

GRACE // TRUTH 1.0

Five Conversations
Every Thoughtful Christian Should Have
About Faith, Sexuality & Gender

by DR. PRESTON SPRINKLE

FREE PREVIEW
CONVERSATION 1

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Dear Church: I'm Gay

His hands trembling and his face dripping with sweat, my friend Jordan waited anxiously in his car outside the church office.¹ He didn't want to go inside but knew he had to.

Jordan had recently come to grips with the fact that he was attracted to guys, and he'd even mustered up the courage to tell his pastor. But now he was about to go into a room full of church leaders and tell them that "I ... I am ... I'm ... g—." He could hardly say the words out loud even in the safety of his car. But in a few minutes, he would be saying those words out loud—to men he feared might not understand.

Jordan, who had just completed a year of college, had spent several years wrestling with his attraction to guys.

He did not believe that the Bible allowed him to act on that attraction, and he had never touched another guy romantically, out of allegiance to God's Word. No one at this church had known about his struggle. Oh, and one other thing: Jordan was helping out in the youth group at church.

When he entered the room, he was greeted with smiles. Palms still dripping with sweat, he decided to get it over with. "I know you all trust me and allow me to help out in church. So, I wanted to let you know that ... I mean ... I want to confess that, well ... I'm, sort of ... I'm ... I struggle with same-sex attraction. I'm ... I'm attracted to guys."

Silence.

"I thought he was a Christian," one leader whispered to another, as if he'd forgotten that Jordan was still in the room. A few feet away. With ears. That work.

"Jordan, when did you decide this?" one asked.

"Um ... when? What do you mean? I ... I didn't *decide* this. I don't *want* to be attracted to guys."

The leader continued, "You know, Jordan, what God thinks about homosexuality? He says it's a sin."

Jordan was taken aback. He didn't know what to say. The leaders seemed to assume that he was engaging in immoral sexual behavior. But Jordan was sexually pure. He was simply admitting his attraction to, not sexual activity with, other guys. *Is struggling with and resisting temptation a "sin"?* Jordan wondered. *Do these leaders never struggle with and resist sexual temptation?*

"Jordan, we can't condone someone with your lifestyle," another leader said with a look of concern.

Lifestyle? Jordan thought. *I haven't even touched another person romantically. What does "lifestyle" even mean?*

Before Jordan could respond, another leader added, "And what about our children? I mean, we can't have you working with our children!"

Jordan felt sick to his stomach. He didn't know how to respond. "Um ... sir, I ... I don't struggle with wanting to have sex with children. I'm gay, not a *pedophile*." But the distinction between homosexuality and pedophilia seemed to sail right past the leaders.

As Jordan sat through the rest of the rather brief meeting, he felt dehumanized and misunderstood. The leaders had good intentions; they believed in God's Word

and wanted Jordan to live a holy life. But misinformed assumptions about language (“we can’t condone someone with your *lifestyle*”) and people (“what about our children?”) can crush someone’s soul. The last thing Jordan remembers that night was heading to his car, locking the door, squeezing the steering wheel until his fingers turned white, and screaming away his pain.

These Are Important Issues People!

My heart breaks whenever I think about Jordan in that church office. Unfortunately, I’ve talked with a lot of LGBT+ people, and almost all of them have similar stories of being made to feel less than human. I could fill this entire book—and several others—with stories similar to Jordan’s, but let me share with you a “real time” message I literally *just* received through Facebook. It’s from a young kid I’ve never met who read one of my books. We’ll call him Joey. This is what he said:

Hi. My name is Joey. I read your book *Living in a Gray World* and I’m struggling with same-sex attraction. I was wondering if you could help me cope with a problem at school. Well, I don’t know where to begin. My so and so friend told the bus driver that I’m gay and things went south quickly.

First, he moved all the boys forward and me to the back of the bus. When I asked why he said "I may be a Christian, but I won't have an abomination sit next to the rest of my kids I need to get home. I don't need you doing stuff with them." The word got around school and now I can't go 23 steps without being looked upon like I grew a tail or being called f*g. And I'm scared to talk to my pastor. (Yes, I go to church.) I was wondering if you could help me.

For the bus driver, homosexuality was some issue that needs to be confronted and resisted. It's a threat to his religion, and it needs to be crushed. But instead of actually crushing evil, the bus driver crushed a young boy created in God's image.

There's nothing in a Christian sexual ethic that allows us to dehumanize other people.

Jordan and Joey are only two of many LGBTQ+ people who have shown me that discussions about sexuality and gender should always be seen as closely connected to the actual people we're talking about. Homosexuality is not just an issue. Transgender people are not issues. The thirteen-year-old student in your youth group who's secretly contemplating suicide because he experiences unwanted attraction to boys and desperately wishes he would become attracted to girls—he's not an issue. He's

an image-bearing human, crafted and cared for by his Creator.

In order to focus on people, we have to get rid of the stereotypes. Despite what you may see in the media or read about in the news, not all LGBT+ people are the same. As a straight man who grew up in a conservative Christian church, I used to believe the stereotypes. Effeminate men. Masculine women. Promiscuous people who march in pride parades wearing feathers and leather G-strings. But then I did something that changed my life.

I got to know several LGBT+ people and listened to their stories.

That's it. No agenda. No ulterior motive. I just wanted to connect closely with the "topic" I was studying. And it—or *they*—changed my life. Please note: My theology didn't change. I still believe that marriage is between a man and a woman and all sex outside of marriage is a sin. But my heart was changed. I began to love and truly enjoy all my new friends—some of whom you'll get to know when you discuss this conversation at the next gathering.

LGBT+ people are not all the same. I've met gay people who are trying to follow Jesus and gay people who want nothing to do with Jesus. Some of my gay friends are committed to celibacy because they believe gay sex

is a sin; other gay friends are married to people of the opposite sex—and yet they are still gay. I know non-Christian gay people who are against gay marriage, and kids raised by gay parents who are pro-LGBT+ but against gay parenting. There are loud and proud LGBT activists, and silent and scared kids in your youth group struggling with their sexuality. One non-Christian gay man I know says he doesn't resonate with the gay community and would never march in a pride parade. He's not really into all that political gay stuff—even though he's gay. There

are lesbians who think that transgender ideology is destructive and morally wrong, while other lesbians find comradery with transgender people.

Some people who struggle with their gender reject a transgender identity, while others embrace it. As one psychologist said: "If you've met one transgender person, you've met ... one transgender person."

But then I did something that changed my life. I got to know several LGBT+ people and listened to their stories.

It's simply wrong and naïve to talk about "those gay people" or "the LGBT community" as if they're all the same. Not all LGBT+ people are alike. We have to take our stereotypes, fold them up, throw them in the trashcan, and then get to know *actual* LGBT+ people

before we can think clearly about this issue. Because it's not just an issue. It's people.

Sticks and Stones Will Break Your Bones—and So Will Words

One of the best ways to humanize this conversation is to learn the right language.

There's a stupid saying we used to memorize: "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me." That's a lie. Words can do great harm. Millions of people have been psychologically and emotionally damaged over something somebody said to them more than twenty years ago—and this goes for all people, not just LGBT+ people. Hurtful words drive people toward eating disorders, depression, and suicide. Words have the power to both hurt and to heal, to build up and tear down. And unfortunately, Christians have unintentionally (or sometimes intentionally) crushed LGBT+ people by abrasive, ignorant, or downright mean words and phrases.

So, let's talk about language, beginning with some simple definitions. In conversation 5, we'll talk about some words and phrases to avoid, and I address several others in *Grace/Truth 2.0*.

Gay

The word *gay* simply describes someone attracted to the same sex and not to the opposite sex. Please note: People use this term in very different ways. Some gay people believe that gay sex is totally fine, while others think it's a sin. In itself, *gay* doesn't mean "having gay sex" or "married to a person of the same sex." It just means "attracted to the same sex."

Same-Sex Attraction (SSA)

Same-sex attraction (SSA) is similar to *gay*, but it's usually used by Christians who don't want to be identified by their sexual orientation. Put simply, SSA is almost always used by conservative Christians to describe *unwanted* same-sex sexual attractions.

However, some Christians use the term *gay* as shorthand to say they are attracted to the same-sex (even if they're not having sex). In other words, they use *gay* in virtually the same sense as SSA. Remember: *gay* is a broad term and can be used in different ways to mean different things.

Transgender

This is an umbrella term for anyone who doesn't identify with, or feels some sort of discomfort with, their biological sex. (By the way, it's *transgender*, not *transgendered* with an -ed.) There's more to it

than that, but we'll take a deeper look into all of this in *Grace/Truth 2.0*. Two basic points you need to understand for now: (1) *transgender* is not the same as *gay*. Gay refers to whom someone is *attracted to*, while transgender refers to the gender someone *identifies as*. And (2) if someone identifies as *transgender*, that doesn't necessarily mean they've had a sex change (i.e., sex reassignment surgery or hormone replacement therapy, or both). Some have but many haven't.

There are many other phrases and concepts in the gender discussion that we'll get to in *Grace/Truth 2.0*—gender fluidity, gender nonconforming, gender queer, and other nonbinary categories.

LGBT+

This acronym stands for **L**esbian, **G**ay, **B**isexual, and **T**ransgender. As I mentioned before, I like to add a plus sign (+) at the end of it to include all the other letters that are sometimes attached to this (growing) acronym, such as **Q**ueer, **I**ntersex, **A**sexual, **P**ansexual, and many others.

In our conversations, I'll use LGBT+ as shorthand for people who are same-sex attracted, experience discomfort with their biological sex (e.g. gender

dysphoria), or are simply “nonstraight.” Depending on the context, I may use LGBT+ to refer to Christians who are *struggling* with their faith, sexuality, and gender, even if they don’t choose to identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, etc. Not every person who experiences same-sex attraction or discomfort with their gender identifies as LGBT+. I get that. But if I use the phrase “same-gender loving persons, people who experience gender dysphoria, and other nonstraight persons,” our conversation would be twice as long! So, for convenience, I’ll just use LGBT+ as a shorthand for that longer phrase in quotes above.

Affirming and Nonaffirming

These are the common labels Christians use to describe what they believe about same-sex marriage. Those who are *affirming* (gay or straight) believe that monogamous same-sex sexual relations and marriage are morally permissible. Those who are *nonaffirming* (gay or straight) believe that marriage is between a man and a woman. There are other terms used to describe the *affirming* view, such as: *revisionist*, *progressive*, or *liberal*. Other terms for the *nonaffirming* view include *traditional*, *historical*, and *conservative*.²

For more thoughts on terms and phrases, see the *Grace/Truth* podcast “Why Language Matters in the LGBT+ Conversation.”

Quite honestly, every one of these terms has some problems. For instance, there are many things I *affirm* about my LGBT+ friends. Even so, I believe that marriage is between a man and a woman and that all sexual relations belong within marriage. But without better

alternatives, I generally use *affirming* and *nonaffirming* to describe the different views.

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Some of you may be annoyed that we’re wasting all this time and energy on language. After all, isn’t this just a cowardly attempt to be politically correct? Are we tiptoeing around overly sensitive people with our language?

If we’re just trying to be politically correct, then yeah, I’m not interested in that. But using language correctly honors the people we’re talking about—people created in God’s image. Plus, this isn’t the only conversation where language matters. If after an abortion a doctor said he simply “discarded a fetus,” many of us would protest and say he “killed an innocent unborn child.” My Jewish friends tell me that there’s a big difference between the question “Are you *Jewish*?” and “Are you a *Jew*?” The

latter term carries with it shades of antisemitism, even if the person saying it doesn't mean it this way. The fact is, language matters! We love people well when we use language that humanizes them, which is especially important in a conversation that has dehumanized so many people.

Is Same-Sex Attraction a Sin?

Speaking of people, I want to return to my friend Jordan and talk about something incredibly important: same-sex attraction.

Whether you're gay or straight, sexual *attraction* is not the same as sexual *behavior* or sexual *lust*. *Lust*, by the way, is a "desire for (and perhaps the planning of) an illicit sexual liaison."³ It's important to realize that while sexual lust and illicit sexual behavior are sins, sexual attraction is not. You can be attracted to someone and not lust after them. If a beautiful woman walks into a room, I'd be a bold-faced liar if I said, "Nope, not attracted to her." But hopefully I would not actively desire to have sex with her. That would be lust. Put differently, lust assumes a prior attraction, but not all attraction leads to lust.

The same goes for people attracted to the same sex. I don't believe the Bible teaches that simply being

same-sex attracted is a morally culpable sin. It may be a *temptation* to sin, and if the attraction turns into lust, then it becomes sin. But the fact that Jordan is attracted to the same sex is not in itself a sin.

Some people disagree with me. They say that same-sex attraction is itself sin. But the Bible never says this.⁴ In fact, look at what James says:

Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death. (1:13–14 NLT)

James says that desires may “give birth to sinful actions,” but he doesn’t say these desires *are* “sinful actions.” Think about James’s metaphor of childbirth. A woman (desire) may give birth to a child (sinful actions), but this means that the woman *is not* the child. They’re different. In the

For a thorough study of what the Bible says and doesn’t say about same-sex attraction, please see the pastoral paper “Is Same-Sex Attraction a Sin?”

same way, desires may give birth to sin, but the desires themselves are not sin. Same-sex attraction is one of these desires. It could lead us to sin—as could *opposite sex attractions*! But simply existing as a same-sex attracted person isn’t itself a morally culpable sin.

That is, it's not a sinful action that someone needs to repent from. And apart from some very rare examples, same-sex attraction is unchosen and, often at least initially, unwanted.⁵ I personally have never met a gay person who woke up one day and said, "You know what? I think I'm going to be attracted to the same sex." What people *do* with their attraction—same-sex or opposite sex!—involves choices and could lead to sin. (And if anyone reading this study is without sin, go ahead and cast that stone.) But the attraction itself is not sin.

Understanding this might be one of the most important steps in learning how to love LGBT+ people better. Can you imagine how Jordan's elders would have responded if they had understood the difference between same-sex *attraction* and same-sex *sexual behavior*?

Being Gay Is Not a Sin

Some conservative Christians say that "being gay is a sin." But when they say "gay," they typically mean sexual lust, gay sex, and affirming same-sex marriage. Again, however, the term *gay* simply means "attracted to people of the same-sex" and doesn't have to include details about a person's sex life or views about marriage. This means that *being gay is not in itself a sin, since*

same-sex attraction is not itself a sin. Many of my gay friends are committed to celibacy *because* they love the Bible—yet they’re still gay. Some of my gay friends are married to people of the opposite sex (often called a “mixed orientation marriage”) and believe in a traditional Christian sexual ethic, and they still identify as gay. Are they in sin for “being gay?” How are they sinning?

I can’t tell you how many people have been damaged by the statement “Being gay is a sin.” A kid comes out to her parents and says she’s gay, and her parents flip out and accuse her of living in sin—just because she said she’s gay. Sticks and stones will certainly break your bones, but words used wrongly will crush your soul.

If same-sex attraction is not a sin, and *gay* means “to be attracted to the same sex,” then being gay itself is not a sin.

This is also why the term *anti-gay* is a horrible description of the traditional Christian view of marriage. It never fails, whenever I speak on this topic—people almost always think in terms of two different views: the anti-gay view and the pro-gay view. They ask me which one I hold to and I say neither. If *gay* means “attracted to the same sex” and is used to describe *people*, then as a Christian, I could never be against *people*. No way. Jesus wasn’t

against people, and as a follower of Jesus, I'm *for* people. And since same-sex attraction (i.e., being gay) itself is not a sin, I'm not anti-gay. I'm actually *pro-gay*. I'm *pro-gay* in the sense that *I am for gay people and I want God's best for them and believe they can fully follow and honor God while being gay*. Because same-sex attraction (being gay) itself is not a sin.

So, can you be gay and be a member of a church?

Yes.

Can you be gay and serve on the worship team?

Yes, of course.

Can you be a gay pastor?

Absolutely.

In no way am I saying that *everyone* who identifies as gay can be a pastor. I don't believe that anyone who's living a sexually immoral life should be a pastor—gay or straight. But I know several gay (same-sex attracted) pastors who believe in and follow a biblical, Christian sexual ethic and a traditional Christian view of marriage. They're attracted to the same sex, but they believe that same-sex lust and same-sex sexual behavior is sin.

Simply being gay is not a morally culpable sin. But having sexual relations with someone of the same biological sex is sin. We'll see why in conversations 3 and 4.

Can't They Just Pray It Away?

This leads to our final question: Can gay people just pray it away? Or—if a Christian still experiences same-sex attraction, does this mean they haven't prayed hard enough?

Several *nonaffirming* gay Christian writers have compared their same-sex attraction to a disability, and I find this comparison to be helpful.⁶ Many Christians have been crushed by the assumption that if they're still gay, they haven't prayed hard enough, fasted long

The good news isn't "God can make you straight," but "God can make you holy."

enough, or read the Bible as frequently as they should.

Yet we don't place the same expectations on other people who experience a physical or mental disability. We don't tell blind people they haven't

prayed hard enough since they're still blind. We don't tell physically disabled people that if they just read their Bible more, they'd get up and walk. We also shouldn't assume

that the reason gay Christians are still attracted to the same sex is that they just haven't tried their hardest to get rid of it.

Or take the example of an alcoholic. (I'm always wary of using analogies, since they're never exact. When I use them, I'm only trying to compare certain elements, not make a one-to-one correlation.) There's a reason alcoholics still say they're alcoholics even if they haven't had a drink in twenty years. It's because the desire to drink is always there, even if they don't act on it. I think we'd applaud an alcoholic for being twenty years sober; we wouldn't (or shouldn't!) say, "Well, if you'd just pray harder, you'd have no desire to drink."

Can God give sight to the blind and snuff out an alcoholic's desire to drink? Of course. But for whatever reason, this isn't how God typically works. (That's a whole other discussion.) So we shouldn't blame LGBT+ Christians for not praying it away. The good news isn't "God can make you straight," but "God can make you holy."

3. Do you have any biblical or theological disagreement with the argument above that same-sex attraction (or being gay) is not a sin? What biblical evidence do you believe supports your view?

4. What questions do you have about the terms discussed above (gay, same-sex attraction, transgender, and so on)? Please be willing to discuss your questions with the group.

5. LGBT+ people aren't the only ones who have been victimized by people using language ignorantly. Have you personally experienced similar frustration and pain as a result of people using words wrongly to describe you? Please describe.

6. Would you attend a church that has a gay pastor, deacon, elder, or worship leader? Why or why not? As part of your response, make it clear what you mean by *gay*.

7. Do you agree that gay people can't be expected to just "pray it away?" Why or why not? Why do you think some people have believed gays could simply "pray it away?"

8. Some Christians grew up with negative feelings about gay people. In general, do you believe they got their negative feelings from the Bible? Or from their culture and family upbringing? Or both? Please discuss.

9. What idea surprised you the most after reading this conversation?

CHAPTER ENDNOTES

1 "Jordan" is a pseudonym for my friend. This story represents the gist of what happened in that meeting, although I've included phrases and scenes from other events in Jordan's life.

2 The word *traditional* makes it sound like Christians mindlessly cling to tradition and are opposed to newer interpretations of the Bible. *Historical* is accurate, yet there have been many horrible perspectives on marriage, sex, and women in the history of the church. So, I don't want to sign off on everything that the church has historically endorsed either. *Conservative* has too many political connotations and is often caught up with an entire conservative way of thinking, which may or may not be biblical. Some people see me as conservative because I believe the Bible. Others think I'm liberal because I don't read it in the Kings James Version. The word *conservative* is terribly subjective. Even the word *nonaffirming* isn't the best. It sounds too negative. But I think it might be the best of all the options we have.

3 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 204. The same Greek word for lust (*epithymeo*) in Matt 5:27 is used in the Greek translation of Ex 20:17 (the ten commandments) to prohibit *coveting* your neighbor's wife. You can recognize that your neighbor's wife is attractive without actually coveting (or lusting after) her.

4 Some people argue that Rom 1:24–27 says that same-sex attraction is a sin. However, Paul condemns sexual lust in the context of sexual behavior. He's not thinking of same-sex attraction as a temptation that's resisted. See further the pastoral paper "Is Same-Sex Attraction (or Being Gay) a Sin?," https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources?field_product_category_tid=1.

5 For instance, Cynthia Nixon from the hit show *Sex and the City* says that for her, being gay is a choice: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/cynthia-nixon-wit.html>. See also Brandon Ambrosino

from *The New Republic*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/116378/macklemores-same-love-sends-wrong-message-about-being-gay>.

6 For instance, Nate Collins, *All But Invisible: Exploring Identity Questions at the Intersection of Faith, Gender, and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

THE CENTER FOR
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The Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender (The Center) is a collaboration of Christian pastors, leaders, and theologians who aspire to be the church's most trusted source of theologically sound teaching and practical guidance on questions related to sexuality and gender. The Center focuses on equipping Christian leaders, churches, and organizations to engage questions about faith, sexuality, and gender with theological faithfulness and courageous love.

At the Center, we seek to address two primary needs in the church. First, to help leaders cultivate a more robust biblical ethic of marriage, sexuality, and gender. Second, to help churches and organizations create a safe and compassionate environment for LGBT+ people, their families, and anyone wrestling with their sexuality or gender identity.

To meet these two needs, we seek not only to educate pastors and leaders but also to help these leaders educate the people they lead by providing small group material, educational videos, podcasts, blogs, youth curriculum, and other resources.

For more information, please visit www.centerforfaith.com.



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