

Christian Witness to the LGBT Community

November 10, 2019

So far in this class we have considered God's design for our bodies, gender and sexuality within the context of the overarching Christian story. We are beautiful (created by God), and at the same time broken (corrupted by sin). Through Christ we are called to redemption, and both Christ-centered marriage and consecrated Christian singleness bear witness to this redemption. Finally, we live in the hope of glory (the final redemption of our bodies). In light of the Christian story, we can address the complicated and sometimes confusing realities, including homosexuality, intersexuality, and gender dysphoria, that we face in this broken world.

But how do we relate with wisdom and love to people who haven't yet bought into the Christian story?

The two biblical principles I want to highlight today are: **hospitality** and **holiness**. We see both of these principles lived out in the ministry of Jesus in the gospels, and commended to the church in the epistles.

How does Jesus relate to outsiders (those who are not yet his disciples) in the gospels?

- **Lepers** (Mark 1:40-45)
- **Tax collectors** (Mark 2:13-17; Luke 7:33-35)
- **Adulterous woman/prostitute** (John 7:53-8:11; Luke 7:36-50)

In all of these passages we see that...

1. **Jesus is intentionally, remarkably, graciously hospitable to outsiders** – unlike many other religious leaders of his day, he attracted outsiders (such as the leper) by his reputation of showing compassion, he intentionally pursued them to become his disciples (Levi), he ate and drank with them on their own turf even though this damaged his reputation at times (Levi's house), he defended them against their accusers and pronounced forgiveness of sins (adulterous woman).
2. **Jesus calls those who follow him to a life of holiness** – he meets us where we are, but he doesn't leave us where we are. He calls those who follow him to a life of uncompromising devotion ("take up your cross and follow me"). Yet he promises that every "death" that we must die, every act of self-sacrifice done for his sake, will lead to resurrection life and joy.
3. **In Jesus' ministry, hospitality both precedes and promotes holiness.** Jesus doesn't wait for people to become holy before he extends hospitality. However, Jesus doesn't extend hospitality in a way that encourages people to continue living in ungodliness.

How do we relate to non-Christian neighbors according to the pattern of Jesus?

1. Hospitality

- a. "Seek to show *hospitality*" (Romans 12:13). In other words, be generous, open-hearted, and welcoming. Christians must extend hospitality even to those who oppose the gospel.
 - i. "Repay no one evil for evil...never avenge yourselves....On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink, for by doing so you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21).
 - ii. "We regard no one according to the flesh" (2 Cor 5:16) as we seek to be God's ambassadors conveying his message of reconciliation in Christ.

2. Holiness

- a. "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good" (Romans 12:9). Christians are to have clear and distinct moral standards, embracing what is true and good and beautiful and resisting what is distorted and deceptive and dishonoring to God.
- b. Recognizing that the path of following Christ may seem "hard" and "narrow" to our neighbors (Matthew 7:14), we commit to take up our own cross daily and to deny ourselves

in order to follow Christ, trusting that his way leads to everlasting life and joy. We can only commend the “hard” and “narrow” path of following Christ with integrity if we are actually walking that path ourselves. Redemption involves finding meaning and purpose in suffering, and we resist our culture’s instinct to seek redemption merely by avoiding suffering.

How do we as Christians faithfully bear witness to Christ among the LGBT community? By extending Christlike hospitality and by inviting people into Christ-centered holiness.

Hospitality involves meeting people where they are, getting to know them on their terms, understanding their experiences, identifying shared concerns, and extending kindness and mercy.

Some terms as they are commonly used...

- Lesbian = women attracted to women
- Gay = men attracted to men
- Bisexual = people attracted to both sexes
- Transgender = people who identify with a different gender than they were born as. They may cross-dress, take hormones, and/or have surgery.
- Queer = originally a derogatory term, now used by people who reject the binary system of male/female and straight/gay, who want to relativize such categories altogether
- Intersex = people born with ambiguous genitals
- Asexual = people who experience little or no sexual attraction to anyone

There are lots of terms out there, and the list is constantly expanding. It’s good to ask questions like: “How do you identify yourself?” or “Can you tell me what that means to you?” or “What has your experience been like?” If you’re not sure, don’t assume.

Some terms or phrases that may provoke a negative reaction from the LGBT community:

- Calling someone “a homosexual”
- Referring to a “homosexual lifestyle”
- If someone calls himself “gay”, he may not like it if you refer to his experience of having “same sex attractions”

Recognize some similarities between LGBT community and evangelical Christian community

- Both groups feel like marginalized minorities in a hostile/indifferent world
- Both groups find solidarity and strength in being together
- Both have a message of freedom and liberation – we were living in the darkness, in shame, and now we’re able to live in the truth, to be accepted and loved for who we really are
- Both want to be accepting/hospitable/outreaching communities – to bring more people into our community, and in some ways, to extend our community into the wider world
- Each group sees the other as a specific (or at least a potential) threat to its well-being
- Vocal members of each group advocate for mutually opposing public policy stances
- Christians who experience same sex attraction but choose not to pursue a same sex relationship because they prioritize their Christian identity over their sexual desires are caught in the middle. They are generally not understood or accepted within the wider LGBT community, and they are not always well understood and supported within the church.

How can Christians faithfully bear witness to Christ, when relationships can easily become polarized, tense, and distant? As I have said in previous weeks, I do not believe that Christians should abandon the traditional understanding of biblical marriage. Scripture is clear, and God is good. However, I

do believe that finding our identity and security from Christ (and not from ourselves) frees us to love people who are different from us, even people who may at times disagree with or oppose us:

- As forgiven sinners, we can be less defensive, more able to admit our own flaws and weaknesses. Christians are not out to prove that we are better than everyone else in the world. God did not choose us because we are inherently morally superior. The gospel humbles us by exposing our own sin and giving us a winsome, gracious, and unpretentious posture toward our neighbors.
- As recipients of God's common grace, we can affirm all that is good and a reflection of God's image in LGBT people. For example, there may be many admirable aspects of a gay couple's friendship (even though Christians cannot celebrate the sexual aspects of that relationship). A lesbian couple may be excellent parents in many respects (even though Christians may be concerned that they have deliberately chosen to exclude a male parental figure from their household).
- Christians have an internal motivation, through our union with Christ, to love people who are different from us, people who disagree with us, and even people who personally oppose or attack us (Matthew 5:43-48). This is not inherent in the LGBT community or in the world at large.
- Christians should think carefully about what public policies we advocate for and how we can frame our advocacy in the context of pursuing the common good. A good book addressing this question is John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*.

Next steps for the church in reaching out to the LGBT community:

1. Extend hospitality. Take initiative to befriend, listen to, and learn from people in the LGBT community.
2. Repent of double standards. Believe that all sexual sin is destructive. Let's clean our own houses first.
3. Acceptance is not the same as affirmation or approval. Think about how we express this in other relationships. (e.g. how do you relate to a cohabiting heterosexual couple)
4. Invest for the long haul, not just for the short term.

Specific questions:

1. How should I respond if someone comes out to me as gay?

- a. **Thank them** for trusting you enough to share that with you. (If they know you are a Christian, they may have some fear that you would reject them if you knew.)
- b. **Reassure them** that you're committed to your relationship with that person, that you won't reject them as a person.
- c. **Listen to them.** Ask honest questions (e.g. Tell me more about what it's been like for you. Who have you told? How have people responded? Are you in a relationship?)
- d. **Pray for them.** Pray that God would reveal his goodness to them and pray that your friendship would be a faithful expression of that goodness.

2. Should I tell my gay (or gay-affirming) friend that I don't support gay marriage?

- a. Short answer: it depends. Consider at least the following factors:
 - i. Does your friend claim to follow Christ and the Scriptures?
 - ii. Have you had conversations about the gospel previously?
 - iii. Do you have a friendship that generally allows for disagreement and mutual challenge on a personal level?
 - iv. Is your friend asking for your opinion on this particular question?
- b. What if someone asks you directly ("Do you think homosexuality is a sin?") even if you're not trying to raise the issue?
 - i. Sometimes a simple, direct answer is best: "Yes, I think God intended sex to be for marriage between a man and a woman, and anything outside that is not God's will"
 - ii. Sometimes it's worth trying to bring in the bigger picture

1. Many times, Jesus answered a question with another question, not because he was trying to avoid ever giving a direct answer but because he wanted people to see the bigger picture (e.g. Luke 10:25-37; 18:18-30; 20:1-8; 20:19-26).
2. “What do you understand the word ‘sin’ to mean?”
3. “The Bible says that all people, whether gay or straight, have sinned.”
4. “That’s a really good question and I’d be happy to talk about it. But I’d really love to get to know you and for you to know me first. Could we sit down and have lunch or coffee, and then I’d be happy to answer your question.”

3. Should I attend a gay wedding if I’m invited?

- a. Some Christians say **No**: Attending a wedding means that you are witnessing and blessing the vows of the couple getting married. It’s like going to an idol’s temple for a pagan religious ceremony and eating the food there, you’re participating in idolatry.
- b. Other Christians say **Yes**: You can attend a wedding as an expression of friendship, without endorsing the marriage. It’s like Jesus eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners at Matthew’s house. He wasn’t endorsing their sin; he was just meeting them on their turf.
- c. There are some roles in a wedding that clearly communicate approval: officiating, being part of the wedding party, verbally affirming the marriage vows, etc.
- d. Simply being in the audience may or may not communicate approval depending on the setting. Traditionally, it did. Today, it often doesn’t.
- e. A same-sex wedding performed in the name of Christ is especially problematic, because it calls upon Christ to bless a sexual relationship that God has forbidden. In 1 Cor 5:9-11, Paul warns strongly against associating with *someone who claims to be a brother or sister in Christ* and yet is sexually immoral (or greedy, idolatrous, etc.) But he says, I’m not saying that you shouldn’t associate with people in the world who are sexually immoral.
- f. Questions to ask
 - i. If I attend, what will that communicate?
 - ii. If I don’t attend, what will that communicate?
 - iii. If I attend a ceremony that I can’t fully support, how do I maintain integrity as a Christian in that setting? What boundaries will I draw?
 - iv. If I don’t attend the ceremony, how can I be intentional about pursuing relationship with the people both before and afterwards (recognizing that my decision not to attend may cause some relational fallout)?

4. What about “preferred pronouns” and people who adopt a new name as part of their gender transition?

- a. Is calling someone by their preferred name and pronoun a way of extending hospitality to them (by meeting them where they are), or is it confirming someone’s misguided sense of who they are (a form of bearing false witness)?
- b. In some countries and US cities, laws have been passed that impose fines or even jail time for “mis-gendering”, and there is increasing social pressure to conform to people’s preferred pronouns, whatever they may be
- c. Navigating this question may require discernment, prayer, patience, and courage
 - i. If someone introduces themselves to you by a certain name, go with that name
 - ii. If you have an existing relationship with a person who is transitioning to a different gender identity, you could have an honest conversation about what you are willing or not willing to do (e.g. I’m willing to call you by the name you want to be called, but I don’t feel comfortable referring to you as “he”). In some cases, people will accept that. In other cases, people may threaten to cut off all relationship with you if you do not adhere to their demands.
 - iii. In some cases (an obvious case might be a child who is seriously mentally unstable or suicidal) you may decide that it’s not worth fighting a battle about names and

pronouns, at least not right now, because there are more weighty matters currently at stake

iv. Avoiding pronouns is possible but at times can be awkward

5. **How do I talk about all this with my children?**

- a. Christian parents should actively guide their children in age-appropriate gender identity development. This begins with repeatedly and regularly affirming in different ways how wonderful it is that God has made them male or female, and explaining God's good design for the human body and for male and female relationships at an early age (at an age appropriate level of detail). Ideally this affirmation of God's good design should happen *before* children are directly confronted with the fallenness and brokenness of the world in this area, and not simply as a reaction to some particular expression of fallenness or brokenness. In our family, we read *The Story of Me* (for ages 3-5) and *Before I Was Born* (for ages 6-8) with our children (we read the first one when our children had just turned 3 and 5). We found these to be helpful, tactfully written, well balanced resources that opened the door to many further conversations. Whatever resource you use, read through it first on your own so that you are not surprised by the content!
- b. It is important to honestly answer children's questions as they come up, and not to avoid talking about gender or sexuality, or answering hard questions, out of a misguided sense of embarrassment. Conversations about gender and sexuality should not be approached like immunization shots (an unpleasant experience that must happen once or twice in order to get the danger out of the way). Talking about God's good design honors our Creator who made us! If Christian parents avoid talking with their children about these subjects, we are asking for our children's vision to be shaped by the confusing and self-centered messages of the world around us. (The same principle goes with talking about death. 19th century Victorians talked frankly about death but almost never about sex, while 21st century Americans talk incessantly about sex and never about death. The Bible is surprisingly frank, but also discreet, about both topics.)
- c. It is not unusual for young children, as they are exploring the world and as their bodies go through natural developmental processes, to say things like, "I wish I was a boy" or "I wish I was a girl". This does not mean that a child has gender dysphoria. It probably means that the child is attracted to some positive quality that they primarily associate with the opposite sex. It does not mean that they should be encouraged to associate themselves with the opposite sex in every way.
- d. Both mothers and fathers should be involved in conversations with children about gender and sexuality. This is not a responsibility that should be delegated to one parent alone. When puberty comes, it is appropriate for the parent of the same sex to have more extended conversations with the child/youth in that regard (or for a single parent, it is worth finding a mature Christian of the opposite sex who can be a mentor to the child during this stage of life).

Resources

People who came to know Christ from non-Christian LGBT backgrounds:

Rosaria Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert* and *The Gospel Comes With a House Key*

Christopher Yuan, *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to Christ, A Broken Mother's Search for Hope* (written with his mother Angela Yuan) and *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story*

Becket Cook, *A Change of Affection: A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption*

David Bennett, *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus*

Jackie Hill Perry, *Gay Girl Good God*

Caleb Kaltenbach, *Messy Grace: How a Pastor with Gay Parents Learned to Love Others without Sacrificing*

Conviction

For raising children and youth:

Preston Sprinkle, *Living in a Gray World* and *People to be Loved*

Stan and Brenna Jones, *The Story of Me* (ages 3-5) and *Before I Was Born* (ages 5-8) – for reading with kids

For thinking through Christian political engagement:

John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*

Harvest USA (harvestusa.org) has various booklets addressing different issues, including “Your Gay Child Says I Do”, “Homosexuality and the Bible”, “Can You Change if you’re Gay?”, and many others. “Harvest USA brings the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ by helping individuals and families affected by sexual struggles and by providing resources that address biblical sexuality to individuals and churches.”