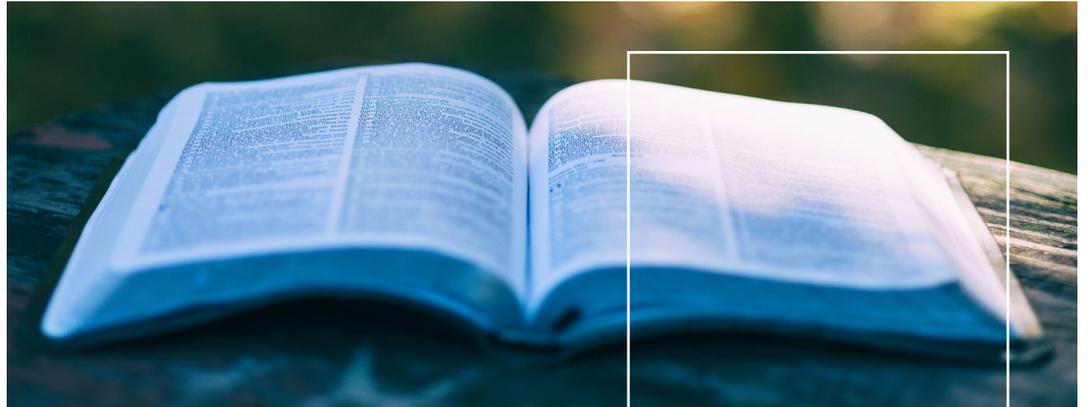


In recent years, those of us who hold to a traditional view of sexuality have found ourselves confronted with a further question that demands clear thinking. The question is this: how do we respond to the phenomenon of a person who refers to himself or herself as a “gay Christian” but has chosen to remain celibate because he or she holds to the traditional Christian view that marriage is between one man and one woman?



LANGUAGE IS IMPORTANT: PROBLEMS WITH THE TERM “GAY CHRISTIAN”

BY: Dr. C. Scott Shidemantle



Introduction

This essay assumes that the reader has embraced the traditional view that God created human sexuality to be expressed *only* within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. God’s creational intent for marriage was clearly demonstrated in the early chapters of the Bible when God created a man and a woman and brought them together in the garden (Gen 1:28). Jesus assumed this view of marriage when he confronted the issue of a divorce between a man and a woman (Matt 5:31-32; Mark 10:11-12). The Apostle Paul also assumed this view when he saw faithfulness in marriage between one man and one woman as one of the qualifications for the eldership (1 Tim 3:2). And, the Apostle Paul wrote that not only is same-sex-sexual *activity* sinful (“they gave up natural relations” Romans 1:27 ESV) but also that same-sex-sexual *desire* is sinful (“dishonorable passions” Romans 1:26 ESV).

In recent years, those of us who hold to a traditional view of sexuality have found ourselves confronted with a further question that demands clear thinking. The question is this: how do we respond to the phenomenon of a person who refers to himself or herself as a “gay Christian” *but* has chosen to remain celibate because he or she holds to the traditional Christian view that marriage is between one man and one woman?

The phenomenon of a person who identifies as a “gay Christian” but decides not to act upon their sexual inclinations is often referred to as “Side B” Christianity. The term “Side A” Christianity refers to the phenomenon of a person who identifies as a “gay Christian” *and* has also decided to act upon those same-sex-sexual inclinations by entering into a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex. The “Side A” position advocates for so-called gay marriage; the “Side B” position does not. Whether one is “Side A” or “Side B,” there is still a problem. Both views erroneously use the term “gay Christian.”



The Problem of “Gay Christian” Terminology

We should be encouraged when a friend shares with us that although they experience same-sex-attraction, they have decided *not* to act upon that attraction because of their commitment to Jesus.

The challenge for us, however, is how do we respond biblically if our friend *then* goes on to share with us that they now identify as a “gay Christian” and that they also identify as a member of the LGBTQ community? The problem is that our friend has *moved from* speaking about their *experience* of same-sex-attraction to placing their *identity* in that sinful experience. On the surface, one might respond by saying, “Come on. You’re just quibbling over semantics here!” Not so. There are significant biblical/theological/practical reasons why we should see this move as deeply problematic and even seriously detrimental to our friend’s discipleship. Let’s explore those reasons.

First, the issue of *identity*.

When Christians describe themselves as “gay Christians” they are identifying themselves with their sin struggle. There is simply no precedence for this anywhere in Scripture. As a matter of fact, we find the exact opposite of this in Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 6:9 the Apostle Paul writes, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” (ESV)? Then Paul goes on to list a whole host of sins, including the sin of homosexuality. After the vice list, Paul writes, using the past tense, “And such *were* some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11 ESV italics mine). This text, and other similar New Testament texts, make it clear that one of the joys of being a Christian is that our identity is *not* found in our sin but in our union with Christ. Paul puts it this way in Romans 6, after discussing how we have been baptized into both Christ’s death and resurrection: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11 ESV). To identify oneself as a “gay Christian” would be akin to identifying oneself as a “lustful Christian” or a “lying Christian” or a “covetous Christian.” We may struggle with these temptations, but our identity is *not* found in these things. Our identity is found in our union with Christ.

It may be difficult for a Christian struggling with same-sex-attraction to see their identity in their union

with Christ and not in their sexuality, for a variety of reasons. First, it is counter-cultural to hold this perspective. The Christian struggler will be battling against powerful cultural messages that urge people to identify themselves by their sexuality. Second, sexual urges and desires themselves are powerful forces, so it might make sense experientially for the struggler to identify with these desires. However, over the long term, drawing on the various real and practical means of grace that God provides, a Christian struggler can expect to, more and more, see these desires diminish as he or she is filled with the newness of life. The desires may not completely disappear, but they may greatly diminish. This hope is not just empty words and theory. There are real, live Christian testimonies that bear witness to the truthfulness of this hope—stories like those of Rosaria Butterfield and Christopher Yuan.

Second, the issue of *legitimate creational and redeemed categories of humanity*.

When Christians describe themselves as “gay Christians” they are violating the legitimate creational and redemptive categories that Scripture uses to describe humanity. To illustrate legitimate creational and redeemed categories of humanity we may turn to John’s Revelation. In Revelation 7, the Apostle sees people from “every nation and all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb” worshiping the LORD (Revelation 7:9 ESV). The Apostle John, in his throne-room-vision of Revelation 7 is able to look at the multitude of redeemed people surrounding the throne of God and take notice of the ethnic, cultural, and language background of those people. What Revelation 7 tells us is that these categories of humanity are good. These categories of humanity remain even in the New Heavens and New Earth in redeemed and perfected form. We rejoice that, on the basis of Revelation 7, we can expect to see the elect of God gathered from a whole variety of ethnic, cultural, and language groups.

The language that we have traditionally used to describe minority groups in our culture actually mirrors the language found in passages like Revelation 7. In our context, we use ethnic and cultural terms like “African American” or “Hispanic American” or “German American” to refer to minority groups within our broader culture.

In recent years, however, new terminology has emerged in our culture that does not reflect a legitimate cre-



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ational and redeemed category of humanity—the category of “sexual minorities.” We do not find, anywhere in Scripture, that any of the “sexual minority” categories (i.e., LGBTQ) are affirmed as existing in the New Heavens and New Earth. Instead, the closest reference that we have of a “sexual minority” would be the 1 Corinthians 6:11 text mentioned above. That text, as we have seen, calls the homosexual person who has come to Christ to see their homosexuality as something that they *were* (past tense) since they have *now* “been washed, sanctified, and justified.”

Third, the issue of *sanctification and pastoral care.*

When Christians describe themselves as “gay Christians” they may actually have adopted a way of understanding their sexuality that will hinder their own sanctification. The term “gay Christian” becomes, to many that use this terminology, an *ontological* description of who they *are* and not a *phenomenological* description of what they *feel*. This may seem like only a semantic difference, but it is very profound. To say “I *am* gay” is very different from saying “I *feel* same-sex-attraction.” The former communicates a static, unchanging nature of being (ontology); the second communicates an experience of feeling that may have degrees of change over time (phenomenon).

If a person understands their feelings of same-sex-attraction ontologically as an unchanging part of who they are, it may prove difficult for that person to realize that they can do battle against those feelings with the means of grace that God has provided. Scripture teaches that all Christians are called to fight against sinful

feelings, urges, and temptations that are contrary to God’s created order and righteous requirements. While those feelings may not completely go away, Scripture teaches us that we can and should experience degrees of growth and change. Likewise, for the pastor or Christian counselor called to walk alongside those who experience same-sex-attraction, if that church member or client identifies ontologically as gay, it will prove hard for the pastor or counselor to lead in the direction of repentance and newness of life.

Fourth, the issue of *confusion.*

When Christians describe themselves as “gay Christians” they cause confusion. Our culture, sixty years after the sexual revolution, has embraced the view that living out one’s feelings of same-sex-attraction is socially acceptable. To say that one is gay in our culture does not typically communicate abstinence from sexual activity. Rather, it assumes the popular notion that “gayness” is a static, unchanging, ontological identity that ought to be lived out. Dominant voices in our culture react viscerally whenever it is suggested that gay individuals ought to repent of and seek sanctifying healing from their “gayness.” And, our culture has embraced the notion of “sexual minorities,” which is ultimately an illegitimate creational and redemptive category found in Scripture. In short, the term “gay Christian” produces confusion at multiple levels.

Challenge to Use More Biblical Language

Rather than using the term “gay Christian,” which implies a static ontological identity that is contrary to Scripture, pastor and theologian Sam Allberry, argues



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that it is more biblically faithful for a person to say “I am a Christian who struggles with same-sex-attraction.” Why is the latter more biblically faithful than the former? There are three reasons that this is more biblically faithful. First, the person unambiguously describes himself or herself as a “Christian,” whose identity is squarely found in Christ and not grounded in his or her feelings. Second, in using the term “struggle” the person communicates clearly that his or her experience of same-sex-attraction is unwanted—it is a product of the Fall, is not God’s best, and they hope to battle against it. In addition, by using the term “struggle,” the person places his or her experience of sin alongside the experience of every Christian, since all Christians are engaged in the struggle of putting sin in all of its forms to death. Third, because the person uses the terminology of “same-sex-attraction” he or she has chosen to understand their experience phenomenologically (“I feel...”) as opposed to ontologically (“I am...”).

Why Is This Important?

In a passage very familiar to most Christians, the Apostle Paul writes, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2 ESV). This fallen world has ways of thinking that are contrary to Scripture. We must be on guard that we do not conform to the way the world thinks. Why? Because conforming to the way the world *thinks* affects the way that we *live*. And, we as Christians ultimately want our lives to be, more and more, conformed to the image of Christ and not the world as we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to Christ.

Believers in both the Old Testament and the New Testament were constantly tempted with “worldly thinking”

in the form of “syncretism.” Syncretism is the practice of merging elements of two or more religions. Old Testament Israel struggled with the syncretism of the worship of Yahweh and at the same time the worship of Canaanite gods like Ba’al and Asherah. Early Christians struggled with the syncretism of Christianity and gnosticism (the ancient Greek belief that spiritual things are good and physical things are evil). The syncretism of our day is the merging together of Christianity with what we might call “identity-ism.” “Identity-ism,” which is also sometimes called “Postmodern Tribalism,” is the tendency of postmoderns to fixate their identity on some very narrow trait. This takes the form, sometimes, of postmoderns identifying as a sexual minority, like identifying with the LGBTQ community. For the reasons we have discussed above, we need to *discourage* our Christian friends from identifying themselves as a “gay Christian” since it ultimately is driven by an attempted syncretism between a Christian way of thinking and “identity-ism.” Ultimately, by adopting this form of syncretism, the Christian does injury to his or her self-identity, which biblically should be determined by his or her union with Christ.

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For Further Reading

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