are stuck with for this journey. Reducing students' sexuality to a simple choice brushes aside both their stories and their complexity as individuals.

Cut out the gay jokes.

Same-sex attracted students have all heard these jokes, and they are part of the reason they are in hiding. Who wants to be honest about their struggles when they are treated flippantly or the term "gay" is used in a mocking manner? As parents and youth workers, we need to eradicate any vestige of same-sex humor we might have within us and in the contexts over which we are shepherds. Same-sex attracted students need to know that they have an advocate in us.

Put an end to gender stereotypes.

Not all guys love football. Not all girls love dresses. Let's show students what real men and women look like, constantly teaching against unhelpful masculine and feminine stereotypes. Instead let's teach our students what true men and women look like in the kingdom of God. Real men and women leave everything, denying even themselves, to follow after Jesus (Luke 9:23-25). Real men don't always have six-pack abs and hunt animals. Not all real women like getting a mani-pedi and going out for lunch.

Our ministry to students must be varied and rich, recognizing, validating, and fostering the unique, God-given gifts our students possess.

Selected from Tim Geiger's booklet, *Your Child Says, "I'm Gay"*

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You can't change your child.

You cannot change your child. No matter how badly you might want to see change, no matter how much you pray, no matter how convincing your argument, you won't be able to convince your child to change. Your child's issue ultimately isn't with you; it's with God.

Only a transforming relationship with Jesus Christ will lead to the heart change that is needed before behavioral change will occur. God wants to do business with your child's heart. Your child has adopted a gay identity because, at some level, he has believed lies about God, himself, and others. Romans 1:21-25 is a clear and sobering description of human behavior in a broken and fallen world. Paul lays out an argument about how the knowledge and pursuit of God is suppressed and twisted in favor of believing lies about God and turning to idols to find life.

This is not a passage to hammer your child with about their same-sex attractions! Romans 1 isn't targeted merely to homosexuals. Paul is talking to all of us! He is saying that everyone in the world has been so impacted by the fall that we all are guilty of serious idolatry, and only a real, transforming relationship with Jesus Christ will enable us to live in increasing wholeness and godliness before God.

Use this passage to remind yourself that, while you can work toward being an agent of change in your child's life, you can't

expect that you will be able to convince your child to change or make him change. It's only the Lord who does the changing in our lives. Such change is likely to come about over time, within the context of Christian community—through your relationship with your son or daughter and through his or her relationship with other mature, compassionate Christians who are willing to walk with those who struggle with same-sex attraction and not abandon them through this journey.

Your child doesn't need to become straight.

Your child's deepest need to not to become straight. Your child's deepest need to the same as every person in this world—a life of faith and repentance in Christ. Having heterosexual sex will not solve your child's problem. There is more to this issue than sexuality. The ethical opposite of homosexuality is not “becoming straight.” Godly sexuality is about holiness. It is about living out one's sexuality by increasingly being willing to conform and live within God's design for sex. Godly sexuality is not merely about being heterosexual; it is not merely about being married and having two kids and living in the suburbs.

Godly sexuality also includes being single and celibate, refusing to be controlled by one's sexual desires because one chooses to follow a higher value in one's life—to follow God even when it's not easy or popular (particularly in the area of sexuality today). Rich relationships and friendships are possible and achievable for singles. Again, the world will have us believe that a life without sex is tragic and not “true to yourself,” but Jesus and the witness of the New Testament is evidence against that false worldviews.

Being celibate today is not an easy road. If your son or daughter chooses to follow God's design for sexuality by remaining celibate, they will need to find people who will support that decision and help them live a godly life. But

celibacy may not be the only path that is open before them. There are some men and women who, in turning away from a gay-identified life, have found a fulfilling marriage relationship with the opposite sex. Over time, many have found a lessening of same-sex attraction desires and some have even found growth in heterosexual desires (most often not in a general sense, but toward a specific person with whom they have grown to love).

In other words, it is important to bring multiple stories of transformation and change to the discussion. You do not know what the Lord has in store for your child's future. Marriage may be out of the question—for now and possibly for the future. Waiting upon the Lord and seeking his will and wisdom is what is needed, and that will be the faith journey your child will have to walk.



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