

Feature Article: JAF2393

IS “GAY CHRISTIAN” AN ACCEPTABLE IDENTITY?

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This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 39, number 03 (2016). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to:
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I'd just finished speaking at a Christian conference on sexual purity when a man approached me, eagerly shaking my hand. “What you said about being authentic was great!” he enthused. “I always try to do that. I’m a boy lover.”

I froze, not quite registering it. “A boy lover?” I finally stammered.

“I love boys. Some call me a pedophile. But I’m a Christian, and I know it would be a sin to give in to my feelings, so I never do. I’m celibate.”

After I regained my composure, we argued at length about the terms we use to self-identify. Obviously I was glad he resisted his temptations, but two things disturbed me: the way he identified himself by those temptations, and the positive spin he put on them—“boy lover”—which left me speechless.

In this age of recovery-oriented identities, people adopt labels describing problems. (“My name’s Barbara; I’m an alcoholic.” “My name’s Lee; I’m a sex addict.”) Unquestionably, there’s value in being honest about an area of weakness, so James tells us to confess our faults one to another (James 5:16), and Paul declared he kept a close watch on himself to avoid anything that might compromise his calling (1 Cor. 9:27). But is it wise (much less, biblical) to categorize ourselves by a sinful tendency? Under what circumstances should we acknowledge those tendencies? And should the terms we apply to them ever be positive?

Nowhere are these questions more relevant to the modern church than in the area of sexuality. As the culture shifts toward condoning behaviors it once condemned, so does its language. Adultery has been rechristened “polyamory,”¹ a promiscuous male is now “a player” or “a stud,”² and sex-change operations have morphed into

“gender confirmation surgery.”³ We may frown on society reframing immorality in positive terms, but we should weep when believers do the same.

WHEATON COLLEGE AND GROWING TRENDS

The issue was highlighted in February when *Time* magazine reported on Wheaton College’s dismissal of openly lesbian Julie Rodgers.⁴ Wheaton, one of America’s more prominent Christian campuses, first hired Rodgers to assist their chaplain, largely because of her personal and ministry experience with same-sex issues, and the school’s desire to provide support for students dealing with the same. When first hired, she signed a statement of agreement with Wheaton’s traditional definition of marriage and family. Still, while affirming that homosexuality falls short of God’s will, she also identified herself as a gay Christian—celibate, but still gay, and openly so.

Her views on homosexuality began changing, she says, shortly thereafter, reaching a point where she started openly endorsing same-sex marriage and the legitimacy of homosexuality in God’s sight, for which she was subsequently dismissed. Rodgers’s story raises questions about embracing a gay Christian identity, an embrace that preceded, in her case, and I suspect others, shifting to gay advocacy. The outcome seems unavoidable.

Certainly, if a believer admits that she or he privately wrestles with same-sex attractions and refuses to yield to them, I hope we’d view that person as nothing less than a faithful disciple, persevering (as we all do) in the age-old struggle between the flesh and the spirit (Gal. 5:17). But when desires of the flesh become a primary identifying characteristic, referred to in positive terms, much as one might refer to race or nationality, then shouldn’t red flags be raised? Thankfully, as of this writing, few if any Christians use words like *boy lover*, *polyamory*, or *player*. But while accurate terminology for child molestation, adultery, and promiscuity is intact within church circles, the term *gay Christian* is coming into more frequent use, the Wheaton example being one of many.

Author Eve Tushnet, who has contributed to prominent conservative publications such as *The American Spectator* and *National Review*, believes homosexual behavior is biblically condemned. Yet she also refers to herself as a Christian who is “gay” and “queer,” citing “gay” as a term for community, not just homosexuality.⁵ Well-known Christian ethicist David Gushee credits his belief in pro-gay theology to the influence of “gay Christians” he’d come to know.⁶ Sociologist and author Tony Campolo likewise claims his support for same-sex marriage stems from his interactions with gay Christian couples.⁷

Christian publisher WaterBrook/Multnomah Press released *God and the Gay Christian* in 2014, a book calling for a pro-gay reinterpretation of the Bible, written by self-identified gay Christian Matthew Vines.⁸ Stephen W. Cobb, chief publishing executive for WaterBrook Press, defended the company’s support for Vines, referring to

him as a “bold, young, evangelical writer.”⁹ And the Gay Christian Network,¹⁰ an organization of believers who identify as either “Side A Gay Christians” (homosexual and believing that God approves) or “Side B Gay Christians” (homosexual but believing that God disapproves, therefore choosing celibacy), regularly hosts prominent speakers such as author Philip Yancey¹¹ and blogger Rachel Evans Held¹² at its annual conference.

So by using the term gay Christian, growing numbers of believers impose a positive slant on what Scripture refers to only in the negative. And when we adopt linguistic affirmatives for what are, in fact, biblical prohibitions, can positive re-identification of other sins be far behind? As the late Francis Schaeffer noted, “Tell me what the world is saying today, and I’ll tell you what the church will be saying seven years from now.”¹³

OF LABELS, LEGITIMIZATION, AND LICENSE

In fairness, we should note that some who identify as gay Christians hold an essentially sound position on homosexuality, Tushnet being an example. They accept biblical condemnations of same-sex behavior at face value, and abstain from it. Others going by the same label hold less doctrinally sound views, celebrating their homosexuality, believing it to be God-intended and blessed. I would argue with the identity adopted by the first group; I’d argue with both the identity and behavior adopted by the second.

In so doing, the debate would hardly be academic. I repented of homosexual behavior in January of 1984. The homosexual orientation—an internal sexual attraction toward men—was something I couldn’t repent of, because (as an involuntary condition) it didn’t have an “off” switch. Those attractions would continue to arise, and when they did, I needed to resist them. In the interest of doing so, and in making a clean break with my identity as a gay man, I moved to another county, found a church, hired a professional counselor, and began investing in daily prayer, Bible study, regular worship with other believers, and deep friendships.

I didn’t consider myself a gay Christian during that transitional time, despite any lingering homosexual attractions I had. I was aware of the attractions, dealing with them as they arose, but they no longer defined me. Indeed, thirty-two years later, after twenty-nine years of marriage and the fathering of two grown sons, I’m aware of the places or situations that could reawaken those desires, and for obvious reasons, I avoid them. So my refusal to see myself as a gay Christian was never a denial of the attractions themselves. Rather, it was and remains a refusal to let them define me.

All of that put me in the same boat as any new creature in Christ. Scripture calls us to an awareness of the sin nature (Rom. 6–7), the temptations and responses it generates (Gal. 5:17), the mandate to resist (Rom. 6:12), the promise of strength to do so (1 Cor. 10:13), and the “glory to glory” transformative sanctification we experience (2 Cor. 3:18). We can thereby, with integrity, wear the “sinner” badge, as Paul did (1 Tim.

1:15), recognizing we always fall short (James 3:2) and, in this life, always will be both wrestling with and overcoming sinful impulses.

All of this can be done without advertising which impulses we're overcoming. In limited situations—a support group for people wrestling with a life-dominating problem like addiction, for example—it makes sense to specify the problem. (James's instruction cited earlier to "confess our faults" comes to mind here, an instruction we hardly can obey if we're not honest about the faults themselves.) So the statement, "I'm Bob, and I'm an alcoholic," has merit when Bob's in a meeting focusing on alcoholism. When Bob's in church, one hopes he wouldn't feel compelled to introduce himself the same way. After all, if I have Type-A blood, that's relevant when I'm in the hospital; irrelevant most other places. It's no dark secret, of course, since everyone assumes I have blood. But the specific type hardly matters.

Likewise, within the body of Christ, we're all wrestling with some kind of sinful tendency. We assume that about each other without knowing, or needing to know, the actual temptations of someone next to us in the pew. The fact we're sinners is no dark secret; we all struggle, we all know it. That "something" may be a common tendency or an uncommon one, one we all share, or one only a few of us can relate to. The general struggle is universal; the specific type hardly matters.

But when it does matter—when a Christian who experiences same-sex desires chooses for whatever reason to acknowledge them—the way they're acknowledged matters as well. That, too, is where the term gay Christian is problematic. On the one hand, an area of weakness is no cause for shame, since we all experience cravings for what we know to be wrong, desires in conflict with our beliefs but strong and persistent regardless. By and large, while we do pay attention to them, we don't beat ourselves up over them. But we don't refer to them with flattering lingo, either. We don't call them *gay*, which implies they're happy, cheerful things. Nor do we consider them morally neutral as we would consider our nationality or our sex. They're neither good nor neutral, but regrettable, a reality of life in this fallen world from which we look forward to being finally and permanently freed when our mortal bodies put on immortality, and sin is once and forever swallowed up (1 Cor. 15:53–54).

The term gay Christian labels when labelling seems uncalled for. Having dealt with the issue myself, and having had the privilege of walking alongside many Christian men and women who have done the same, I'm more convinced than ever that *homosexual* is a word best used as an adjective ("I experience homosexual temptations") rather than a noun ("I am a homosexual"). The result of the latter usage is labeling and limitation. The former offers a broader, more biblical self-view.

And when the gay Christian label is applied, labelling enhances legitimization. I've seen many believers with homosexual temptations begin reframing those temptations, in their minds and conversations, recategorizing them from sinful urges to primary identifiers, making it all that much easier eventually to default to them. This is

why the words of one Christian woman dealing with her own homosexuality are so apt:

I found for myself that moving past gay identity was essential for living stably and contentedly according to my beliefs as a same-sex attracted Christian woman....Abandoning gay identity doesn't mean being in denial. It doesn't mean "naming it and claiming it," proclaiming that you're "healed," that you're totally straight and happily heterosexual, while you're still homosexually attracted. What it means is radically altering the role that the fact of your homosexual attractions plays in your thinking about yourself and your life.¹⁴

Whatever our unique struggles, we could do worse than to take a cue from her, remembering that the way we frame our experience directs our response to it. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov. 23:7 KJV).

NOTES

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- 13 Francis Schaeffer cited in Elisabeth Elliot, "The Essence of Femininity: A Personal Perspective," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, eds. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 395.
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