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WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE SAYS, "I'M GAY"

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SYNOPSIS

As homosexuality becomes more broadly accepted within the culture, it's no surprise that more Christian families are hearing a loved one say, "I'm gay; I've accepted it; I intend to live it out." Aside from the obvious emotions raised, a number of questions come up as well: Can I say anything to change his mind? How do I handle it if she gets into a relationship with another woman? What about my gay teen? What if he marries another man?

These concerns spring from a real-life crisis many Christian homes are facing today. Two primary questions arise as well: What about us? and What about God? Both questions are relevant to the discussion families will have when addressing the issue, and believers need to frame them wisely.

When responding to a family member "coming out," a Christian should first clarify his own feelings in response, then stress the importance of the relationship and clarify mutual expectations as well. A broader discussion about worldview, the claims of Christ, and what created intent there may be for the human sexual experience should follow.

While we cannot override someone else's free will, we can and should seek to engage them, thereby being part of the work God is seeking to do in their lives.

Apologetics is so much simpler when you're not too emotionally involved. When talking theology or ethics with a coworker or acquaintance, feelings of good will are present, of course, but not overwhelming. In those cases, we speak to defend truth, refute error, and seek conversion without much inner conflict. The process is not all that emotional, not because we're indifferent—God forbid!—but because the nature of the relationship is less intimate, thereby less complex. The love of Christ constrains us to speak truth and pray it's received, but it's a love absent the entanglements and vulnerabilities that come along with more intimate relations. Any schoolteacher with children of her own will attest to this. Catch one of your students cheating on a test, and you'll feel concern as you address the situation, but you're not likely to feel overwhelmed. But finding that your own son or daughter has done such a thing is another matter. It may call for the same corrective action, but now your emotions, springing from your deep bond with the child, will surely be different, making the process all the more challenging.

So it is when homosexuality hits home. It's already hit the culture, so believers these days often find themselves expressing then defending the biblical position on marriage and sexuality, such conversations usually taking place with coworkers, friends, or acquaintances.

Yet more Christians are also hearing "I'm gay" from someone they never thought they'd hear those words from—someone close, with whom they share history and a deep bond. The truth may still be clear, but now it's being applied in the context of intimacy, the feelings generated becoming messy and often volatile.

So volatile, in fact, that when truth and relationship collide, some try to abandon one in the interest of preserving the other. Clint McCance, a self-identified Christian and former Arkansas school board member, remarked in a well-publicized post on Facebook in 2010: "I would disown my kids if they were gay. They will not be welcome at my home or in my vicinity. I will absolutely run them off."¹ While few believers would sign off on such an approach, it shows the simplicity (albeit the wrongness) of destroying a family tie when a loved one's sin makes the tie painful.

Conversely, some families opt to revise or negate truth in the interest of love. Robert and Susan Cottrell operate Freed Hearts Ministries, a website encouraging Christian parents not just to love their gay children but also to approve of and embrace their homosexuality. When facing a conflict between truth and love, they advise, "If you have to choose between love and doing what you think is the right thing, always choose love and it will always be the right thing."² Both extremes bypass a critical fact about Christlikeness: He's full of grace *and* truth, not grace *or* truth (John 1:14). A Christ-like approach will honor both, compromising neither.

Yet complications arise from outside the family as well, when cultural messages clash with biblical ones. Some sins condemned in Scripture are also culturally

condemned. Others, like fornication or drunkenness, may be tolerated, yet society shows no animosity toward those considering those behaviors sinful.

Not so with this sin, because our world has not only shifted toward approving it but also toward a robust disapproval of the disapproval of homosexuality. For example, in 2007, the Barna Group found that 91 percent of young non-Christians believe modern Christianity is “anti-homosexual” and that Christians show “excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians.”³ The Public Religion Research Institute in 2013 reported that more than four in ten Americans gave religious organizations a “D” or an “F” in their handling of the issue. The same number also said they believe that “the messages coming from places of worship contribute a lot to negative perceptions of gay and lesbian people,”⁴ leading David Aikman, former correspondent with *Time Magazine* and senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., to conclude, “Gays, in general, regard evangelical Christians not just as critical of them, but also as implacably hostile toward them.”⁵

So if you have a family member who’s homosexual, and you also consider homosexuality a sin, then your loved one is not just being reassured by societal voices—and by many voices claiming a Christian base as well—that homosexuality is normal. He’s also being educated to believe that your disapproval of homosexuality constitutes, at the least, ignorance or, at the worst, hatred on your part.

When someone you love says, “I’m gay,” myriad questions arise that fall under the umbrella of two general ones: What about *us*? and What about *God*? By exploring both questions, we’re better equipped to deal with the arguments, emotions, and relational negotiations so often involved in this difficult family situation. Let me propose three key points to consider for each of these two questions.

WHAT ABOUT US?

Our primary hope for our loved ones is that they be in God’s will. We want them saved, growing in grace, and living obediently. John summed up every godly parent’s heart when he declared, “I have no greater joy than to hear my children walk in truth” (3 John 1:4, all Scripture references KJV). But while their relationship with Him is our first passion, that’s tough to address if our relationship with them is unsatisfactory. Plainly put, family members, no matter what the situation, are unlikely to respond to our exhortations if there’s unresolved tension between them and us. Here are some issues to clarify, then, when a family member “comes out” to you.

Clarify Feelings

If the news is a shock or disappointment, it won’t help to pretend otherwise. Our emotions aren’t meant to be detached from our minds, and we can’t pretend indifference in light of a loved one’s sin. Paul didn’t pretend to be unaffected by the Galatians’ error when he exclaimed he was amazed by them (Gal. 1:6), nor did he deny

his sadness over the difficulties he was having with Corinth (2 Cor. 1:23–2:4). A godly heart rejoices in truth and grieves over wrong, so there's nothing unloving in saying, "This is hard for me. I'm feeling so many things I can hardly process them all, so bear with me. You've had time to absorb this, but it's still new to me."

Clarify Priorities

In light of the above-cited statistics about the way many homosexuals perceive Christians, your loved one may expect you to reject or denigrate him, or adopt a holier-than-thou attitude. Many believe their Christian families will no longer consider them valuable, dismissing them as sinners unworthy of attention or love. That's why I encourage believers to reassure gay family members that their relationship is primary, and that they're committed to not allowing this to interfere with, much less define, that relationship. "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men," Paul urged in Romans 12:18. Effort should be made, then, to keep relationships intact as much as possible. And in most cases, it's entirely possible.

Which isn't to say a family member's newly announced homosexuality won't change things. Once it's out, you realize someone you love embraces something God forbids, just as your loved one realizes you disapprove. Neither of you could be unaffected by that knowledge, but if something *affects* people, it needn't *divide* them. There is still room for affection, conversation, and very deep love, even when both parties are in sharp and perhaps irreconcilable disagreement.

In this sense, family relationships differ from congregational ones. When a member of the local church is practicing unrepentant sin as specified in 1 Corinthians 5:11, should he refuse to acknowledge and deal with his behavior, the church is obliged to disfellowship him only as a last resort, unless and until he repents (1 Cor. 5:11–13; 2 Thess. 3:14). Not so with families, since family members are often not acknowledging the same worldview, much less the same approach to the Bible and faith. And even if a loved one is a Christian, I'm convinced Paul's command to withdraw from believers involved in open sin wasn't directed to family members. Otherwise, if a Christian husband was engaging in drunkenness, his believing wife would have to remove herself from him. Likewise, if Christian parents were involved in sin, their children would have to separate from them, and in both cases biblical commands to honor parents and mutually submit in marriage would have to be ignored. Preserving the family relationship despite significant differences is preferable, and clarifying your intention to do so will be helpful.

Clarify Expectations

Often the statement "I'm gay" raises more questions than it answers. I find the following questions especially helpful to ask early in the dialogue about homosexuality:

"When you say you're gay, do you mean you embrace that as something good, or view it

as something to resist?”

“Are you currently in a relationship? If so, do you want me to know this person, and interact with you as a couple?”

“Do you expect me to change my viewpoint on this, or can we agree to disagree?”

These questions help clarify what your family member is expecting of you, but there’s also a place for you to clarify what you expect and where your own boundaries lie. Here I find two Scripture verses especially helpful:

- “Neither be partaker of other men’s sins: keep thyself pure” (1 Tim. 5:22).
- “For whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23).

That tells me I am neither to participate in something unbiblical nor to violate my own conscience when judging whether I have the liberty to do a certain thing. It also gives me room to decide on a case-by-case basis how I respond to different situations. Sometimes it’s clear—hosting two men or women sleeping together, for example, seems an obvious violation of 1 Timothy 5:22 cited above—but other cases aren’t so clear, and prayerful consideration is called for.

So if my loved one wants me to meet his partner, I may decide to accept and relate lovingly to both men, or I may feel the meeting would, in this case, indicate approval I’m not willing to give. Both options are valid; I’m given liberty to determine which is best in my own case. That same reasoning can guide me in other instances that come up as I navigate my relationship with a homosexual loved one.⁶

Of course, not all situations call for mutual agreement. If your teen determines she’s lesbian and wants to date other girls, or socialize at gay clubs, you’re not called to show the same magnanimity you’d offer if she was an adult. You cannot tell her what to feel nor what to think, but you’re still in authority over her behavior. And while I’m against forcing an adolescent to go to counseling in such cases, you’ve still every right to engage her in discussions over what’s divinely intended and what’s not. As always, you teach biblical standards in your home, requiring your underage children to adhere to them, hoping they’ll embrace them as adults.

Likewise if your spouse “comes out” to you, that calls for more than a “live and let live” approach. Since he willingly entered a marital covenant with you, your expectation of monogamy and due intimacy should stay intact. And while it’s unreasonable to hold his sexual feelings against him—the homosexual orientation being an essentially involuntary condition—it’s reasonable to expect him to resist those feelings and invest in the relationship he committed to.

Clarifying your intentions, then, means clarifying necessary boundaries of these principles. It means saying to a family member, “I would never ask you to do something you don’t believe in, even if I disagreed with you. So please show me the same respect. We should get along fine provided we don’t push each other toward

anything we feel is wrong.” And it means honoring your family member by never insisting he violate his own standards, while honoring God by asserting your intention not to violate His.

WHAT ABOUT GOD?

When Jesus approached a Samaritan woman who’d had multiple relations and was now living with a man outside marriage, He recognized her sexual situation without overemphasizing it (John 4:17–18). His priority was not her sin, but her relationship with Him (John 4:26), and from her recognition of Him as Messiah sprang a changed life. She evangelized a city (John 4:39), and it’s reasonable to assume she changed her living arrangement—an assumption not clarified in Scripture but easy to make.

For her life to change, something needed to happen between her and Him; for our loved ones to change, something needs to happen between them and God. We cannot make that happen, but we can pray for it to happen, and perhaps be part of it happening, all of which makes the *what about God?* question essential.

Minds and hearts often change through clusters of influences, the most crucial being the Holy Spirit’s conviction and enlightenment (John 16:8). But God also ordained human influence as a tool for His work, so in addition to preaching, we often see *reasoning* with people as a vehicle for God influencing them. Paul, for instance, engages in *dialegomai*—the act of reasoning—throughout his ministry. (See Acts 17:2; 17:17; 18:4; 19:8; and 24:25, for example.) To *dialegomai* is to “ponder, dispute, mingle thought with thought, or discourse,” and it’s a process we can enter into when homosexuality hits home.

This leads to a point we cannot overemphasize: God loves, and is at work in, the lives of those we love. If He is working in my loved one’s life, I hope to be part of that work. It’s not always possible; sometimes the person will exercise free will by closing the door on such engagement. Or he may harden himself to God’s prompting, essentially closing the door on that as well. Still, to whatever extent I can be part of what God is doing, I want to be available. To that end, when asking the *what about God?* question, let’s consider three points.

Clarify Position on God

A person’s sexuality is secondary; their spirituality is primary. So if someone is dead in sin, it hardly matters before God what their preferred sins are. Their unsaved state is the problem; their sinful tendencies are but a symptom. Likewise, if a family member declares, “I’m gay,” the first consideration becomes their worldview. If they are unsaved, that—not their homosexuality—is the main concern.

It’s true that non-Christians’ lives would be temporally improved if they followed biblical guidelines, but they’d remain unsaved. And these days, apart from conviction based on worldview, there’s very little to motivate a person to renounce

homosexuality when so much of the surrounding culture approves it.

When entering into *dialegomai* with a non-Christian gay family member, then, it's advisable to steer the conversation to the claims of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, humanity's fallen state, and the promises of the gospel. Should the subject of homosexuality come up, it's only fair to clarify that, yes, it's one of many behaviors falling short of what God intends (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–11; 1 Tim. 1:9–11) and, yes, following Christ means taking up one's cross regardless of the ramifications (Luke 9:23–24). But the "reasoning" should also broaden the issue, with reminders that this is no more or less than what's required of any believer, and that what He *commands* us to do, He likewise *empowers* us to do (John 14:16–18; John 15:5; Phil. 4:12–13).

The longstanding tension between evangelical Christianity and the gay community is likely to come up, a tension we can acknowledge and likewise seek to reason about. Admitting the wrong way many Christians have handled the issue is no sin; it can, in fact, enhance credibility. But I find it helpful also to point out that every group—gays and Christians included—have members who shoot their mouths off, making the other group members wince. So for every wrongheaded statement a Christian has made about gays, we can surely find similarly wrongheaded statements made by gays about Christians, which brings us back to the main issue: it's the Person and claims of Christ, not the stellar performance of His followers, that we preach and promote.

Clarify Position on God and Sexuality

Many Christians are being confronted by homosexual family members who claim to be Christian and gay, adopting a pro-gay interpretation of Scripture. This is hardly a new phenomenon.⁷

If your loved one is open to discussing what Scripture really says on the matter, he may claim that he is born again, feels the Spirit, prays daily, and lives a Christian life as a gay individual. In that case, I find it less helpful to challenge the authenticity of someone's faith, and more helpful to ask whether a relationship with God legitimizes all parts of a believer's life. Surely Christians in Corinth were truly born again, since Paul didn't indicate otherwise. Yet throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians, he appealed to them and corrected their many errors, proving that one can be truly saved but truly wrong.

Likewise, many are attempting to make the issue a secondary one, the differences between those believing homosexuality to be sin and those who don't being as unimportant as the differences between Baptists and Methodists.

Yet sexual sin is viewed in Scripture as especially serious (1 Cor. 6:18–20), warranting the first recorded church discipline (1 Cor. 5:1–5) and prompting Paul to command believers to disengage from other believers who practice it (1 Cor. 5:11). If sexual sin warrants serious attention, then whether or not the Bible considers

homosexuality a sexual sin warrants serious attention as well. Whatever else this subject may be, it's anything but secondary.

Clarify Openness to Future Dialogue

Often we reach a place of impasse, where points and counterpoints have been made. That's when it's helpful to ask, "Can we continue this discussion? I'll be willing to read materials you recommend if you're willing to read mine, and we can keep dialoguing on God, sexuality, and spirituality." If agreed to, such discussions can be extremely useful and wonderfully redemptive.

But the answer is sometimes no. I said that myself to friends who confronted me about my own homosexuality more than thirty-five years ago, having decided I was gay and right in God's sight, a decision I would come to renounce in early 1984. And my renunciation finally came from the cumulative effect of hearing sound Bible teaching, discussions with believers, and the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

Which is why I'm convinced such discussion, though sometimes seeming unprofitable, is never in vain. We are commissioned first to know truth, then conform to it, and finally express it as faithful stewards, and when someone you love says, "I'm gay," your faithful stewardship of truth generates reward in the next life, and, hopefully, good fruit in this one as you rest in the assurance that you know who you've believed, and are persuaded that He is able to keep what you've committed unto Him (2 Tim. 1:12).

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NOTES

- 1 Jack Mirkinson, "Clint McCance, Arkansas School Board Member, Resigns On 'Anderson Cooper 360,'" *Huffington Post*, October 29, 2010.
- 2 Susan Cottrell, "Don't Be a Peacekeeper," *Freed Hearts*, December 18, 2014, <http://freedhearts.com/>.
- 3 "A New Generation Expresses Its Skepticism and Frustration with Christianity," *Barna Group*, September 24, 2007, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnextgen/94-a-new-generation-expresses-its-skepticism-and-frustration-with-christianity#.VKMXn-85Dug>.
- 4 "Survey: A Shifting Landscape: A Decade of Change in American Attitudes about Same-Sex Marriage

and LGBT Issues,” Public Religion Research Institute, February 26, 2014,
<http://publicreligion.org/research/2014/02/2014-lgbt-survey/>.

- 5 David Aikman, “Why Gays Hate Christians,” *Charisma Magazine*, June 20, 2013,
<http://www.charismamag.com/life/culture/910-christians-and-gays>.
- 6 For example, see my article, “Should Christians Attend Same-Sex Weddings?” *Christian Research Journal* 35, 5 (2012): 14, available at <http://www.equip.org/christian-researchjournal/should-christians-attend-same-sex-weddings/>.
- 7 For the history of pro-gay theology, and tools for rebutting it, see my book *The Gay Gospel? How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible* (Harvest House, 2004), available at <http://www.equip.org/bookstore/the-gay-gospel-how-pro-gay-advocates-misread-the-bible/>.