

THE CENTER FOR  
FAITH, SEXUALITY & GENDER

# Pastoral Paper

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A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON  
PARENTING A GAY CHILD

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# Introduction

For a decade now, Christian parents have been asking my wife and me for help in parenting their gay kids. As a Christian dad of a gay son, I wish there had been someone to talk me through the issues raised by my son's disclosure of his sexuality. But the evangelical church has until very recently said very little about homosexuality, except that it is a sin and that those who practice it are worthy of condemnation.<sup>1</sup> As a result, most gay young people in the church stayed silent about their sexuality until they could no longer ignore it. Upon coming out, the majority left the church, and often their faith as well.

Most parents, if they knew their kid was gay, told no one about it and had no one to talk to. Some decided to stay in relationship with their children by ignoring the issue; others watched their relationships fall apart in the midst of a sea of misunderstanding, rejection, and anger.

In order to love these families and their gay kids well, the church needs to offer a better model to parents. What follows are a few suggestions rooted in my own journey with my son Drew. (We've written extensively about this journey in our book, *Space at the Table: Conversations Between an Evangelical Theologian and his Gay Son*.)

My responses here are directed specifically to parents of gay kids, not to the kids themselves. I should add, too, that I am only speaking from my own experience as a parent of a gay kid, not speaking on behalf of all parents of LGBT+ kids. Each situation will have unique challenges. In addition, while the opinions here are my own,

they have been worked out in conversation with Drew and so in some way bear his imprint as well.

I hold to a traditional biblical understanding of sexuality and marriage, one that affirms God's creation of sex for marriage and marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman. I am writing here to parents who share this perspective, and so I will assume it throughout this paper. Finally, while I believe my words of advice are rooted in the principles of the Christian Scriptures, the issues are often complex and open to dispute. I hope you will take what is helpful to you and leave the rest behind.

# When Your Child Comes Out

For many gay kids, coming out to their parents is unthinkable. They would prefer to come out on social media, risking whatever backlash and damage might follow, rather than to tell their mom and dad directly. And for many evangelical parents, there is simply nothing worse a child could tell them than that he or she is gay. When kids do come out in person to their parents, those coming out moments often result in damaging reactions that may take years to heal. Here are some thoughts about how to minimize the damage and create opportunities for redemptive responses instead.

## ***Just Listen***

When I was a gregarious young person with strong opinions on everything, someone said to me, “Brad, God gave you two ears and one mouth for a very good reason!” The point was not lost on me, not least because I had already read the book of James, which states that the godly and wise person should be “quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger” (1:19, HCSB). Perhaps there is no better thing parents can do when their child comes out to them as gay than this: Listen!

Why is a posture of listening so crucial? It will help you remember that your child’s coming out is not fundamentally about you, but about them. In their widely read book *Someone I Love is Gay* (1996), Anita Worthen and Bob Davies discuss the pain, guilt, and shame that evangelical parents often feel when their children come out. Some parents, Worthen and Davies report, consider their child’s coming out a “betrayal” and respond with nausea and disgust. They must deal with the

loss of their future dreams about grandchildren and even the loss of their reputations.

While such reactions are understandable, they are also fundamentally self-centered. They are rooted in love of ourselves, not love for our children, and so we miss the opportunity to embody God’s *agape* love as we respond to our children’s coming out.

## ***Take Time to Deal with Shock***

For some parents, the shock of your child coming out will be like a scene in a war movie: as if a grenade has exploded far enough away from you not to kill you, but close enough that for several minutes you cannot hear or speak. In this case, it is probably best not to react immediately. You might simply say to your child, “Thanks for telling me this. I’m sure it was very difficult for you and took a lot of courage. I want to talk to you about this, but I think I am going to need some time to gather my thoughts and feelings before I do. Is that okay with you? For right now, though, I want you to know that I love you. I’ll never stop loving you, no matter what.” Even without hearing all your thoughts immediately, your child will likely be incredibly relieved, because the experience of finally telling you their secret may have been like leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge with a frayed bungee cord. A few hours or even a day to think and pray might be helpful for both of you.

## ***Refrain from Immediate Negative Reactions***

This is one of the most important pieces of advice I can give you, and I wish someone had said this

to me before I started to react. Some Christian parents, especially if they have very strong opinions about homosexuality and also happen to be “fixers,” are likely to respond with something like the following: “No, you are not gay. That is simply a lie that Satan is telling you. You are a child of God and he has designed you to live according to his standards. So you are not going to be allowed to pursue this direction in life and we are going to get you help. Through prayer and counseling God will show you the truth and will get you back on the right track. Now, how about mowing the lawn like I asked you to?”

Even if your child willingly cooperates with such an approach, it is highly unlikely to end up turning them back into a straight evangelical Christian with traditional sexual and marriage visions for their life. Much more likely, one of two things will happen: either they will shut up and grudgingly follow your directions, making you feel better at first but not resolving their inner turmoil; or they will blow you off and beat themselves up for being stupid enough to come out to you in the first place.

If your only reactions are negative reactions, then I urge you (as difficult as it may be) not to react at all. Instead . . .

### ***Ask Questions about Their Experience***

Asking your child how they have reached the conclusion that they are gay does a couple of really important things. First, it communicates that you are going to listen and try to understand where they are coming from. Second, it will give you a window into what has undoubtedly been a period of great struggle in your child’s life, leading you to a posture of compassion rather than anger or disgust.

It is important to understand that listening to and

even validating your child’s narrative of coming to the conclusion that they are gay does not necessarily communicate that you are fine with same-sex sexual relationships. It simply recognizes that this is how they are experiencing their life. But to negate their story at this early stage will make trust and open communication more difficult in the future.

### ***Show Unconditional Love and Acceptance***

Once you have listened to your child’s story and you come to the place of giving a response, begin by affirming your love and personal acceptance for your child no matter what. Your gay child probably expects that your reaction to their revelation will be negative, and they are worried about that. What they need most of all is to hear from you that, regardless of their sexuality, you will never stop loving them.

As parents, God calls us to respond to our children in the same way he engages us. While he certainly wants me to grow to be different than I currently am in some ways, he loves me just as I am. Your gay child needs to know from the very beginning that your love for them will never change, even if they choose to live their lives in a way that you disagree with. This response makes it possible for you to continue to move forward in a loving relationship, which will keep you in a place of influence in your child’s life for the long haul.

### ***Talk Briefly about Your Biblical Convictions***

At some point in your response to your gay child, you are going to need to discuss your biblical convictions about sexual ethics. As you discuss these convictions, it will be important to help your child distinguish between sexual *orientation* and sexual *activity*. Simply being attracted to the same

sex—which is what most teens probably mean when they say “I’m gay”—is not in itself sinful. (For a thorough defense of this claim, see the Pastoral Paper “Is Same-Sex Attraction (or ‘Being Gay’) a Sin?” available at [centerforfaith.com](http://centerforfaith.com).) It’s crucial that your child does not feel they are being blamed for their unchosen attractions.

Having clarified this distinction, talk to your child about what they believe the Bible has to say about same-sex sexual expression. Although the Bible does not work very well as a hammer for pounding your child into submission, it is your duty as a parent to talk to your child about your deeply held convictions regarding their life. Of course, all of this presupposes that you actually have an intelligent understanding of what the Bible says about same-sex sexual expression. There are plenty of texts on this topic, and I particularly recommend Preston Sprinkle’s *People to be Loved*.

In any case, as you have allowed your child to tell you where they are coming from, they need to understand your own convictions as well. Whether your child chooses to follow a biblical sexual ethic depends not on your extensive Bible teaching but on their own relationship with the God who wrote the book. Accordingly, I suggest you just let them know what your biblical convictions are, give them the opportunity to respond, and then move on to the next stage.

### ***Don’t Kick Your Gay Kid Out of the House***

When Drew and I were writing *Space at the Table*, he met a woman from a local Christian university who was writing a research thesis on homeless youth. She volunteered several days a week with various homeless outreach centers and youth shelters, some church affiliated, some not. Day in and day out she encountered many young people

who lived on the streets because their Christian parents had sent them packing as soon as they discovered they were queer. In fact, 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT and 68% of homeless LGBT youth report serious family rejection.<sup>2</sup>

Such family rejection often happens because these parents feel like they have to stand up for their Christian convictions about sexual identity or behavior. They may also feel like rejecting their LGBT child is the most loving way to save them from ungodly behavior. My wife and I did not respond this way because, from the beginning, we recognized that whatever influence we wanted to have in Drew’s life would be most effectively expressed through staying in relationship with him as far as it was possible from our end. And there’s nothing in the Bible that encourages parents to kick their LGBT kids out of the house.

Recently, I read a story about the death of a young person kicked out of his home for being gay. His mother told him to get out of the house and come back when he stopped being gay. Desperate and without enough money to survive, he tried calling her to talk out their differences, but she would not take his calls. The next time she saw him he was in a casket, dead of a drug overdose. I wish this story was the only one of its kind, but I’ve read far too many of them. It’s no wonder that LGBT youth are 4-8 times more likely to commit suicide when they experience rejection from family, and 62% of homeless LGBT youth have attempted suicide—often after being rejected by their family.<sup>3</sup>

Disconnection, while it may not result in death for your child, will surely lead to destruction of some kind. I suppose this is the most fundamental reason not to kick your gay kid out of the house. What follows are a few more.

First, there is a theological principle here. When we read the narrative of the Bible, we see that God's overwhelming posture towards the disobedient is one of working for reconciliation. Ours should be as well. This is not to say that God never judges sinners. Of course he does. But as Paul remarks, it is God's kindness that is intended to lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). And the whole Gospel of John shows us that God responds to a humanity at odds with him through love, entering into our world and taking our pain and suffering upon himself. It is God's loving entrance into our world that draws us to him, not his judgment.

Second, kicking your gay kid out of the house is not the best way to keep from compromising your convictions. Jesus spent tons of time in the homes of people the religious elite had dismissed as sinners. Our experience is that your gay son or daughter does not need you to disown them to know what you believe and stand for, and God does not need you to disown your son or daughter to defend his honor. Jesus didn't think he was sacrificing his convictions by having dinner with "immoral" persons in their homes. Rather, he was living them out.

## Next Steps

Where you and your child go from here is enormously affected by a couple of things. First, is your child a minor living with you, or an adult child living on their own? Second, is your child interested in pursuing biblical values of sexuality? No matter what the age of the child, consider starting with something like the following: “Talk to us about your relationship with Christ. If the Bible says no to gay sex, do you want help living according to those values, or are you going to choose to pursue same-sex sexual expression?”

If the answer is that the child is not interested in following a biblical model, you’ll want to discuss a number of issues and questions that will arise as a result:

- Disagreement with your child’s choice and your conviction that it is not the best for them, including your concern that it will damage their relationship with God.
- Affirming your love and personal acceptance of them in spite of the disagreement.
- Talking about how to live together and/or stay in loving relationship with each other. This might include sharing with your child behaviors which, because of your biblical convictions, you will or will not allow as long as they are living in your home. (Of course, your household rules should apply equally whether your child is gay or straight. For example, if you don’t allow your unmarried children to spend the night with a partner, this rule applies regardless of each child’s sexual orientation.)

If the child does want to follow a biblical model, here are a few next steps to consider :

First, let your child tell you how you can be most helpful. It may not be in the way you expect. They might want help thinking through the church’s debate on sexual ethics and why the traditional biblical model is correct. They may want to talk with you about options like celibacy or marriage to someone of the opposite sex. Or they may simply want you to continue encouraging them in their pursuit of Jesus and not talking about their sexuality a great deal.

One of the first things many Christian parents think about at this point is counseling. And that may be an important step at some point. But I encourage you not to rush into it.<sup>4</sup> If you do pursue counseling, be careful that your main agenda for counseling isn’t to stop your child from “being gay” or to make them adopt your beliefs about marriage and sexuality. Consider getting counseling to help you and your child communicate well about the issue, or to help them understand and work through their own feelings and concerns. Or perhaps you should consider seeing a counselor to help you and your spouse cope with your feelings so you can react to your child in healthier ways.

Second, consider talking to your pastor. But make sure before you do that your pastor is well-educated on LGBT issues. Some are, but many aren’t—even if they are well-educated on many other topics. I’m encouraged by the increasing number of pastors who are moving away from quick, knee jerk reactions to gay

church members and are working much harder at listening, understanding, and offering guidance and community. If you have this kind of pastor, a visit could be helpful. But if your pastor is not prepared to handle this unique conversation or has unhealthy or unbiblical views on the topic, it may be best to seek counsel elsewhere. A pastoral visit to the wrong pastor might only lead to discouragement or increased self-hatred.

Third, help your child think through what it will look like for them to pursue a biblical sexual ethic. The fundamental biblical posture towards sex is that God designed it for marriage—and marriage is a one-flesh union between a man and a woman. If a person believes in the God of the Bible and wants to follow his lead, one thing that means is a determination to refrain from sex outside of marriage. Since this biblical value is the same for heterosexual persons, the commitment does not single out the gay person. It is just a posture that says, “If I want to follow Jesus and I am not married, now is not the time for sex.” But when we say things like this to our gay kids, we must not do it without recognizing the brutality of the message. What the gay person often hears us saying is, “I can pursue my natural desire for sexual relationality and be pleasing to God, but you can’t.” We need to acknowledge the unique challenges our gay kids may face if they choose to follow Jesus, as well as helping them think creatively about the unique joys and opportunities they might receive by their obedience.

# Continuing Questions

## ***My child wants to come out at church, but I'm concerned.***

Your concern is probably justified. Drew felt that coming out at church as a high schooler would be a disaster in terms of his ability to have guy friends in the youth group. That was ten years ago, and attitudes have changed some since then, but you'll need to do some work to have at least an idea of what your child will face.

Still, coming out at church may actually be the healthiest thing for your child. One good first step would be to have your child talk to a youth pastor. Drew's experience with this approach was very good. His youth pastor responded to Drew with love and grace and took him to breakfast regularly for some time, really just for the purpose of listening and communicating to Drew that he was safe. To this day Drew feels a deep love and respect for that pastor. The advantage of this situation is that a good youth pastor can help your child predict how a youth group will respond to them if they come out. The youth pastor might also be able to help your child devise a way to come out that will minimize negative reactions and promote helpful conversation. Coming out on Facebook or Instagram, for instance, will likely create the kind of polarization that social media is famous for and end up much more hurtful than helpful.

## ***Is my child's attraction to the same sex a choice?***

No. Attractions are almost never choices and may

have a variety of causes. I've talked to dozens of young gay Christian men over the years, and every one of them has told me, "Brad, as soon as I realized I had sexual attractions, I was attracted to men." Middle school boys do not stand around waiting for the school bus one morning and say to themselves, "Okay, today I need to decide what I'm going to be—gay or straight, gay or straight?" What a person decides to do with attractions is a choice, but the attractions themselves are not.

## ***Is this my fault?***

Very unlikely. The medical, psychological, sociological, and even theological worlds are all over the map on the issue of causes for homosexuality. Some people have assumed that an absent father or a domineering mother (among other environmental factors) shape same-sex attraction. But studies have shown that causation can't be reduced to this simplistic narrative. Some LGBT people didn't have an absent father or a domineering mother, whereas many straight people did—and they still ended up straight. The one thing scientists agree on is this: the cause of same-sex attraction can't be reduced to one simple factor like bad parenting. The best work by an evangelical that I have seen on the issue of causation is by Dr. Mark Yarhouse, a professor of psychology at Regent University.<sup>5</sup> According to his report, the best research shows that there are many possible causes for homosexuality. Finding out the cause of same-sex orientation in any particular case can be very problematic. The most important issue is

not finding the cause, but answering the question, “Where do we go from here?”

***How do we stay in a loving relationship even if our deepest convictions are at odds?***

You need to come to grips with the fact that your child is gay, and that the way they live their life may never change.

I know a number of gay Christians who decided as young persons either to live a celibate life or to enter an opposite-sex marriage (often called a “mixed-orientation marriage”) in order to enjoy the benefit of the traditional nuclear family. Some of these persons have stayed true to their decisions for many years and are very happy. None of them, however, have simply become straight. And as far as I am aware, they all still deal with attraction to persons of the same sex even after having been single or married to someone of the opposite sex for years.

On the other hand, I also know many Christian families whose gay kids have decided that celibacy or mixed-orientation marriage is simply not for them and have opted to live either multi-partnered or monogamous gay lives. Some of them, in the process, have left the church and even their faith. Others have stayed committed to the church and still identify as faithful followers of Jesus, but they believe that God is fine with them pursuing a same-sex relationship.

My point in all this is simply to urge Christian parents of gay kids to prepare themselves for a number of possible outcomes, especially as their child leaves the home and begins to live an adult life. If your adult gay child, out of a commitment to follow Christ, decides to be celibate or enter a

mixed-orientation marriage, this decision may make you very grateful; however, don’t think that things will now just get back to normal and you can go on with your life. A gay person who makes one of these choices is going to need an enormous amount of support from family, friends, and church. This person labors under a weight that few of us can possibly understand—a burden that can result in deep loneliness, depression, and for some, one or more forays into homosexual encounters which then become the source of guilt, broken relationships, and despair. So while this may be the decision you want your son or daughter to make, and while you will very likely believe it is the right decision and will even be blessed by God, know that it comes with a price.

***What should I pray for my child?***

From the time Drew came out to us, my life was filled with prayer for him. For a while my prayers went something like, “God, you are all powerful and loving. You can make Drew straight. Please make him straight.” But that kind of prayer was pretty short-lived. I just knew too many stories of gay Christians who prayed themselves for years that God would make them straight. I don’t know a single person for whom that prayer worked. God can do anything. He can part the seas, turn water to wine, or make a gay person straight. But experientially, these don’t seem to be the typical way in which God works.

So I stopped praying that God would make Drew straight. I stopped praying that he would not have gay sex. I didn’t even pray that he would have sex with a woman and find it surprisingly more fulfilling. I also did not pray that God would make Drew miserable in his sin, a kind of prayer that we

evangelicals are oddly drawn to. No, my prayer for Drew began to take on a whole new character. I just stopped praying about Drew's homosexuality and started praying about something much more important. I began to pray that God would be gracious to allow Drew to be so captivated by Christ's love for him that he would want Jesus more than anything else. And if that began to happen, I would let God worry about Drew's sexuality.

***How do we talk about the issue in a healthy way, instead of constantly arguing or pretending it doesn't exist?***

As I mentioned above, make sure you have explained to your son or daughter your biblical convictions about same-sex sexual activity. But once you have made yourself clear on that issue, it probably does not help to keep coming back to it. If you have raised your child in the church, it is very likely that they have already heard the biblical arguments numerous times.

Another crucial issue at this point is to make sure that your conversations with your child about their sexuality are not about your anger or shame. If they are, then your child will eventually recognize that the conflict is really about you and not them. When you get to the point that you and your gay child clearly do not agree on the moral issues of their sexuality, the conversation needs to move in a different direction—one that is about how to stay in a loving relationship in spite of being at moral loggerheads.

If your child is still living with you at this point, the conversations will include negotiations about behaviors and rules you can both live with. But if your child is an adult living on their own, the conversations will be somewhat different. Here

are a few suggestions based on the way Drew and I talked for the first couple of years after he left home.

Some topics need time before they can be addressed productively. For us, conversations about possible causes of Drew's sexuality, for example, did not work for several years. One of the reasons for this is that if you focus on cause, your child will likely perceive this as your attempt to find ways to "fix" them. Your child becomes a "project," like repairing the dry rot in the deck. Press this far enough and your child will eventually begin to feel that the only way you will really love them is if they stop being gay. Many gay young persons, even from Christian families, don't want to be fixed. If you keep bringing it up—"we can fix this!"—it will likely cause them to stop trusting you as a reliable guide.

On the positive side, it is really important to talk about the process each of you is going through. Learn to share your fear and guilt with one another, moving purposefully towards each other even when beliefs or behaviors threaten to push you apart. For most evangelical parents, the journey of embracing your gay child is one filled with lots of barriers. The point here is not to pretend those barriers don't exist, but to figure out how to keep them from sabotaging a loving relationship.

You also cannot ignore your fears, including possible fears about HIV. While HIV is not the death sentence it used to be, thank God, it is still a very serious health threat that changes a person's life forever. Robin and I have lived with this fear ever since Drew left home. There have been numerous phone calls where Drew, sometimes fairly casually, has remarked that he is waiting for the results of an HIV test. In these moments, I

usually feel as if my stomach has just launched a grapefruit into my throat. I've learned that neither silence nor a high school health lesson works best at that point. Instead, I respond with raw honesty; something like, "Wow, Drew. That's pretty scary for me. It must be scary for you too." Drew answers, "Yeah, I'm kind of nervous about it too." Honesty. Recognition of each other's fears. No condemnation or lectures. And we move on.

***How can I acknowledge my child's sexuality without reducing him or her to "a gay person"?***

We human beings have a propensity for categorizing people. From the time we are little kids on the playground, the girls and boys each saying that the other gender has "cooties," we learn to judge people on the basis of one simple characteristic. As evangelicals, because we have focused so much attention on the issue of homosexuality, it is sometimes difficult for us to think about a gay person through any lens other than the lens of their sexuality. It's not uncommon for a group of evangelicals talking about a celebrity or artist to be interrupted by someone piping up, "Yeah, but you know he's gay, right?" As if being gay somehow negates a person's admirable qualities or contributions.

My experience is that for many evangelical parents of a gay son or daughter, their child's sexuality becomes so overwhelming that they have difficulty thinking of their child in any other terms. Even when they talk about their kid's many wonderful qualities, they still often end their thoughts with a "yes, but..."

As a parent who understands this tension, my advice is that parents need at some point to begin to move their son or daughter's sexuality to the

back burner of consciousness and relationship. Your son or daughter is a human being made in the image of God. As a result, everything they are or do that is beautiful is reflective of God and is good. Their sexuality does not negate those things. So parents need to make a conscious effort to conceive of and relate to their children in terms of all the things they are and do, to refuse to let their convictions or feelings about their children's sexuality dominate how they see them.

***How should I engage my adult gay child's relationships?***

This is a complex issue, and not one that I have all nailed down. But allow me to offer a few thoughts that may help you as you think through this issue.

First, it is important to recognize that love, acceptance, and even participation in your child's life does not mean approval or agreement. A mother who loves and accepts her three-month-old son will not necessarily endorse his decision to scream for hours in the middle of the night. A college student might love Broadway musicals while disapproving of exorbitant ticket costs. If you have had thoughtful conversations about your Christian convictions, accepting your child's partners and participating in their lives will not make them assume you have changed your views. Again and again, Robin and I have found that our decision to embrace Drew's gay friends and partners has never—and I really mean never—led either Drew or his friends to come to the conclusion that we agree with the way they live out their sexuality.

What embracing them has done is create bridges for relationship that have allowed some of Drew's friends and partners to believe that a person can have conservative Christian beliefs about

homosexuality and still love and embrace them exactly as they are. This, I believe, is how God engages the world in Christ. So while embracing Drew's partners has not compromised our Christianity, it has allowed Robin and me to welcome into our lives some delightful, intelligent, and engaging persons who have made our lives richer.

Second, ask questions about your son or daughter's relationships, both friendships and romantic ones. I remember a telephone conversation where Drew said to me, "Dad, when I am in a relationship with someone, you never ask me about it. If my siblings are in a dating relationship, you ask how things are going because you care about them. Can you see how that might make me feel? Dad, if our relationship is going to move forward, you need to ask me about the men I am dating."

Of course this commitment to engage your child's friends and partners positively will result in some challenging questions: Can they stay at your house? Will you go to their wedding? If so, will you participate? I cannot answer these questions for anyone but myself. (For more thoughts on the wedding question, see the Pastoral Paper "Should Christians Attend a Same-Sex Wedding Ceremony?" available at [centerforfaith.com](http://centerforfaith.com).) My advice is simply this: Always opt for positive relational connection as long as it does not compromise your principles. Remember, God does not need you to "defend his honor."

### ***How do I keep living out my faith?***

To be a follower of Jesus means living out our faith and even talking about it regularly. What

makes that stressful to many gay persons with Christian parents is that your Christian values include a sexual ethic which forbids same-sex sexual activity. But putting your faith on the back burner is not an option, and doing so would mean being untrue to who you are. While it might lessen the open conflict, it would not move you and your child forward in authentic relationship.

In our family, living out our faith meant that we were regularly involved in and talking about Christian aspects of our lives. I am a professor at an evangelical Christian university. Much of my life revolves around the events of that world. And Drew has been involved in that world. We go to church, we have friends over from our prayer group, we pray at mealtimes, we read and talk about the Bible. Once Drew left the church and began pursuing gay relationships, I became acutely aware that the habits of our Christian life were probably irritating to him. I wondered if they would cause him to want to spend less time with us. But Robin and I decided that we are who we are, and if Drew wants us to accept him for who he is, we need to be accepted on the same terms. Healthy family relationships can't be fostered unless each person is able to be sincere around the others.

But here's the kicker. Don't try to cleverly insert subtle Jesus jabs into the conversation, like some Christian parents and grandparents do all over Facebook. Don't send your gay child podcasts of sermons or links to Christian websites—unless, of course, your child has indicated a desire for this kind of interaction and has initiated by sending you media that articulates the view from their side of the fence. In short, live out your faith when your adult gay child is with you in the same way you do when they are not. But don't make

your Christian life a constant opportunity for you  
to subtly put pressure on your gay child.

## Pastoral Implications

At the end of this rather lengthy paper, I find myself thinking about fifteen other questions that I simply did not have the space to address. If you want more help, I'd highly recommend that you check out the Resources page at [centerforfaith.com](http://centerforfaith.com), including the book Drew and I wrote together titled *Space at the Table*.

Let me close with just a few big-picture pastoral recommendations. First, do everything you can to stay relationally connected to your gay kid. You may disagree with their sexual morality, you may struggle with their behavior, you may even believe that they are in store for some tough judgment from God. But the truth is that, without Christ, this is the situation we all find ourselves in before a holy God. In his holy love, God embraces us in Christ, pursuing us relentlessly without ever sweeping our behavior under the rug.

Disconnection from your gay child will not make them see the error of their ways and repent. It won't make them return to the church and become celibate, much less straight. More likely it will lead to a lifetime of pain and suffering for you both that embitters your child against Christ and you.

Second, open your hands and give your gay kid to God. At the end of the day, your child's life is in God's hands, not yours. It is not your job to judge them, to get them to agree with your convictions, or to "fix" them. Your job is to do your very best in word and deed to point them to the God who loves them unconditionally in Christ. It is God's job to captivate their hearts by the Holy Spirit, leading them to a place where they desire

nothing more than him so that they surrender their lives to following his ways. If you make it your mission to manage your gay kid's life so that they come back to your way of thinking and living, and they never do, you will find yourself mired in a sea of anger, frustration, and guilt that can only further degrade your relationships with both God and your child. Let God be responsible for your gay kid's life and future. It's his job.

Third, refuse to see your child's identity mainly through the lens of their sexuality. Your gay son or daughter is a beautiful creation of God. They are endowed by God and their family with talents and gifts, relational instincts, personality traits, commitments and behaviors that are profound, attractive, beneficial for others, and reflective of the character of God. Choose daily to focus on those. Only then can you continue to build a relationship with your child that brings joy to you both and creates space for honest, loving conversations about the tough issues. Only then can you, perhaps, find healing for everyone involved.

# Notes

1. The fact that this is all we typically say about homosexuality is problematic in many ways. First, this framing draws no differentiation between same-sex orientation and same-sex sexual expression. Second, it says nothing about gay persons who are actually desiring to follow Jesus. And third, it often singles out same-sex sexual behavior as an exceptionally bad sin while ignoring the gravity of other sins treated with equal or greater severity in the Bible.

2. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/americas-shame-40-of-homeless-youth-are-lgbt-kids/>

3. Bill Henson, *Guiding Families*, 4 (available online at <http://www.leadthemhome.org>).

4. Let me make a brief comment here about ex-gay ministries. My observation over the last decade about the effects of ex-gay ministries for same-sex-attracted Christian men is that it is a mixed bag. I have talked to many young men who have been through ex-gay programs. For some it has been helpful; for others it has not. And all these young men I am thinking about are men who want to follow Jesus with their lives. The bottom line for me is that the only person who should go to an ex-gay ministry is an adult who understands the process and who really wants help to live out their sexuality in a way that reflects their biblical convictions by participating in a specific program with other men or women who want the same thing.

5. *Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2010).

# About the Author

Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at [www.centerforfaith.com/leadership](http://www.centerforfaith.com/leadership).



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