



How should Christians respond to gay Christians? * Qs from the pews
September 12, 2021 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

A few years back, I was scrolling through my Twitter feed when I noticed a tweet from a Christian songwriter whom I admire. I followed her on Twitter because her songs were singable and memorable, her theology was bang on - which made her tweet all the more unbelievable. This Christian singer songwriter was announcing to the world that she was a lesbian - God had made her that way and God embraced her that way and so she was proud to be a gay Christian.

That tweet left me wondering the same thing as the person who asked our question today: As Christians, how do we respond to gay Christians (publicly out or not)?

That's a great question. Historically, the Church has said that homosexuality is inconsistent with God's character and so the idea of a gay Christian was inconceivable. And yet, now many LGBTQ+ people are coming into the church as gay Christians and saying 'God made us this way and He loves us this way.'

How do we respond to that? How do we respond to people who are gay and Christian?

Well, to answer that question, I think that we need to ask another one first. Is it even possible to be gay and Christian? Is homosexuality consistent with the values and demands of Christianity? Or to put it another way - is homosexuality sin or is it simply a part of who you are?

To answer that question, I want to give you a quick tour of all the places in the Bible where homosexuality is mentioned. As evangelicals, we believe that the Bible is God's Word and so it is the authority for our life and faith, and so we want to pay close attention to what the Bible says about homosexuality. And believe it or not, it doesn't say much. In fact, there are only six places where homosexuality is explicitly addressed. So we're going to take a quick peek at all six appearances to see that God says about homosexuality. All that to ask - can you be gay and Christian?

Now the first passage - Genesis 19 - is probably the most famous - it's Sodom and Gomorrah. Genesis 19 - God sends angels down to Sodom to see how the people were behaving - Lot insists that they come into his house for the night and then the men of the city attempt to break down the door. Genesis 19:5 tells us why - the men in the crowd cry out "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them." Lot refuses to do so and in the end, God destroys the city.

Now historically, many people have taken that to be a pretty obvious condemnation of homosexuality, right? The men say 'bring out those men so we can have sex with them' and then the city gets destroyed. I mean, that's where our word 'sodomy' comes from. It would seem that this would be a pretty straightforward condemnation of homosexuality.

And yet, many people would argue that it's not really homosexuality being condemned here but gang rape. The issue here is not affection between same sex partners; the issue here is that the men of Sodom wanted to show these visitors who was boss by having their way with them. If anything, the sin at play is not homosexuality, but sexual violence and dominance.

And so, some people will say that we can't use Genesis 19 to call homosexuality sin, because what appears here is different from the kind of loving, committed, monogamous relationships that homosexual people today want to enjoy. Gang rape and committed love are two very different things.

Now, I admit that I find that a compelling argument - that Sodom is probably more about sexual violence than homosexual expression, but, there are more passages that we need to consider before we can reach a conclusion.

For example, skip ahead to Leviticus 18:22 -

22 “Do not lie with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”

Or Leviticus 20:13 - “If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.”

Now that seems to me to say pretty clearly that homosexual behaviour is sin. It doesn't matter what the situation is - loving, committed, monogamous relationship or not - if a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, it is sin. It is counter to God's will.

But - people say - that's the Old Testament and we don't follow the OT law like they used to. I mean, in the very next chapter, God forbids planting your field with two different kinds of seed and wearing clothes woven of two kinds of material (19:19); I don't think any of us would call planting carrots and peas in the same garden sin. Why should we then call homosexuality sin?

That's a good question and reasonable too, because it's true. In a sense, we don't relate to the OT Law the way that our Jewish forefathers did. But Jesus didn't come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. And while He did away with some things, He and His apostles affirmed others, including the sinfulness of homosexuality.

For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9 says -

9 Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men^[a] [nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders (1Co 6:9 NIV).]10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

And then 1 Timothy 1:9-10 -

9 We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine...

In both of these passages, the New Testament reaffirms the OT teaching on homosexuality. The food laws are shut down in Acts 10; the sacrificial system is rendered obsolete with the Cross; but the designation of homosexuality as sin remains in place. To have sex with a person of the same sex is sin in the OT and in the New. Why? Well, the sixth passage, Romans 1:26-27, explains why - it is inconsistent with the way that God made us.

Take a look at Romans 1, starting in verse 25 -

25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised.

26 Because of this [because they ignored God and desired created things more than their Creator], God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

In the beginning, God created us in His image. He created us man and woman. Man and woman together reflect the image of God. Marriage then, intimate human relationships, were created by God to be a reflection of who He is. That's why Jesus says - 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'^[a] 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'^[b]? (Matthew 19:4-5).

Jesus here affirms that God created man and woman to become one flesh and Romans tells us that when men and women engage in homosexual behaviours, it is counter to the purposes for which God created us. God made us man and woman and gave us sexual compatibility; same sex relationships then run counter to what God intended. Which means, that homosexuality is sin.

Now that's a lot, isn't it? There is a lot here and actually I'm tempted to have a Bible study one night to talk through this because this is not dry theology we're talking about here - this is real people's lives that we're talking about and so it would probably be valuable to work through this together to consider all the details and nuances.

But for now, I do think that these passages lead us to the conclusion that homosexual behaviour is in fact sin. Homosexual behaviour is sin to be confessed, not embraced.

Unless... And here's where we need to talk about what we mean by 'gay Christian' - are we talking about someone who is actively engaged in a same-sex relationship or behaviour OR are we talking about someone who experiences same sex attraction and yet chooses not to act on it out of faithfulness to God?

The first one, same sex activity, is sin, from the Bible's point of view. To indulge in same-sex sex is sin. The other one though, unindulged same sex attraction, is not. It's possible then to be a 'gay Christian' if by that you mean a same-sex attracted person who has chosen for the love of God to resist those desires.

This might be a big idea to wrap your mind around, but same sex attraction is not itself sin. Acting on it is, but the simple state of being attracted to people of the same sex is not itself sin. James 1:14-15 tells us that temptation is NOT the same thing as sin; it's only when we give in to temptation that we sin, so experiencing same sex attraction is not itself sin. It is simply a manifestation of the fallen sin nature that we all have.

Remember back to a few weeks ago? Why do good men fall into sexual sin? It's because we all have a fallen sin nature. What God created good in the beginning got twisted in the Fall and so we all have a sin nature that warps our sexuality. This is the reason that powerful men pursue affairs; this is the reason pornography is so rampant; this is the force that powers the whole industry of sex work. And for some, it drives them to desire people of the same sex.

Sam Alberry writes “All of us experience fallen sexual desires, whether those desires are heterosexual or homosexual by nature. It is not un-Christian to experience same-sex attraction any more than it is un-Christian to get sick. What marks us out as Christian is not that we experience such things, but how we respond to them when we do” (Alberry, 43).ⁱ

And he’s completely right - whether we are tempted by pornography or an affair or homosexual attraction, we are all being tempted by our inner fallen nature. The choice though, that we have as Christians is: what are we going to do with it? Indulge in it, despite the fact that it is inconsistent with the holy calling to which we have been called? Or resist and get help in resisting, so that we can remain faithful to the God who has graciously saved us?

As Rachel Gilson memorably and rightly puts it - you gotta crucify these desires, not coddle them (paraphrase, Gilson, 50).ⁱⁱ

There is a sense then, in which it IS possible to be gay and Christian - a person experiencing same sex attraction, and yet affirming the truthfulness of the Bible, and so resisting their same-sex desires in order to remain faithful to God is a gay Christian. They exist. These books are all written by non-practicing, same-sex attracted Christians. And they’ve all been very helpful to me.ⁱⁱⁱ

So as we answer our question today, I really do think that we need to distinguish between same sex attraction and same sex behaviour. Because someone who experiences same sex attraction and yet chooses not to indulge in it in order to faithfully follow Jesus would be a gay Christian, or maybe better, a Christian who experiences SSA. And they are different from a person who indulges in it. And that difference should be reflected in our response to our question this morning.

So, after all that, let’s answer our question. As Christians, how should we respond to ‘gay Christians’?

First - If you are talking about SSA Christians who are nonetheless actively resisting those desires, you should respond with grace and support, 100%. They are brothers and sisters in Christ who are struggling with the same temptations that you are, only theirs are focused in a different direction. There is nothing about homosexuality that makes it inherently more sinful than any other sin and so we need to help them resist, as much as we need help resisting what tempts us..

Preston Sprinkle^{iv} rightfully points out “homosexual sins are never mentioned in isolation” (126) and he’s right. The Leviticus passages don’t just call homosexuality sin; they list like a dozen other *heterosexual* sexual behaviours that are sin too. 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10 call homosexuality sin, but they also call heterosexual lust and slander and gossip and greed sin too. And Romans 1, the biggest issue is not that people have turned to same sex relationships, the biggest issue is that people have turned their back on their Creator.

We need to resist the temptation to think that same-sex attraction is a grave evil, somehow worse than other sexual sins; we need to recognize our own fallenness and celebrate the grace of God in saving us from it through Jesus. Jesus died to redeem same-sex attracted sinners the same as He died to redeem opposite-sex attracted sinners and so we need to extend grace to all.

To SSA Christians then, I think we need to be welcoming and supportive, opening our homes to them, since resisting temptation for them may mean life as a single person. I know that some will marry

people of the opposite sex and have meaningful relationships; some will eventually experience greater opposite sex attraction, but some will remain same sex attracted all through life.^v They are brothers and sisters to support, not pariahs to avoid. We need to help them in their sexuality, just as we all need help in godly sexuality. So that's how I would respond to same sex attracted Christians.

What about SSA Christians who act on those desires? People who say 'God made me this way; God is love and so you're wrong to think that I'm wrong in loving a person of the same sex.' Well, that's a more complicated issue, isn't it? Because 1. They are going to say that we're reading the Bible wrong and 2. It is a very personal and emotional issue.

So let me put it to you like this - I think that we need to respond with grace and truth. The Church has historically done a great deal of harm to the LGBTQ+ community - we've treated them as pariahs while turning a blind eye to other more 'acceptable' sins and so I think that we need to be very careful to act with grace. We need grace as much as they do. Preston Sprinkle writes: "Jesus didn't open up a relationship by giving his stance on a person's sin. Rather, he opened it up with love. If we desire for people to live holy lives, then we need to begin with love" (Sprinkle, 125-126). And I think he's right. I think that when we interact with practicing gay Christians, we need to go out of our way to affirm their value and humanity.

Now that being said, I also think that we need to go out of our way to not compromise the truth. The Bible says it's sin and if you read it the way the original authors intended, I don't think that you land anywhere but that. I've tried to show you this morning some of the common objections to biblical texts that talk about homosexuality; if it comes up in conversation, you now have some idea of how to respond when someone tries to say that the historical interpretations of Scripture are wrong. We need to affirm the Bible.

But that being said, I still think that we need to land hard on grace. We need to affirm their basic humanity. Grace and truth, but especially grace. Like I said before, these are real people and real lives we're talking about here. I never had to consider as a kid whether or not I was attracted to men; that just didn't show up in our media but it does for kids today. And I am entirely sympathetic to people who are torn up about this, even considering suicide because of it.

Our sexuality is a deeply entrenched part of who God made us to be and when the Bible challenges someone's sexuality, it's never an easy ride. It's hard enough to admit sin; the last thing you need is someone hammering you for it. I think that we need to be honest with biblical truth, but in such a way that the other person can experience the sacrificial love of God through us. I think that we need to be directed by grace and truth.

Someone who has helped me a lot in thinking about this is Sam Alberry - a non-practicing, same-sex attracted pastor in the United Kingdom. His little book has been really helpful to me, answering questions like 'Should I attend a gay marriage?' and 'What should I do if a Christian comes out to me?' (Spoiler alert - he suggests skipping the wedding but being intentional about having them over to show that you care - and thanking them, listening to them and gently probing to find out what else is going on in their lives - there's a copy of the book here if you'd like to borrow it). Ultimately, I'm going to give him the final word, because he knows better than I do what he's talking about -

"I would rather start at the centre and work outwards, than start at the edge and work in. The center is the death and resurrection of Christ. That is where God reveals Himself most fully. That is where we

see his glory most clearly. It is also where God most clearly shows his love, righteousness, power and wisdom. This is what I most want people to know - for them to be bowled over by the God of the cross and resurrection. And, once they are gripped by this, to help them think through what trusting in this God will involve - what will need to be given over to him, including our messed up sexuality. But I want that conversation to take place in the context of the gospel, rather than start with their sexuality and try to get from there to the gospel... So when a gay couple starts coming to church, my priority for them is the same as for anyone else to hear the gospel and experience the welcome of a Christian community” (Allberry, 67-68).

ⁱ Sam Allberry, *Is God anti-gay?*, (The Good Book Company, 2015).

ⁱⁱ Rachel Gilson, *Born (again) this way*, (The Good Book Company, 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ Allberry, Gilson and Wesley Hill, *Washed and waiting*, (Zondervan, 2016).

^{iv} Preston Sprinkle, *People to be loved: homosexuality is not just an issue*, (Zondervan, 2015).

^v Sprinkle, 159.