

“We need to talk...”

Starting a Conversation on Homosexuality and Same-Sex Relationships



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The global church is going through a fair bit of turbulence over LGBTQ matters. (How's that for understatement?) Churches are leaving conferences and people are leaving churches. Some Christians are feeling threatened as they open up about their experiences, and other Christians are feeling threatened by changes to long-held values and beliefs. Adolescents struggling to make sense of their sexuality are being bullied in schools and playgrounds, and teens rejected by their families are being driven to depression, even suicide. This is a critical issue, and an urgent one. We need to talk about it.

As we talk together about these things, as we seek to think through the issues and live together around these questions as siblings in Christ, there are five realities that we need to keep in mind.

Reality #1: We are called to love others the way Christ has loved us.

This is *the* hallmark of true followers of Jesus: not our right doctrine, not our proper ritual, not our correct behaviour, but our *love* (John 13:35). In fact, if we do not love others then we are not true children of God and we do not truly know God, because God is love (1 John 3:11-20; 4:7-21). Our love for others is wrapped up in the greatest commandment, tied inseparably to our love for God (Matt 22:36-40). It is the one thing we owe to others; it sums up every other command of God for us (Rom 13:8-10). Love is the “most excellent way” to live (1 Cor 12:31), it is the foremost fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), it is the virtue that stands “over all” other virtues, that “binds together” all other virtues (Col 3:14).

This love is not merely affection for others, though feelings of affection are good and beautiful. This love is not merely tolerance of others, though it is important that we acknowledge and accept others' differences. This love is **loving**

as Jesus himself has loved us: freely giving ourselves for others so that they might experience flourishing life together with us, even if we feel they don't deserve it, even when it hurts us to do so (e.g. Rom 5:8; 1 John 3:16; 4:9-10).

Jesus calls us to love the other. This means loving anyone we cross paths with, our “neighbours.” It means loving “strangers” or “sinners,” those who are different than us in any way, even in ways we strongly disagree with. It means loving even those who oppose us in anything, even if they do so violently: our “enemies” (Luke 6:27-36; 10:25-37). Jesus calls us to give ourselves for them—our time, our attention, our listening ear, our gracious words, our compassion, our material resources—so that they might thrive as human persons, even when we don't want to do this, even when it is awkward or difficult or dangerous, or it makes us feel vulnerable or weak or afraid. Yet this love, like Jesus' love for us, is voluntary—it is never to be coerced, never to be forced. It is not an excuse for abuse. The goal is to share together the flourishing life God desires for all.

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In exploring matters of human sexuality, we must always remember that we are not merely dealing with an “issue” but with flesh-and-blood human beings, created in God's image and fully loved by God (Gen 1:26-27). Those who disagree with us are human persons, created in God's image and fully loved by God. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other-gendered (LGBTQ) persons are human persons, as are heterosexuals or cisgender or “straight” persons, all created in God's image and fully loved by God. “Conservatives” and “progressives,” “traditionalists” and “liberals,” are all human persons, created in

God's image and fully loved by God. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood," the Apostle Paul reminds us (Eph 6:12)—and all these are indeed our own flesh and blood.

Jesus calls us as Christians to love one another as God's family. We are to carry each other's burdens, we are to rejoice with each other and mourn with each other, we are to pray for each other with thanksgiving, we are to forgive each other—even when it's hard to do, and even when we disagree (e.g. Rom 12:9-21; 1 Cor 12:12-26). We are to accept one another just as Christ has accepted us (Rom 14:1–15:13). This means neither condemning nor disdaining siblings in Christ who think differently than we do—even on matters of gender identity and marriage. Even more, this means receiving our siblings in the faith with joy, welcoming them with delight—just as Christ has done for us.

The bottom line? "Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 John 4:7-8). Demanding that we love each other is not being "wishy-washy"; it is not being "soft" on holiness or truth. **Love is the strongest moral imperative there is.**

Reality #2: There are faithful Christians who come to very different conclusions on same-sex questions, and have very different experiences of sexuality.

Nearly every Christian denomination is wrestling through these questions, and within every denomination one can find people who hold to nearly every possible opinion. There are sincere Christians who seek to follow Christ as Lord and abide by Scripture as authoritative, who are intelligent and well-informed, characterized by faith and love, godliness and devotion—and who differ greatly on these questions, or even in their own sexuality.

This is also true within the church I pastor. We have faithful members who believe that we should openly and fully affirm LGBTQ persons among us. We have faithful members who believe that we should welcome gay persons among us as long as they commit to celibacy. And we have faithful members who believe same-sex attraction and sex acts are clearly wrong and we should not even be talking about all this. Some of us have never met a gay person (that we know of). Some have loved ones who are gay or lesbian. And some among us are themselves same-sex attracted.

These differences among us are simple facts. They may not be widely known or talked about, but they are realities. We do great harm when we portray those who are different than us or disagree with us as ignorant or insincere Christians, or as those who are rejecting the Bible or not following Jesus.

These differences also point to a deeper reality: **this is not among the essentials of Christian faith and life.** You cannot find a statement on sexuality in any of the biblical summaries of the gospel or the Apostles' teaching, or in any of the early church creeds or "rules of faith." What a person believes about same-sex questions or experiences as sexual attraction says nothing about the legitimacy of their faith, or whether or not they are "saved," or whether or not their theology is "biblical" or "orthodox."

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Human sexuality is a crucially important issue in our day, but it is not at the essence of Christian faith and life. Put another way, the gospel of Jesus Christ should impact our sexuality, but human sexuality is not the gospel. We can worship and serve and fellowship together regardless of our differences in this matter.

Reality #3: Human sexuality is more complex than we often think it is.

It can certainly seem simple: people with male sex organs are “male” and are therefore to behave in “masculine” ways, while people with female sex organs are “female” and are therefore to behave in “feminine” ways. Indeed, this can seem obvious, “the way nature intended it,” and the way people have thought about sexuality until only recently.

However, human sexuality has always been more complex than this. There has always been a small percentage of people born with mixed sex organs, for example, who don’t fit neatly into “female” or “male.” Or, for example, every culture both historically and today has had a different understanding of what is acceptably masculine or feminine behaviour, or what are acceptable male or female roles.

It is generally recognized today that **there are at least four dimensions to human sexuality:**

1) Biological sex. This is at the level of basic genetics, anatomy, and physiology, one’s DNA or their sexual organs and their function. People can be female, male, or intersex (sexually dual or ambiguous). Between 0.2% and 1.7% of people are born intersex, depending on how intersexuality is defined. Biological sex is determined by genetic factors and/or environmental factors in prenatal development.

2) Sexual orientation. This is at the level of basic physical and emotional attraction. People can be same-sex attracted (gay or lesbian), other-sex attracted (heterosexual), bi-sex attracted (bisexual), or non-sex attracted (asexual). Between 3-6% of people are same- or bi-sex attracted. Current research suggests that sexual orientation is determined by genetic factors and/or environmental factors in prenatal or early development. Regardless, one thing is clear: this is not a conscious choice.

3) Sexual behaviour. This is at the level of our actions, what we do with our bodies. Apart from instances such as coercion or mental illness, this involves conscious choice—we are by and large responsible for our actions. It is worth noting also that sexual behaviour does not always match up with sexual orientation—people can, for various reasons, act sexually in contrast to their sexual attraction.

4) Sexual identity. This is at the level of how we perceive ourselves and others in relation to our society. Every society has generally accepted norms regarding what behaviour, dress, virtues, roles, and so on, are appropriate to their perceived sexual (or gender) identity. People may be considered more feminine (e.g. “ladylike”) or more masculine (e.g. “manly”), for instance, or they may see themselves as “straight” or “gay,” or they may not fit easily into these common binaries (“transgender” or “queer,” for example). While some of these gender traits have roots in biological sex, gender identities are largely cultural constructs, and one’s status within a particular identity is determined by a combination of genetic, environmental, and social factors.

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Human sexuality is complex. It’s important that we acknowledge this, and that we try to be careful in how we think and speak about these matters. **Remember: behind these words and ideas there are real, flesh-and-blood people with real-life experiences, each created by God and loved by God.** Out of love, then, we must avoid using demeaning language for people of different sexual orientations or identities, or in any way treating them with contempt or cruelty.

Reality #4: The Bible's teaching on homosexuality is not as simple and straightforward as we might like it to be.

There are six biblical passages that are typically understood to speak about homosexuality (Gen 19:1-29; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 1 Tim 1:9-11). When we read these passages in an English translation, outside of their ancient settings, without considering how they fit into the bigger picture of Scripture, it can be easy to think these passages are clear and directly applicable to today. However, when we pay closer attention to these texts within their contexts, we may find they are not as simple or straightforward as they first seem.

In the story of Sodom (Gen 19) the “men of Sodom” demand to have sex with the “men” who came to Lot’s house, an act which Lot describes as “wicked.” However, the story as a whole suggests that what is “wicked” is not the sexual act but rather their violent hostility toward these strangers: the men of Sodom wish to shame and subjugate these foreign men through an act of domination. This fits in the wider context: contrast this with the previous chapter where Abraham receives the same men with gracious hospitality and is blessed by God. And this fits with later biblical depictions of Sodom’s sin which describe it as oppression or inhospitality, never “homosexuality” (e.g. Ezek 16:49-50; Matt 10:14-15). For these reasons, most interpreters do not consider the story of Sodom to be relevant to questions of same-sex relationships today.

The Leviticus commands for a man not to “lie with a man as with a woman” (18:22; 20:13) were given as laws within God’s covenant with ancient Israel. They are part of the “Holiness Code” in Leviticus, listing specific ways in which the ancient Israelites were to be “holy” or “distinct from” the peoples around them. In particular, these commands are focused on religious purity, determining who is able to participate in Israel’s worship rituals. As Christians we are not

bound to the Mosaic covenant (Heb 8:8-13; Rom 10:4), we are not required to obey at least some of these purity laws (Rom 14:14), and we are not required to enforce the consequences of disobeying at least some of these laws (John 8:3-11). Christians have long debated which of these commands are still applicable and, if they are, exactly how they are applicable.

Romans 1:26-27 speaks of Gentiles (Paul turns to Jews in Romans 2) who exchanged “natural” relations for “unnatural” ones, men with men and women with women. The passage repeatedly emphasizes excessive “lust” and “passions” (1:24, 26-27, 29). Perhaps that is the problem at the root of Paul’s condemnation: a lack of sexual

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self-control. Romans 1 also has a strong focus on idolatry: Paul has just said that the fundamental sin of the Gentiles is idolatry, neither worshipping nor giving thanks to the one true God (1:19-25). Paul may therefore be thinking of idolatrous forms of worship that included same-sex acts. Paul’s description of “natural” relations is also hotly debated: does “natural” mean this is based on divine order, which is unchanging? or on social norms, which do change? In Romans 1 Paul clearly censures at least some same-sex acts, but it is not clear why.

First Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 give lists of people who are acting contrary to God’s will, including *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*. These words are notoriously difficult to translate. *Malakoi* literally means “soft”: in the ancient world it was used to refer to men who were unable to control their passions, or to men who acted in effeminate ways, sometimes doing so to attract either women or men. *Arsenokoitai* more clearly refers to same-sex behaviour, but it is not clear what behaviour Paul has in mind: all same-sex acts? or cultic same-

sex acts, part of idolatrous religious ritual? or exploitative same-sex acts, perhaps involving pederasty? All of these are possible.

My point in looking at these biblical passages is not to convince you of a specific interpretation. It is simply to highlight that **these texts are not as clear or relevant as they may seem at first glance.** In particular, while at least some of these biblical passages do censure some forms of same-sex behaviour, none of these biblical passages speaks to the idea of a committed and caring same-sex marriage.

However, even if one insists that one or more of these passages prohibits homosexuality in general, these texts are all focused on sexual *behaviour*, not biological sex, or sexual attraction, or gender identity. In other words, if “homosexuality is sin,” it is not the sexual attraction or identity that is sinful, but the sexual act. This means that, **at the very least, “being gay” is not a sin, and “gay Christian” is not an oxymoron**—though one might believe that gay Christians should seek to remain celibate and that the church should support them in this effort.

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Reality #5: We must set these questions within a broader Christian perspective on sexuality and sin.

Humans have been created by God as embodied beings, part of God’s “very good” creation (Gen 1:26-31; 2:7). One aspect of our “embodied-ness” is our sexuality. Human sexuality is therefore created and blessed by God. It is not something shameful—it only becomes so when distorted by our sin, our harmful attitudes and actions that go against God’s life-giving desires for us (Gen 2:25; 3:7). God calls us to express our sexuality in healthy ways, in the context of a faithful love that is other-delighting and self-giving.

These things are true whether we are single or married, gay or straight. They are simply part of the fabric of human relationship, the necessary human companionship for which God created us (Gen 2:18-24).

There are certainly sexual behaviours that work against these Christian ideals, behaviours that clearly and directly cause harm to ourselves or others: sexual violence, exploitation, degradation, infidelity, and promiscuity. These kinds of behaviours or their underlying motives are unambiguously condemned both in Scripture and in Christian tradition. However, these destructive behaviours are neither exclusively heterosexual nor exclusively homosexual—they are *human* sins.

It is not clear how much harm, if any, is caused by same-sex acts within a committed and caring adult relationship. Nevertheless, even if one believes this to be sin, there are far more harmful sins and evils among ourselves and in the world which we as Christians should be denouncing. Greed, injustice, rage, murder, envy, hypocrisy, pride, hatred, gossip, idolatry, adultery—these are all clearly and repeatedly condemned in Scripture, and they cause tremendous harm in their various expressions today. If we must turn the spotlight on sin, let it be these—and let it begin with ourselves.

There is much more that can be said about homosexuality and same-sex relationships—these are simply some introductory, guiding thoughts. **I invite conversation among us on these matters. I encourage each one of us to participate in this conversation, speaking freely in a spirit of truth and love.**

Unity does not mean uniformity or complete agreement. Disagreement does not mean disunity, nor should it mean division. As a pastor I would never insist that all my congregants agree with each other, let alone with me. I do,

however, always insist that we love each other in the way of Jesus. And so we are right back where we started, with love.

May the Spirit of God guide us in the way of Christ, for the strengthening of his church, for the furthering of God's kingdom, and for the glory of God.

There are many good resources for working through these questions. Here are a few I have found most helpful, from different perspectives.

Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Zondervan, 2015). A strong presentation of the traditional view.

Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (Convergent, 2014). A strong presentation of the affirming view.

Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Zondervan, 2010). An autobiographical, easy-to-read introduction to the traditional view.

Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate* (Jericho, 2013). An autobiographical, easy-to-read introduction to the affirming view.

Listening Church. Online: <http://listeningchurch.ca/>. Interviews with LGBTQ Christians from within Mennonite Church Canada, describing their experiences of bullying and compassion, banishment and welcome, fear and love, doubt and faith.

Through My Eyes. Online: <https://youtu.be/QImNx1JA3BI>. Interviews with LGBTQ Christians, mostly from within an American Evangelical context.
