



**Relationships
Matter**

Affirmations Guide

**Guide to the evangelical
affirmations on the Bible,
sexuality and same-sex
attraction**



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Clarity, confidence and compassion

Relationships are critical to what it is to be human. At the centre of the universe is God in relationship – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Human beings are made in the image of God, created male and female. All of us, as image bearers, are made for relationships – with God and with each other. It is through these relationships that the immense love of God is learned and lived.

Despite this, the church has often struggled to respond to the cultural challenges that relationships can present. Changing views and values around sex, sexuality, gender, marriage and family have been especially prominent in western cultures over the past half century or so.

This resource builds on earlier works produced by the Evangelical Alliance in 1998 and 2012 on an evangelical view of sexuality. Social attitudes have continued to change over this time, most notably with the legal redefinition of marriage in 2013. Attitudes have also shifted within the church with a more sustained effort to redefine Christian teaching and practice around sexuality and sexual relationships. The language used has also changed and so we have updated our 2012 Affirmations to ensure they are more easily understood and remain clear and unambiguous. Finally, successive governments have committed to ban conversion therapy. The Evangelical Alliance has consistently supported attempts to end abusive and coercive conversion therapy practices while ensuring people can receive the prayer and spiritual support they choose. The Affirmations reiterate this position.

This resource briefly sets out the current cultural context and a biblical framework

for engagement before introducing the updated Affirmations accompanied with brief commentary. The Affirmations relate to same-sex sexuality as does this accompanying resource but set within the broader context of an orthodox understanding of biblical sexual ethics. It is part of a broader suite of resources designed to provide **clarity** about what the Bible teaches about sexuality, and in particular same-sex attraction and sexual activity. It looks to build **confidence** in understanding our changing culture and how we express and live out our beliefs. Finally, it helps congregations to explore with **compassion** how their beliefs work out in various pastoral and practical situations.

Cultural context

Sex and sexuality are the site of so many battles in what have become commonly known as the culture wars. Our cultural stories often focus on freedom, where sexual freedom is seen as an essential, perhaps the essential, apex of our liberation – we should be largely free to have sex when we want and with whom we want. While the history of this is complicated, the famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche share significant responsibility.

Freud, more than anyone else, made plausible the idea that humans, from infancy onward, are essentially sexual beings. He argued that our sexual desires are ultimately decisive for who we are and what brings us fulfilment. Though many of his ideas have since been rejected, the sexualisation of identity has stuck. Nietzsche saw Christianity as an oppressive religion that used marriage and monogamy to suppress natural human desires. Both were influential on postmodern thinkers who looked to throw off ‘oppressive’ sexual restrictions or

norms, instead seeing sexual freedom as a pathway to fulfilment and happiness. These ideas continue today in areas such as queer theory which looks to deconstruct marriage, family and even biological sex.

This combined with post-war prosperity in the 1950s and '60s leading to big social and cultural changes, especially with the advent of birth control as the pill become widely available, decoupling sex from procreation. We have also seen the separation of sex from marriage as UK birth rates outside marriage have risen from 5% in 1966 to 48.1% in 2017. Sex has also become more casual, often detached from the emotional and time commitment of a relationship.

In our Freud- and Nietzsche-shaped world, sexual identity and sexual behaviour cannot easily be separated – we are told that authenticity requires the free expression of identity. To object to any kind of sexual practice is seen as an attack on the underlying identity, and questions of identity are seen in the modern world as a question of dignity – not something we can agree to differ on. Instead, in the postmodern world of sex, the growing number of sexual and gender identities get a letter and a flag.

When the Evangelical Alliance published its first resource in this area in 1998, the British Social Attitudes study at the time found that 23% of the population agreed there was nothing at all wrong with same-sex sexual relationships. By the time of our 2012 resource this had risen to 47%. The last time the question was asked was 2022, when 67% said nothing at all was wrong.¹ The speed of social change in this area has been rapid.

Statistics from the Office for National Statistics published in 2022 also found that 3.3% of the UK population identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual.² 1.8% of those over 16 identified as gay or lesbian and 1.5%

identified as bisexual, with the rates being slightly higher for men than women. This has almost doubled since this measurement began in 2014, when only 1.6% described themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual. This statistic is heavily skewed by age, with 8% of 16 to 24-year-olds describing themselves as either lesbian, gay or bisexual, with the largest difference being that 5.3% identify as bisexual.

While the numbers identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual remain small statistically, it is a growing group with significant cultural influence. The church must offer a clear, confident and compassionate gospel message to that group and to the growing proportion of our culture who are sympathetic or supportive. Ignoring the issue won't work and ignores the people involved. Questions around sexuality and gender have become a major stumbling block for some Christians in their discipleship journey and for others considering the Christian faith. A lack of clarity helps no-one in the long term – it is disrespectful, confusing and ultimately divisive when people come to realise that they have deeply different and often incompatible views. We believe that the historically, biblically orthodox approach set out here offers a hope-filled better story to those within and beyond the church. We pray and hope this resource, built around the updated Affirmations, will bring the biblical clarity, confidence and compassion many look for.

Biblical framing

We are made in the image of God as male and female – biological beings who are also theologically significant. This means when we get the body, sex and sexuality wrong, we get the divine story wrong as well. Christopher West says:

*The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest held convictions about who we are, who God is, who Jesus is, what the church is (or should be), the meaning of love, the ordering of society and the mystery of the universe.*³

A flourishing human life will often involve sexual intimacy and, for Christians, that is fulfilled in the context of marriage. This is grounded in Genesis 2:24, when God sets out that “a man leaves his father and his mother and is united with his wife, and the two become one flesh”. Jesus firmly reiterates this same pattern of exclusive marital and sexual union in Matthew 19:4–6, while Paul reaffirms it in 1 Corinthians 7:1–16 and presents it as profound mystical analogy for Christ’s relationship with the church in Ephesians 5:31–32.

The role and significance of covenant is a key theme of the biblical story, and motifs of marriage, procreation and family appear consistently in scripture as outworkings of successive covenants between God and humanity (Genesis 9:1; 12:7; Exodus 30:21; 2 Samuel 7:12; Jeremiah 23:3; 31:31–34). Just as God requires faithfulness, selflessness and constancy from His people, so marriage and family life, as core building blocks of community, are presented as a reflection of that divine-human compact.

It is also essential to remember that the Bible clearly shows us that a flourishing human life can be lived without sexual activity or sexual intimacy. We need to be careful to not place marriage on a pedestal. Jesus and the early church launched the first sexual revolution based on consent, mutuality and a spiritual understanding of sexuality. In Matthew 19, Jesus affirms sex and marriage – husband and wife becoming one flesh. But Jesus Himself lived a life of singleness and celibacy. In Jesus sex is

sacred, marriage is precious and celibacy is celebrated.

So, it is important to recognise that not all receive the gift of marriage. For some this may be that they abstain in the hope of a marital sexual relationship; for others, their singleness does not deny their sexuality but places other relationships ahead of this in a life of prayer, service and witness. For others still, it may be because they are not attracted to people of the opposite sex and therefore a commitment to living in line with biblical teaching means they will not seek any other form of sexual union.

Human relationships come in many forms, and our personhood is established in a multiplicity of relationships through family, friends and community. Our task is to see God’s redemption work in all these relationships. Jesus invites us into the family of God – we are called brothers and sisters and co-heirs with Christ (Matthew 12:48–50; Romans 8:15–17; Ephesians 1:4–5). God calls us children and He is our Father. Through Jesus we are called friends of God and through Jesus we become the Bride of Christ (John 15:15; Revelation 19:7). In the God story, sexual union in marriage is a symbol pointing beyond itself to something even more relationally profound and eternal in the new Heaven and new earth: the perfected union of Christ with His people (Ephesians 5:25–32; Matthew 22:30). Marriage is the lifelong covenant between one man and one woman that points beyond itself towards our eternal union with God. And the place for sex is within that covenanted partnership.

Sex matters. Sexual intercourse constitutes both a ‘one flesh’ union and a spiritual union.

The way we understand sexual relationships affects the church and its mission to the world. As evangelicals look to better understand, articulate and live out what the



Bible has to say about sexuality, it is vital to also understand the world that we live in. The perception can be that society has overvalued sex but, in reality, it has often undervalued it by failing to appreciate how astoundingly valuable it really is. Faced with the development of the contraceptive pill, liberalised divorce laws and legalised abortion and the ensuing impact on sexual fidelity, monogamy and family life, the church has struggled. On the one hand it too has overvalued sex, building strict protective walls around it, while on the other it has undervalued it as just another desire to be tamed.

Contemporary culture, and parts of the church, have managed to place sex on a pedestal and devalue it at the same time. In short, the church has too often failed to recognise the significance the larger biblical

story – the good, true and beautiful story of God – has on our understanding of sex and sexual relationships. In speaking about sexuality, it is vital to neither underestimate the scale of the cultural shifts that have occurred nor become overwhelmed by the challenge they pose. In fact, the rapid cultural shifts and the exposure of the shallowness of the cultural foundations around sex and sexuality create significant opportunities.

An evangelical response

Since our 2012 publication, marriage has been legally redefined in the UK to include same-sex relationships, and that has been supported by some within the Christian church. For evangelicals advocating for a biblical approach to marriage and sexuality,

there are two primary questions to answer: ‘Why should sexual activity be reserved for a marriage relationship?’ and ‘Why should that relationship be only between a man and a woman for life?’ Behind both is a question of biblical authority, and these are questions we look to answer throughout this resource.

But as we do so, we need to remember the need to speak with clarity and conviction, discipling congregations to live lives in the light of the Bible, even when this is a counter-cultural message. We must help people have confidence in what they believe in a culture where many will disagree. We don’t want to define ourselves by what we are against or retreat to a defensive approach that solely looks to protect the freedom to hold and teach what we believe. But neither do we seek the agreement and approval from those we know root their values and beliefs in a very different place from ours.

The church can and must do better in how we treat people – acknowledging and repenting of the fact that we have not always been a welcoming community for gay and lesbian people. There has been fear, misunderstanding, prejudice and even open hostility on occasion. This was acknowledged by John Stott who wrote: “love is just what the Church has generally failed to show to homosexual people”.⁴ We must challenge discrimination towards someone on the grounds of their sexual attractions, perceived orientation or identity. The church should not hesitate to call out and condemn violence and hatred towards people because of their sexuality, and reject and oppose demeaning, bullying, marginalising or scaremongering attitudes and speech. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must provide a place of welcome, being honest, clear and compassionate about what we believe and what the journey of discipleship and transformation will look like.

The church also can and must do better at training and equipping people about relationships, sex and sexuality. For too long too many churches have avoided the issue because it is difficult and potentially divisive. This doesn’t help anyone. Those who hold a historically orthodox position do not feel supported, encouraged or equipped. Those who support a progressive or revisionist position can feel understandably confused or let down if the church has a position that it has not articulated.

So, we need to work harder at telling a better story – a vision that is rooted in the broader story of love, healing and reconciliation that God has embodied for us in Jesus, and that through Jesus offers hope to a confused and hurting world. We need to teach and immerse ourselves in a holistic vision for sexual wholeness that’s different from, counter to, and more beautiful than, the dominant cultural waters that most people swim (or drown) in every day.

This resource updates the *Affirmations in Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*, reaffirming an evangelical sexual ethic, and sets the discussion of same-sex sexuality within the context of the gospel of grace and Christian teaching on love, marriage and sex more generally.

The following pages unpack each of the ten Affirmations and considers how they work out in practice. It is clear that many churches, organisations, schools, colleges and other contexts face – or will face – questions relating to their approach to issues of sexuality. Many leaders, staff, board members and volunteers are insufficiently prepared to deal either biblically or pastorally with the confronting questions. In the following pages we look to provide a primer, never the final word, but hopefully a helpful start.

Evangelical affirmations on sexuality

1. We affirm the goodness of creation and the dignity of all people as those made in God's image. We recognise that all of us are sinners, and that the only true hope for sinful people – whatever our sexuality – is in Jesus Christ. Our prayer is that His love, truth and grace would always characterise evangelical responses to debates on sexuality.

Good news foundations

It is essential that evangelicals begin with the gospel – the *evangel* or good news of salvation in Jesus Christ – and let it shape both what we say and the way we speak. This is equally important for internal church discussions about sexuality and for how Christians speak and are heard when they address these issues within wider society. Acknowledging that society will often disagree with how evangelicals approach these questions does not provide an excuse to adopt an aggressive or antagonistic tone. Where we disagree, our disagreement should be conducted with compassion and grace.

What we believe about sexuality is tightly bound up with what we believe it means to be human. It rests on a realistic and robust understanding of the goodness of humanity's creation in God's image, and of the damage done by and to humans in the fall (Genesis 1:26–3:24). Irrespective of belief or behaviour, the starting point of our theology is in the truth that human beings are animated by God's life-breath (Genesis

2:7). In acknowledging sinful behaviour and in responding pastorally to those who struggle with, or give in to, temptation, we humbly recognise our own sinfulness and need for forgiveness (Romans 3:23).

We have all sinned, and our only true hope is in Christ. It is our union with Him through new birth, faith and baptism and His promise to make all things new that is a shared hope for those who experience same-sex attraction and those who don't. This is why the Affirmations begin with our shared need for Jesus.

So much of my life as a homosexual Christian... has simply been learning how to wait, to be patient, to endure, to bear up under an unwelcome burden for the long haul. . .Washed and waiting. That is my life – my identity as one who is forgiven and spiritually cleaned and my struggle as one who perseveres with a frustrating thorn in the flesh, looking forward to what God has promised to do. (Wesley Hill)⁵

Common humanity

Focusing on our common humanity enables us to move past the frequent misstep of classifying people based on their orientation, on divisive language and approaching sexuality as a problem that ‘they’ have and ‘we’ don’t.

The St Andrew’s Day Statement from the Church of England Evangelical Council is helpful in this regard:

Our sexual affections can no more define who we are than can our class, race, or nationality. At the deepest ontological level, therefore, there is no such thing as ‘a’ homosexual or ‘a’ heterosexual; therefore there are human beings, male and female, called to redeemed humanity in Christ, endowed with a complex variety of emotional potentialities and threatened by a complex variety of forms of alienation.⁶

This statement also recognises the general scientific consensus that many people’s sexual preferences exist on a continuum rather than at one polarity or another. This is more obvious in those who describe themselves as bisexual and those who present their sexuality as changing over

time. Recognising that sexual inclination or attraction looks different for each person is not to *endorse* the behaviours that might follow from such attractions, or even the attractions themselves. On the contrary, it recognises that the areas of sex and sexuality are a struggle for many that we need to be able to discuss honestly and accurately.

Love, truth and grace

The heart of the gospel is that truth finds its fulfilment in God’s grace, offering the chance of repentance, forgiveness and new life (John 1:14; Romans 12:18; Ephesians 4:15). This truth is not compromised when compassion and respect are shown to an individual, nor are such responses a seal of approval on wrong behaviour. They are, rather, a sign of God’s love. In all aspects of the Christian life, and not least in relation to same-sex attraction, it is essential to balance how we communicate what we believe to be true with biblical grace. Truth asserted without grace can seem cold, condemning and more concerned with rightness than righteousness. Instead, we must show love and care while encouraging and supporting everyone to live in obedience to God’s word.



2. We affirm God's love and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexuality, and so reject and condemn all attitudes and actions which victimise or vilify those whose affections are directed towards people of the same sex. We are encouraged that many Christians now recognise and deeply regret the hurt caused by past and present failures in their responses to those who experience same-sex attraction.

God's love for all people

We affirm God's love and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexuality. Sexuality is an emotive word, used in our culture to speak to questions of identity, relationships and belief. These matters are important to everyone, so any discussion on sexual orientation and/or behaviour can quickly become deeply personal and emotive. We should always look to be clear and compassionate in our language and tone when addressing this subject.

We also acknowledge that the church has not always been a welcoming community for gay and lesbian people. There has been fear, misunderstanding, prejudice and even open hostility on occasion, and we should apologise for any past wrongdoing.

Jesus was committed throughout His ministry to those marginalised and cast as outsiders, whether because of their identity, their morality or their behaviour (Matthew 8:1–13; Luke 7:36–50; John 4:1–16). Christians have an opportunity to nurture and model patterns of behaviour, both individually and corporately, that ensure all are loved and valued within and beyond the church. We can and should ensure that everyone, regardless of their sexuality, receives the best pastoral care and hospitality.

According to various UK statistics there are high levels of hate crime including verbal abuse and physical violence which are related to sexual orientation.⁷ Theological convictions and disagreement about sexual activity (and/or gender identity) can never be used to justify collusion or silence in the face of abuse. No faithful follower of Christ should remain indifferent to such hatred. Christians should condemn any physical violence or verbal harassment and reject bullying or dehumanising attitudes and speech (James 3:9–10, 17–18).

The dignity of everyone, whatever their sexuality, should be reflected in laws which should also recognise, respect and protect freedom of religion and belief when it comes to views on sexuality – including the evangelical position articulated in these Affirmations.



3. We affirm that marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship for life and is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations. Any sexual practice outside of this is incompatible with God's will as revealed in scripture. Holding these theological and ethical views on biblical grounds is neither harmful nor homophobic. Rather, they are views to be held and expressed with Christ-like love and grace, since they reflect the teaching of Jesus Himself.

A biblical view of marriage

At the heart of these Affirmations is the belief that marriage is an institution created by God (Genesis 1:26–2:25) in which a man and a woman enter an exclusive, covenant relationship for life that mysteriously points beyond itself towards our eternal union with God (Genesis 1:26–2:25; Matthew 19:4–6; Ephesians 5:21–33). This is the only context in which sexual relationships are biblically affirmed. We are created male and female in God's image and designed for relationships with others. Those relationships can take many non-sexual forms in the context of family, friendships, workplaces, societies and churches. These relationships may be between people of the same sex or mixed. However, where specifically sexual relationships are concerned, lifelong monogamous marriage between a man and a woman is the proper setting in which they are to be initiated and sustained.

God's command to Adam and Eve that they should be "fruitful and multiply" is closely connected to His instruction that they order the world around them – that they feed, clothe and nurture themselves and their offspring (Genesis 1:28–30). While this is the default biblical pattern for marriage, it is important to note that not all marriages produce children, while others that do not do so naturally may fruitfully provide a home and family for children through fostering and adoption.⁸ Beyond its particular association

with procreation, biblical marriage has wider significance as a key building block for society. In this sense, the one-flesh union of male and female in marriage is a profound and fundamental expression of unity in diversity more generally. Biblical marriage is not only the divinely ordained context for sexual expression, but also an archetype of what God wants for society and the world. It is within the covenant of marriage that duality and difference are reconciled – and that reconciliation points to the great Reconciler, Jesus Himself.

The unique status and role of marriage is reiterated and reinforced in the New Testament by both Jesus and Paul. Jesus begins His public ministry with the blessing of a wedding at Cana (John 2:1–12) while in Ephesians 5:31 Paul presents marriage as an image for Christ's enduringly faithful relationship with the Church, an image echoed in Revelation 21:2. Hebrews 13:4 affirms the general biblical view that sex outside of marriage is immoral: "Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." Not only is adultery wrong, but also any sexual immorality or activity outside of marriage. This leads us more directly to the issue of same-sex sexual activity.

While polygamy and other forms of sexual relationship feature at points in the history of Israel, they do so in a fallen, unredeemed



world where they are at best tolerated and accommodated for a season rather than endorsed by God.⁹

Same-sex sexual practice

The references to ‘sexual relations’ and ‘sexual practice’ in this third Affirmation are intentionally distinct in meaning from the reference to ‘same-sex attraction’ in Affirmation two (above). The experience of certain attractions, or the assumption of a particular sexual orientation or identity, do not in themselves determine how a person might behave now or in the future. While debate on the origins and formation of sexual attraction and orientation is of interest scientifically and sociologically, it is not decisive theologically. The issue for Christians is not how a person got their attractions, but rather what they do with them.

There has been much debate in recent years regarding the biblical view on

same-sex relationships; however, we are convinced that scripture is clear and consistent in its view of same-sex sexual practice – and we use practice to entail conscious commitment to act in certain ways, as distinct from aspects of attraction that might be involuntary, unwilling or unwanted. While there are relatively few direct references to same-sex sexual practice in the Bible, where they do occur, all of them teach that it is incompatible with God’s will and as such inconsistent with faithful Christian discipleship.

It is beyond the scope of this short resource to fully review every relevant biblical text, but we will explore some of the most cited. Further resources are listed at the end of this publication and available online. A fuller commentary on these Affirmations is available at eauk.org/sexuality

Jesus and Genesis

It is often helpful to start with Jesus because many people mistakenly think He had nothing to say on this subject. Matthew describes a fascinating encounter when some Pharisees came to test Jesus with a question about divorce. Jesus says, “Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female.’” He starts with the story of creation and then He says, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh,” quoting from Genesis 2. Jesus goes on to say words we often hear at a wedding – “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19:4–6).

Jesus reaffirms the foundations in Genesis – one man and one woman for life – and also condemns *porneiai* or ‘sexual immoralities’ in Matthew 15:19 and Mark 7:21, which would have been understood in that cultural context to have included same-sex sexual practice.¹⁰ Jesus avoids the trap of legalism, offering forgiveness for those who have sinned while discipling all of us to sin no more.

Old Testament

Genesis 19:1–29

While the foundational framework for marriage is set out in Genesis 2, the story of Sodom in Genesis 19 is often cited in this conversation because of its link to the word ‘sodomy’. The account describes the men of Sodom trying to forcibly have sex with two angelic visitors to the city who have appeared in the form of men. Later, parts of the Old Testament accuse Sodom of a range of

sins: oppression, adultery, lying, abetting criminals, arrogance, complacency and indifference to the poor. It is considered by evangelical scholars to refer to both a gross breach of hospitality and to sexual relationships, though not all see it as a key text in arguing against same-sex sexual practice.

Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

Leviticus contains two well-known statements about same-sex sexual practice. Leviticus 18:22 says, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” And Leviticus 20:13 says, “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.”

Leviticus can be jarring to the modern ear and some claim that if the prohibitions against eating shellfish no longer apply, the same should be true about same-sex sexual practice. However, this fails to distinguish between the ceremonial, civil and moral laws detailed in Leviticus. The ceremonial laws related to temple and worship and covered things like unclean foods such as pork and shellfish. These didn’t apply to everyone back then – just Israel. The civil laws were about regulating Israelite society such as looking after the poor, settling disputes and determining crimes. Finally, the moral law declared what God deemed right and wrong – for instance, the Ten Commandments.

The New Testament understanding is that the ceremonial laws around the sacrificial system and ritual purity were fulfilled in Christ and are no longer binding. The civil laws offer useful guidance and principles, especially

for the church, but we are no longer part of God's nation-state on earth. The moral law reflects God's character and continues to apply. When Jesus mentioned the moral laws, He either reaffirmed them or intensified them – for example, looking lustfully at a woman is committing adultery in our hearts (Matthew 5:28). To argue that the laws relating to same-sex sexual practice no longer apply, it must be proved that they were only ceremonial. And for that argument to succeed, same-sex relationships would need to not be mentioned in the New Testament. But, as we shall see, they are.

Another argument that is sometimes made is that Leviticus is about exploitive relationships, possibly linked to temple prostitution, and therefore doesn't apply to the loving gay relationships we might see today. But again, the argument doesn't hold as the penalty of death is given to both parties. If this practice was banned because one party was being exploited, they would not receive the same punishment as the abuser. There is nothing in these passages that implies a relationship of exploitation.

New Testament

Romans 1:26–27

Romans 1 is the biblical text which attracts the greatest attention and debate, principally because it provides the fullest discussion of same-sex relationships and is almost certainly the only biblical reference to lesbian sexual activity. In this passage Paul is highlighting the equal status of all Christians – Jew and Gentile – with respect to salvation, while also showing the equality of all in terms of God's divine wrath and judgement.

As Paul focuses in on Gentile society, he notes that it will face God's wrath for suppressing the truth that God has revealed about Himself in creation. Paul then gives three examples of how people have exchanged what has been known about God for something else. Firstly, they exchange the glory of immortal God for images of mortal creatures (verse 23). Secondly, they exchange the truth about God for a lie, worshipping created things (verse 25). Finally, they reject the knowledge of God (verse 28), exchanging 'natural' relations for 'unnatural' ones.

Paul's theological and moral reasoning in verses 26 and 27 is clearly defined by divine creation as set out in Genesis 1 and 2 as well as the second commandment's prohibition of idolatry (Exodus 20:4). For Paul, same-sex practice is an outward sign of an inward reality – that someone has rejected the Creator's design.

Paul makes clear that same-sex attraction is not what God originally intended. All our desires have been distorted by sin, but here Paul does describe both lesbian and male homosexual behaviour as 'unnatural'. Paul's reference to lesbianism as well as male homosexual conduct also supports the idea that he is condemning all homosexual activity, and not just the man-boy relationships that typically occurred in Roman culture.

As Preston Sprinkle notes: If Paul situates the same-sex relations in the context of departing from the Creator's intention, then this suggests that Paul's words are not limited to some cultural way of behaving.¹¹

The strength of Paul's language should not make us think that homosexual conduct is the worst or only form of sinful

behaviour. Paul may be highlighting it because it is a particularly vivid example, or because it was especially pertinent for his readers in Rome given their cultural context. Also, as Sam Allbery notes:

It is important to recognise that Paul is talking here in social rather than individual terms. He is describing what happens to culture as a whole, rather than particular individuals. The presence of same-sex desire in some of us is not an indication that we've turned from God more than others. But it is a sign that humanity as a whole has done so. It is not the only sign, and in everyone there is no doubt more than one sign or another. But it is a sign that human nature has been changed from what God originally intended.¹²

1 Timothy 1:8–11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9

In both 1 Timothy 1:8–11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9 Paul speaks of sinners who do damage to the goodness and holiness of God's law. In 1 Timothy 1 there is a focus on the need to integrate legal and doctrinal obedience with "love that comes from a pure heart, conscience and sincere faith". Paul is concerned with "sound doctrine" but also keen to stress pastoral care and integrity. And as part of his list of those who commit such contraventions in verses 9–10, we come across the word *arsenokoites*, which is also found in 1 Corinthians 6:9–11.

Most translations and commentaries associate *arsenokoites* with practitioners of homosexual acts. This passage sees both heterosexual and homosexual immorality addressed as undermining the sanctity of monogamous heterosexual marriage. In both 1 Timothy 1:8–11 and 1

Corinthians 6:9 Paul speaks of sinners who do damage to the goodness and holiness of God's law.

The word used in both passages is the same and is a novel compound of two words which seems to have been used as a translation of the Hebrew words used for 'lying with a male' in Leviticus. Some have tried to argue that the term should only apply narrowly to abusive practices. While 1 Corinthians does talk more generally about exploitation, verses 9–11 do not. It is important to note that this reading would also require a reinterpretation of the relevant Old Testament passages and 1 Timothy. The prevailing view among evangelical scholars is that this relates to a wider range of sexual sins that undermine the sanctity of heterosexual monogamous marriage.

Preston Sprinkle considers the continuity of teaching from the Old Testament into the New and states:

The most fail-proof test to see if an Old Testament law is still valid for Christians is if it's repeated in the New. Cheating, lying, stealing – it's all repeated in the New Testament. Adultery, murder, drunkenness, Yup, it's all there. But what about eating pork? Leviticus outlaws it, but the New Testament says that Christians don't need to obey this law. The same goes for animal sacrifices... In short; yes, the New Testament repeats the prohibitions against same-sex intercourse as it is described in Leviticus 18 and 20.¹³

Genesis sets the foundations. Leviticus asserts the boundaries – the behaviours that are prohibited. Lots of different

sexual behaviours and practices are described in the Bible but they aren't condoned or endorsed. Jesus affirms and restates God's creational design for marriage between one man and one woman. He also fulfils the law and the prophets and takes the punishment for our sins so that we can be set free. Paul goes on to describe behaviours that are still sinful, not by appealing to ceremonial principles or civil law, but based on the moral law backed by making a creational appeal.

Attempts to get around the prohibitions on homosexual behaviour do not work. It is same-sex sexual activity in general, rather than only certain expressions of it, which are forbidden in scripture.

Same-sex practice is not unique, but it is wrong. However, the very passages that show us that homosexual activity is a sin also make it very clear that it is not a unique sin. It is one example of the type of wrong behaviour we all commit with serious consequences – unrepentant sinners won't enter God's kingdom. But that isn't the forgone conclusion of someone's story. Anyone can accept Jesus' invitation to repentance and new life in Him, sanctified and justified by His atoning sacrifice. We are each offered a new standing and identity before Him.

Overall, the Bible builds a remarkably clear and consistent picture and ultimately shows us a way of living that leads to human flourishing.

Homophobia

Homophobia is often defined simply as an irrational fear or hatred of gay people. Fear or hatred of fellow humans are powerful and destructive tendencies which should be rejected in the strongest possible terms as they harm personal wellbeing, damage relationships and divide communities.

The Jesus who comforts people to "not be afraid" is one with the divine Father who hates sin: the command to not fear sits alongside not tolerating sin. Historically these twin dynamics have led many evangelicals to use an approach to sexuality with the mantra of "love the sinner, hate the sin". Although this slogan reflects biblical truth to a degree and has often been well-meant, in practice the rejection of sexual activity as sinful has gained such priority that the pastoral imperative in the second half of the saying has been lost. This has fuelled mischaracterisations of

the evangelical approach to same-sex attracted people as *intrinsically* hateful, fearmongering and destructive.

By contrast, evangelicals, as people formed and shaped by the good news of Jesus, should themselves model that good news to the world, telling what Glynn Harrison terms the "better story" offered by God in Christ.¹⁴ This means being willing to hold fellow evangelicals to account when they perpetrate ungodly homophobia, but it also means demonstrating that one can maintain a classic evangelical viewpoint on same-sex relationships that is genuinely motivated by love for God as well as for those who consider themselves part of the LGBTQ+ community. It means bearing out that love in actions as well as in words – in hospitality and kindness to those who already attend church, who are first-time visitors to church services, or who are not associated with church at all – from relatives and colleagues to neighbours and casual acquaintances.

4. We encourage evangelical congregations to be communities of grace in which those who experience same-sex attraction and seek to live faithfully in accordance with biblical teaching are welcomed and affirmed. Such Christians need churches which are healthy communities where they are able to share and explore their stories with fellow believers for mutual encouragement and support, as we help each other grow together into maturity in Christ.

Attraction, desire and orientation

In the years since *Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality* was published, and even more so since the first articulation of the Affirmations in 1998, there has been significant growth in the awareness of Christians who experience same-sex attraction but who are committed to living faithful single lives in accordance with biblical teaching. While the need for welcoming communities of grace as set out in the fourth Affirmation has not diminished, there are perhaps more visible examples of what good practice looks like. Similarly, the seventh Affirmation sets out that those with same-sex attraction should not be restricted from leadership positions simply on that basis.

Core to Affirmation four is an understanding of the nature of attraction, and more specifically of its relation to desire and orientation. Sexual attraction is part of what informs our experience of ourselves and our interactions with others. It affects our personality, desires and emotions and, as such, is part of the context in which we are called to discern what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ. Orientation is broadly used to categorise sexual attraction – at its simplest into heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual – but is increasingly referred to with many more

options, and as far back as the 1940s Alfred Kinsey and colleagues proposed a seven-point scale from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual.

Today, as discussed above, the fusion of sexual and gender identities that queer theory has done so much to promote has famously influenced Facebook and others to define upwards of 70 different genders, with an accompanying diversification of implied attractions.¹⁵ Despite these developments, in 2014 the UK's Royal College of Psychiatrists noted that "it is not the case that sexual orientation is immutable or might not vary to some extent in a person's life. Nevertheless, sexual orientation for most people seems to be set around a point that is largely heterosexual or homosexual."¹⁶

Attraction, desire and orientation all describe our experience of living in an imperfect and fallen world. They do not detract from God's ordering of right sexual relationships around monogamous heterosexual marriage. This applies to heterosexual desire before and outside of marriage as well as same-sex desire. Jesus and Paul both condemn lustful sexual desire as sinful if it is directed away from a faithful mutual marital relationship.

Scripture does seem to differentiate between temptation to sin, and sin as such. This is most clearly demonstrated by Jesus' temptation. Hebrews 4:15 says He was



“tempted in every way, just as we are – yet He did not sin.” A plain reading of this text would suggest that includes sexual sin. However, evangelicals do disagree as to whether same-sex attraction is inherently sinful even if not enacted, whether it is a form of temptation rather than of sin, whether it is morally neutral, or whether it can function constructively in certain cases within an abstinent or celibate Christian’s life. Ed Shaw, ministry director of Living Out, certainly suggests that the latter of these options might apply as long as same-sex attraction is processed as a celebration of God-given beauty rather than as an indulgence in lust:

We need to appreciate, increasingly, that any time we’re instinctively attracted to another human being is a call to worship – a call to worship the Creator

of the beauty, not the bearer of it... I want to honestly recognize that my track record is one of idolatry, of worshipping another creature than the Creator. But the experience can do me good if I end up worshipping, instead, the God whose greater beauty I have just caught a brief glimpse of.¹⁷

Identity and sexuality

This discussion in turn affects how evangelicals who are attracted to members of the same sex consider themselves and talk about that attraction. This is unavoidably linked to notions of identity and whether it is proper for Christians to identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Identity can draw in social and political solidarity with others and as such Christians have often rejected the labels of gay or lesbian because they are

associated with more than just who they are attracted to. On the other hand, some consider it an important descriptor of their experience of being a Christian, in the same way that one might be a British Christian or a French Christian, or a young or old one. What matters is that the primary identity is in Christ and any additional signifier does not distort this central truth.

On a pastoral point it is important to understand how different Christians approach this and why they might reach different conclusions.¹⁸

“The new me no longer identifies as gay.”
– Jonathan Berry

...being in Christ is infinitely more important than who we are sexually attracted to. So the old me, aged seventeen, identified myself as gay; it was an important aspect of my identity. But the new me no longer identifies as gay. The new me is a new creation in Christ. This essential truth now defines me. Brad, a gay friend of mine from California, believes that I’m denying who I really am by not calling myself gay, and not acting on my sexual attractions. One time, only half-joking, he called me a ‘self-homophobe’ (don’t worry: I’ve been called much worse). Obviously, I disagree with him. I’ve tried to explain to Brad that gay is not really who I am. No, ‘who I am’ is a follower of Jesus who happens to be

same-sex attracted. I certainly don’t deny that. But the essential me is rooted ‘in Christ’, not in my sexual attractions.¹⁹

“I am a celibate gay Christian.”
– David Bennett

Christians, all Christians, are being made holy. We aren’t yet perfect. We still experience the attractions of our old self. Yet because of Christ, we can live in victory. God does not wave a magic wand and remove our desires – at least, that is not the normative experience. It is equally wrong to endorse or to deny the presence of fallen desires, and that is why I call myself a gay or same-sex-attracted celibate Christian... The word gay does not necessarily refer to sexual behaviour; it can just as easily refer to one’s sexual preference or orientation and nothing, one way or the other, about how one is choosing to express that orientation. So whereas ‘stealing Christian’ describes a believer who actively steals as an acted behaviour, ‘gay Christian’ may simply refer to one’s orientation and nothing more. This is why I rarely, if ever, use the phrase gay Christian without adding the adjective celibate, meaning committed to a life of chasteness in Christ. To call myself a celibate gay Christian specifies both my sexual orientation and the way I’m choosing to live it out.²⁰



5. We believe the acceptance by certain churches of same-sex marriage and other forms of sexual relationships outside monogamous heterosexual marriage, and permitting the ordination to ministry of those in such relationships, is incompatible with biblical teaching. We stand prayerfully with those in such churches who are seeking to resist these moves on biblical grounds.

6. We believe church services that institute or bless same-sex marriages, same-sex civil partnerships and any other forms of sexual relationship outside monogamous heterosexual marriage are unbiblical. We believe that no church leader or congregation should be compelled to perform or participate in such services.

Same-sex marriage

The most prominent social change that has spurred the revision of our Affirmations on sexuality here has been the introduction of same-sex marriage in England and Wales in 2013, in Scotland in 2014, and in Northern Ireland in 2020. This followed the adoption of same-sex civil partnerships across the UK from 2004.

Affirmations five and six address how evangelical churches respond to this shift, and in particular the pressure experienced in some denominations to accept same-sex marriages and conduct weddings between same-sex couples. Sadly, certain church networks and congregations have accommodated their understanding of scripture, theology and practice to affirm same-sex marriage as a civic institution authorised by the state, while others have produced prayers and liturgies for the active blessing and solemnisation of same-sex marriages on their own premises.

As evangelicals, however, our focus on God's work in the world and what His Spirit might reveal to us is guided by a very high

value of the authority of the Bible. As the Evangelical Alliance's Basis of Faith makes clear, this is our supreme guide for faith and conduct. As we have noted above, the Bible articulates a remarkably clear and consistent picture of marriage between one man and one woman. Therefore, we continue to hold that churches who endorse or look to endorse same-sex activity including within same-sex marriages do so in divergence from the teaching of scripture. While acknowledging that the law has changed and such marriages confer legal rights and protections, we continue to insist that the covenant of marriage as God intended, and the Bible sets out, is for one man and one woman for life.

Globally, the vast majority of churches also continue to share this biblically orthodox understanding of sexuality and marriage, including the Roman Catholic Church, the eastern Orthodox churches, and most members of the Baptist World Alliance, the Anglican Communion, the Lutheran World Federation and the World Communion of Reformed Churches, as well as all those affiliated to the World Evangelical Alliance

and the Pentecostal World Fellowship. At the time of the original publication of *Faith, Hope and Homosexuality*, while there were individuals advocating for a change in view, no significant church groupings had followed. This has now changed with some provinces of the Anglican Communion adopting a liberal stance, including in the UK the Church in Wales and the Scottish Episcopal Church. Similarly, Methodists, the Church of Scotland, the United Reformed Church, Quakers in the UK and other smaller denominations globally have changed their stance.

It is worth noting the complicated position of the Church of England given its size and continued influence in the UK. While the official doctrine of the Church of England remains that marriage is between a man and woman, in late 2023 its bishops backed prayers of blessing for same-sex couples, ostensibly for a “trial period”, and not as full-blown services or liturgies.²¹ These changes came about after a “Living in Love and Faith” consultation which had taken several years, and which had led to increasing unease among many evangelicals within and beyond the Church of England that it was diverging from biblical orthodoxy on this issue. As things stand, it is unclear what sort of pastoral provision might be made for those who disagree with these developments, and some Church of England parishes and networks are mobilising on their own account to challenge them in law and/or to operate semi-autonomously over against affirming bishops, dioceses and protocols.

Same-sex attraction, marriage and ministry

As well as reiterating the orthodox evangelical position on marriage, these two Affirmations make two further important points. Firstly, in line with the conviction that same-sex sexual activity is sinful, we consider the ordination to ministry, or the appointment to other church leadership posts, of those in such relationships to be unbiblical.

It is important that churches are consistent in their requirements for ministry and do not single out same-sex sexual activity as a barrier when they would not do the same for other actions that are part of a persistent sinful lifestyle. It is also vital as noted in Affirmation 7 that Christian leaders who are same-sex attracted but committed to refraining from such activity are not treated with suspicion or intrusive enquiry in a manner that would not be true for other single or married leaders.

The second further point flowing from these Affirmations is to stand in solidarity with Christian leaders upholding this biblical approach in denominations that support same-sex relationships. No Christian leader should be required to conduct services or offer prayers of blessing to weddings or civil partnerships that they do not consider compatible with biblical teaching. We are not aware of circumstances where leaders in the UK have been compelled to provide such services; however, we remain vigilant to this and, in line with the Evangelical Alliance’s long-standing commitment to religious liberty, stand ready to support anyone who is required to act against their conscience in this area.



Jeanette's story

I had this parallel life going on: one where I'd met the woman of my dreams, and then meeting God for the first time... I delayed becoming a Christian because of my dilemma with the relationship on one hand, and knowing that if God was who He said He was, I had to go by His guidelines, His rules, His everything... In the end, I decided God was who He said He was, and I stopped the relationship. Part of being open about my sexuality and certainly my past life meant that I had to tell my congregation. So, with the pastor's permission, I stood up on Sunday morning and asked forgiveness for not presenting the true Jeanette. I explained that I had difficulties with my sexuality, that I had homosexual attractions and temptations. And as one, the congregation stood to their feet, applauded me and said: 'Whatever help you need, we will support you.'

7. We commend and encourage all those who experience same-sex attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from same-sex sexual practice. We believe they should be eligible for ordination and leadership within the church, recognising that they can bring invaluable insights and experience to the sphere of Christian pastoral ministry.

Same-sex attraction and leadership

Supporting people who are attracted to those of the same sex must begin with an acknowledgement that they will have different understandings, experiences and challenges arising from that orientation. For all those differences, however, we have made it clear that same-sex attracted people have innate value as those made alike in God's image, loved by Him, and worthy of loving reception and support from others.

We have noted above that same-sex sexual behaviour is incompatible with God's will. The example of Jesus Himself, from Matthew 19:11–12, and the teaching and testimony of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:1–16, show that abstinent or celibate singleness are entirely valid, God-given expressions of faithful discipleship alongside monogamous heterosexual marriage. Noting the witness of Jesus in Matthew 22:30 that “at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage” but will be “like the angels in Heaven”, the evangelical ethicist Oliver O'Donovan has perceptively observed that:

[The New Testament church] conceived of marriage and singleness as alternative vocations, each a worthy form of life, the two together comprising the whole Christian witness... The one declared that God had vindicated the order of creation, the other pointed beyond to its eschatological transformation. In

other words, marriage points to Genesis, singleness to Revelation.²²

For some Christians, commitment to chaste singleness is a response to finding that they are same-sex attracted. Whether or not they identify as 'gay' or 'lesbian' in *orientation* – and we have explored different approaches to that issue, too – such Christians would reject gay or lesbian sexual *practice*. Organisations like Living Out and True Freedom Trust support and encourage these Christians in their pursuit of singleness as a vocation.²³ These testimonies are often moving and humbling.²⁴



Vaughan's story

I don't regard [being same-sex attracted] as my identity; it's just part of my experience of life. But my fundamental identity is as a Christian. That's who I am, and that determines how I want to live my life... God's teaching about sex is both marvelous and challenging for everyone. I don't think it's hard just for those who are attracted to the same sex. There is a particular challenge for those who are never attracted to the other sex, and who might find it hard to imagine they will ever get married to [someone of the other sex]. That could sound unfair, but we're all broken, and in the midst of the brokenness Jesus Christ has come close, and God works in and through brokenness and ultimately will heal it... God comes to those who are poor, to those who acknowledge their need of Him, and I think my experience of same-sex attraction is that it has made it a bit easier for me to acknowledge that I need God, I'm broken, I'm not a perfect person. I think I'm better at understanding the brokenness of others as well – I probably get that in a way I might not (otherwise). I've also had the huge privilege of many deep friendships... So while it might seem strange to say it, but although there's been real pain in being same-sex attracted, I'm very grateful to God for what He's done in and through it. (Vaughan Roberts, Pastor, Oxford)²⁵

“So while it might seem all though there's been some real pain in being same-sex attracted, I'm very grateful to God for what he's done in and through it.”

As the above testimony and others like it affirm, chaste, single, same-sex attracted disciples of Christ can bring particular gifts and insights to the life of faith, and in some cases those gifts and insights would be fruitfully applied in public ministry. In no way should singleness itself be a bar to consideration for such ministry; by the same token, the biblical disciplines and standards of sexual propriety and fidelity to God's word that we have reaffirmed here should apply to the selection of all people for Christian leadership, including those who are same-sex attracted.

The terms 'celibacy' and 'chastity' can cause confusion. Chastity comes from the Latin for purity and can refer to total abstinence from sex or only having sexual relations with one's spouse. Celibacy can refer to being unmarried or being sexually abstinent. Some see celibacy as a specific calling or permanent state, others would argue that all single people are called to celibacy.

8. We affirm the work of those helping Christians who experience same-sex attraction and who want to live in accordance with biblical teaching. Such pastoral support may involve prayer and counselling and must be done in a responsible, consensual, and non-coercive way. We acknowledge that some people have experienced changes in their sexual attractions, with or without such support, though this outcome is not necessary for Christian faithfulness and should not be promised.

Support for those experiencing same-sex attraction

Pastoral support should be available from churches to help all people, regardless of their sexuality. Churches should be places of welcome and warmth, while also encouraging those who attend and commit to them to live lives aligned with Christ – lives that grow in likeness to him (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18).

Such pastoral support is an important part of Christian discipleship and should include helping those looking to refrain from sexual activity outside of marriage. It will include help to remain abstinent before and outside of marriage and to be faithful within marriage. Such support cannot and should not involve coercion or manipulation, nor should it entail unwarranted promises about the instant or complete eradication of unwanted sexual feelings or desires.

The attempt to diminish or change the direction of a person's same-sex attraction is perhaps one of the most controversial areas of the current debate regarding sexuality both in church and society. Some have undoubtedly experienced significant harm in the past.

The Evangelical Alliance has consistently supported attempts to end abusive and coercive conversion therapy practices while

ensuring people can receive the prayer and spiritual support they choose. Affirmation eight is consistent with this position, ensuring help can be offered to those who voluntarily seek appropriate prayer, counselling and guidance as they strive to live out their own commitment to chaste singleness in the light of experiencing same-sex attraction. As Ed Shaw notes:

It all comes down to Jesus. I am willing to forgo a permanent, faithful, stable same-sex sexual relationship in the here and now because I am already enjoying a permanent, faithful, stable relationship with Him in all His beauty. A relationship that will, one day, be perfectly consummated in the new Heavens and new earth. His is the truest vision of life that I know, and so I'm willing to put my trust in Him.²⁶

There are several problems with the current moves to ban conversion therapy. The first is that there is no agreed definition of conversion therapy. Secondly, researchers such as Kinsey and queer theory advocates note that the strength and direction of sexual preferences can change through time and are to a greater or lesser extent 'fluid' for certain people. The notion that such change and fluidity can only apply in a certain direction is illogical, incoherent and factually undermined by the testimonies of both Christians and non-Christians alike who have, in fact, seen change of their own



free will, with contentment and fulfilment. A broad ban would amount to a serious denial of personal freedom, agency and religious liberty. This does not detract from the testimony of same-sex attracted Christians who have suffered coercive or abusive attempts to change their orientation. We must commit to eliminating ungodly and unbiblical therapeutic and pastoral practice in this sphere while ensuring any new legislation does not become so expansive as to threaten the freedom of Christians to choose how they wish to live as Christians, and who they wish to engage in helping them do so.

The third challenge successive governments have faced is delivering on commitments to ban conversion therapy in a way that is compliant with human rights legislation. There is disagreement about whether the issue might better be addressed through non-legislative measures, and about

whether it should include safeguards around both sexual orientation and gender identity, or just sexual orientation. There are also concerns that too wide-reaching a definition of conversion therapy might have a “chilling effect” on key rights and freedoms, including “rights protected by the European Convention on Human Rights... particularly the Article 8 right to private and family life; the Article 9 right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and the Article 10 right to freedom of expression.”²⁷

Expansive proposals to ban conversion therapy risk creating a culture of fear in churches that would limit the support leaders, and other members, can provide to people with same-sex attraction seeking counsel and prayer. It would be cruelly ironic if proposals purporting to protect same-sex attracted people from abuse end up leaving them more isolated and unable to access the support they are seeking.

9. We believe that sexual relations outside marriage without repentance, and public promotion of such activity, are inconsistent with faithful church membership. While processes of membership and discipline differ from one church context to another, we affirm that churches should be free to follow these processes in relation to those who engage in, or promote, sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage.

10. We encourage evangelical congregations to love and welcome all people, whatever their pattern of sexual behaviour. We are called to be communities of gentleness, patience and ongoing pastoral care in which all of us who are living outside God's purposes will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox church teaching.

Creating communities of disciples

Churches are not closed societies but should be places where everyone is welcomed. Gentleness and patience should mark our individual and communal character as disciples and church communities, but the integrity of the church also depends on core biblical ethics informing the criteria for membership and/or active participation in the leadership and decision-making processes.

One of the challenges facing churches holding to the biblically orthodox view of sexuality and marriage is upholding this belief in the face of opposition. This can come from many quarters – from a culture where acceptance without question is the norm, from individuals and couples living in ways not consistent with biblical teaching, but also from within the church from those who advocate for a different understanding of what the Bible says.

Affirmation nine affirms that those engaged in sexual relationships outside marriage do so in opposition to God's will, but also

that those who promote this are acting in a manner inconsistent with faithful church membership. In the final section of this resource, we will look more closely at pastoral questions around membership and leadership. It is reasonable for churches to raise questions about the integrity of belonging to a church with stated beliefs while that person is publicly opposing those beliefs or promoting alternative positions.

This is not to quash any and all disagreement in a church context; it is important that members of a church are able to discuss and debate beliefs and challenge what they disagree with. It is, however, to recognise that a local congregation should be able to uphold a collective view on key issues – and the tenor of this resource is in recognition that a biblical understanding of sexuality is a key issue – and maintain the integrity of that belief.

The operation of this Affirmation will vary significantly in different church contexts, not least because different churches adopt significantly divergent approaches to membership and church discipleship.

In a similar vein, Affirmation ten recognises the importance of discipleship and formation for all people. In holding to a position that marriage between a man and a woman is the only appropriate context for sexual activity it is reasonable for churches to teach with clarity and compassion that those living outside of this framework are acting outside of God’s purpose. It follows that churches should expect that the actions of those who are committed to following Christ would increasingly be in line with Christian teaching.

We do not underestimate the hurdle this may create for some people, especially those in longer term same-sex relationships and with children. Evangelical churches should welcome and lovingly engage with such couples, and with their children, as with all same-sex attracted people. However,

it would be inconsistent to hold a view with the strong conviction that we do in this area, but then to say that it should not affect how people live. Churches should commit to supporting each person as they discover who Jesus is and finding their identity in Him in line with biblical teaching. This may involve pastoral accommodations without undermining the ethical standards, trajectories and goals indicated in scripture “from the beginning” and expounded by Jesus and Paul in relation to sexual relationships, marriage and chaste singleness.²⁸ In maintaining these standards, trajectories and goals, in commending them to others, and particularly in supporting and encouraging those with same-sex attraction to live faithfully by them, all of us together can be assured that God’s grace is sufficient, and His power made perfect in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:7–9).

Living Out

Living Out want to see Christians living out their sexuality and identity in ways that enable all to flourish in Christ-like faithfulness. This is done through encouraging Christians, equipping churches, and engaging the world with God’s plan for sexuality and identity.

Living Out encourage Christian sisters and brothers – especially those who experience same-sex attraction – to flourish through faithfulness to biblical teaching on sexuality and identity. They equip churches and their leaders to more effectively teach and live out God’s word on sexuality and identity so that we all flourish in response to how he both comforts and challenges us all. And Living Out engage the wider world with God’s better story for human flourishing in which all our questions and desires about sexuality and identity are best met in Him.

True Freedom Trust

True Freedom Trust is a UK-based teaching and pastoral support ministry that holds to the orthodox biblical view of sex, gender and relationships. Their approach is one which is full of grace and truth as they teach God’s word in churches, conferences and Bible colleges, and provide pastoral care for those who struggle with same-sex temptations and gender incongruence.

True Freedom Trust run conferences around the UK aimed at encouraging and equipping Christians to hold firm to biblical teaching and to trust in the God of all grace in the midst of struggles and temptations. As well as teaching and holding conferences they provide support groups and individual pastoral support through a network of staff and volunteers.

Pastoral scenarios

It is important that churches understand what they believe and why, and that Christians can articulate this with clarity. It is also important that what is heard and received by those we encounter matches the good, true and beautiful biblical story.

Those experiencing same-sex attraction should, like all people, be welcome in our churches. The question: “I’m gay; can I be part of your church?” might appear simple. But different understandings of what is meant by gay and being a part of church could lead to a variety of responses, and there is the potential for confusion and hurt if not handled with care and clarity.

There are few other examples which could present such an immediate dilemma for churches. While there are countless examples of where churches could perhaps pay more attention to how discipleship and involvement interact with someone’s engagement and roles in church, they rarely would present in a simple question, nor likely as quickly.

Those experiencing same-sex attraction should not face hurdles that others do not, but neither is it helpful to hide what the church believes, creating the potential for frustration and hurt further down the road. People in particular local churches, including some in leadership, may have varying levels of agreement with one another and/or with what their wider church network or denomination teaches on a range of issues. In this context, it will be helpful for specific congregations to communicate clearly which beliefs are essential for their life and unity,

and which are matters on which leaders and others might legitimately differ.

Current tensions around same-sex relationships in many church contexts mean that such clarity is particularly important on that issue. As God’s mandate for sexuality is so foundational to what it means to be human and made in His image, we would encourage congregations to define commitment to heterosexual monogamous marriage and chaste singleness as part of their ethos, rather than as something on which their leaders or members might simply ‘agree to disagree’.

The following scenarios have been put together from a range of actual and archetypal pastoral situations. Names supplied bear no relation to any particular people in any particular situation.



Serving and leadership in the church

SCENARIO 1: Andy and George are a gay couple with an adopted daughter. They have been attending church frequently with her over the past six months and have recently started coming to a midweek home group. Andy has asked to join the children's work rota, which is focused on a growing Sunday School: because of that growth, the church is seeking more volunteers for it.

Affirmations to consider: 2, 4, 5, 7, 9

SCENARIO 2: Sarah has been attending church and involved in various activities over the past couple of years including helping on the hospitality team that serves refreshments before and after church on a Sunday. Sarah is in a civil partnership with Andrea, who does not attend church, and that has been a factor in holding Sarah back from applying for full membership of the congregation. The church is now planning a new ministry in which it will open its building during the week as a café venue to provide a warm space for those struggling to heat their homes. Sarah has offered to lead this ministry.

Affirmations to consider: 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10

Questions to relate to your own church context

- Does your church have a clear policy on who can serve on different teams, including in children's work?
- Are minimum lengths of time specified for attending church and a home group before anyone can be considered for the children's work team, or any other team?
- If the church has a formal membership policy, does it require anyone involved in any form of leadership role to be a member?
- If it does not, does it have a consistent policy on who can take on leadership roles?
- Are there distinctions between leadership roles relating to practical activities and social ministries and those relating to the teaching and spiritual life of the church?
- How, if at all, might the fact that children are involved bear on any decision to include someone on a serving team rota?
- How are Sunday services and small groups providing discipleship in all areas of life to help people become faithful followers of Christ?

For further reflection

All forms of leadership involve service, but not all acts of service equate to leadership. It is therefore reasonable for a church to take different approaches in how it approaches people joining serving teams from how it handles those taking on leadership roles. That said, it is helpful for churches to define what requirements they place on different positions and responsibilities and to apply those criteria with clarity and consistency. It is reasonable for churches to adopt policies that require those in leadership to agree with and seek to live lives consistent with the church's core beliefs and practices.

Children's work in UK church settings nowadays needs to follow due safeguarding protocols, but these do not apply any more or less to same-sex attracted children's workers than to heterosexual children's workers. The core issue in the first scenario is whether Andy's being in an adult same-sex relationship with George might model something domestically and ethically to the children that the church does not want to be modelled to them – even if that modelling would be more likely to come implicitly through how the children see Andy *living* with George than explicitly through anything he might teach in Sunday School.

This said, assuming their daughter already attends the children's work means that if Andy's offer is declined, due sensitivity will need to be shown to *her*. Stigmatising her or allowing her to be stigmatised because of Andy's and George's relationship would be profoundly un-Christian. Great care must be taken to ensure she herself is loved, encouraged and supported along with all the other children, in a gracious and Christ-like manner.

The second scenario highlights the challenge of how people might be involved at various levels of different activities. It may be that your church welcomes anyone to serve in practical ways to support ministries of the church, but perhaps has some restriction on who takes on leadership roles. A similar question arises as with the first scenario: does inviting someone into a leadership position, even one without an explicitly spiritual or pastoral nature, model acceptance of behaviour that the church would otherwise encourage people to refrain from?

The fact that Andy and George have only been coming to this specific church for six months and have only just started to engage with a home group raises the important question of how long anyone – whether same-sex attracted or not – should engage regularly in congregational life before being considered for a position of responsibility such as this one. More specific to his same-sex relationship with George, however, is the fact that, assuming the church agrees with these Affirmations, further time will be needed to work through with them how their lifestyle relates to its theological ethos and values, and what alignment with those values might look like for them moving forward. As we stressed in relation to Affirmation ten, that process may take time, which could be another reason not to rush Andy into a role like this, however much he might be operating within a more experienced team of children's workers.

Disagreement with church teaching

SCENARIO 3: Mike is part of the worship team that co-leads his church's Sunday services with its pastor, Richard. Mike plays lead guitar, sings, hosts services on occasion, and preaches from time to time. His wife and children are also part of the church. Recently, Mike has been posting on social media in support of moves by some within his denomination to affirm 'equal marriage' as part of an increasingly fractious debate – although as yet he has not said anything about this in church, to the rest of the worship team or to Richard.

Affirmations to consider: 3, 5, 6, 9, 10

SCENARIO 4: Sanjay became a member of the church last year after being a part of several other churches over the past decade. He loves being part of the community but in recent months has started criticising the church's more public stance opposing government moves to ban conversion therapy. During coffee after church, he was overheard telling a couple in the church that if someone's gay then the church shouldn't try and stop them from being true to who they are.

Affirmations to consider: 1, 4, 8, 9, 10

Questions to relate to your own church context

- Does the church endorse any statement or statements articulating what it believes about sexuality, such as an ethos statement, denominational position or the Affirmations included here and published in earlier versions by the Evangelical Alliance? Do those in the music/worship/leadership team personally need to endorse these statements?
- How are those involved in 'up front' roles like Mike's supported and disciplined?
- How is Mike's activity on social media comparable to views that others might express on other issues and that might diverge from the church's ethos and theological outlook?
- At various levels of engagement and involvement in church what limits, if any, should be placed on disagreement, and how would this depend on how it is expressed?
- How would the church respond to someone who is persistently and publicly undermining the church, its beliefs and practices?
- What next steps might be appropriate in these scenarios, with respect to pastoral dialogue and/or discipline in relation to Mike or Sanjay? What about the impact on their families and wider community?



For further reflection

Churches should be places where people can explore what they believe in an open and non-threatening environment. Churches should not be threatened by people within their congregations who hold different views; on contentious topics it may be helpful to provide a forum where these can be discussed.

This is to be held in balance with the importance of the church holding a common position on key issues of Christian teaching which they believe is true and is important for the spiritual health of the congregation and the wellbeing of society. This leads to the key question in this scenario of how disagreement is handled, and how this might vary depending on the issue, the roles in question, and how the disagreement is communicated.

Different churches, networks and denominations will adopt approaches that are tailored to their context and the nuance to each advises against hard and fast rules. However, a few pointers are valuable to consider. It may be helpful for a church to clearly articulate their beliefs and regularly teach on them so that the congregation is aware both of those key beliefs and why the church holds them. This applies not just to Sunday services, but to all activities and training the church provides, and ensuring those in leadership and teaching roles –

such as small group leaders – are equipped to communicate and respond to questions.

This leads to the level of adherence to beliefs required for different roles. If those in leadership are expected to share in the teaching of beliefs it is reasonable that they hold to and actively espouse those beliefs. There will not be a single rule for all beliefs; for example, a church may be happy for those leading small groups to hold different positions on baptism, the end times, or a wide range of issues where the church holds a doctrinal view but disagreement among the congregation is accepted. A church holding a position on male only eldership may be happy for people in a wide variety of roles to disagree but would want anyone teaching on Sunday or in senior leadership to be in agreement.

How disagreement is communicated matters. Someone who is in lay leadership within the church speaking with the leaders about their views is different from publicly promoting disagreement with church teaching. Care must be taken not to silence dissent, but churches are also communities of conviction centred on belief. It is reasonable that steps towards membership and leadership require increasing alignment with the church's position and acknowledgement of appropriate authority. Significant disagreement may lead both the individual and the church to limit leadership roles to avoid confusion.

Discipleship and discipline

SCENARIO 5: Simon has grown up in the church and always been a committed Christian. Now in his early twenties he has returned home after being at university and recently told his small group leader that he is attracted to other men. The church has not taught recently on issues of sexuality and, while he knows that the church has always held to the view that sex was only intended between a husband and wife, he's not sure what this means for him.

Affirmations to consider: 1, 3, 4, 7, 10

SCENARIO 6: Abigail leads the youth work at her church and has been part of the congregation for several years since moving to the city for university. Over the last couple of years, she's had relationships with both men and women, both of which have at times included sexual activity. Last year it was widely known that she was sleeping with her boyfriend and no one said anything, but now she's going out with a girl she has been asked to step down from leading the youth work.

Affirmations to consider: 1, 3, 4, 9, 10

Questions to relate to your own church context

- How is the church teaching what the Bible has to say on issues of sexuality in a way that is accessible and understandable, providing clarity and compassion to the range of situations people are likely to be in?
- How are leadership roles allocated and supported, and is there clarity as to both the level of adherence to agreed church beliefs and standards of behaviour expected for different roles?
- How are other discipleship contexts, such as small groups, equipped to support people as they outwork what the Bible means for them?
- What opportunities are there for people in the church to explore issues in more depth, and perhaps in ways that are not best suited to normal church teaching contexts? Where is there room for questions and doubts, but also clarity about what the church believes?
- Is the church consistent in its applications of church discipline in relation to different types of behaviour?

For further reflection

Our society values freedom and self-expression and so the idea of placing limits on someone's private actions can be culturally jarring. Likewise, the concept of church discipline for what a person does or says in their 'private life' is contrary to current social norms. Church leaders need to be both brave and kind as they navigate this space.

The primary lesson from both these scenarios is clarity within the church as to what it believes and the importance the church attaches to those beliefs. There can sometimes be a tendency to lean on inherited assumptions about beliefs, rather than revisiting them and teaching what the church believes and the application of this to the congregation's daily lives. An assumption about beliefs can lead to both an eroding of support for beliefs as people are influenced by wider culture, friends and circumstances, but also an undermining of why such beliefs are important – even if people continue to assent to them.

For Simon, the visibility within church life, whether locally or nationally, of people who live faithfully while attracted to people of the same sex will likely be important to help him navigate his attraction while holding to his beliefs.

It is also important that churches grapple with the gravity of sin and the destructive consequences it can have on individuals and churches. We are taught to flee from sin and in particular sexual immorality, so in the context of this resource it is helpful to consider what this may look like. As with all the discussion in this area, the hallmarks of consistency and clarity are essential. Churches should not make life harder for people because of the direction of their sexual attractions. It is also vital that churches handle the authority they



possess with significant care so that this is not abused.

For Abigail, it may be that some response is required: if the church would not appoint someone to a leadership role who is engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage, it would be inconsistent to ignore it for someone already in such a position. However, as noted in this scenario inconsistency between heterosexual infidelity and same-sex activity can make it seem like particular activities are policed while others are ignored.

Similarly to previous elements of church life, it may be helpful to think through how churches may respond to situations where people are engaged in sexual activities beyond what the Bible permits, and those where people publicly promote dissenting beliefs.

Engagement with church sacraments – communion and baptism

SCENARIO 7: Jake describes himself as gay and, while not in a relationship at present, would be happy to be in a sexual relationship with another man and has been in the past. He regularly attends church and is a committed member of a Bible study group. He has had many conversations over the years with others in the church including the church leadership about his approach to his sexuality, but his views haven't changed. Jake takes part in communion whenever it is part of church services, but recently someone else in the congregation has complained to the leadership that he shouldn't be allowed because his beliefs and attitude are inconsistent with what the church teaches.

Affirmations to consider: 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10

SCENARIO 8: Emily has approached the leadership and asked to be baptised next month and as part of this has started taking part in the preparation classes the church holds. Emily would describe herself as lesbian but agrees that sexual activity is inconsistent with what the Bible teaches. While she would endeavour to live a chaste life, Emily has disclosed to her accountability partner that several times in the past year she has engaged in sexual activity with a close female friend. Each time she is repentant and recommits to refraining from such behaviour in the future.

Affirmations to consider: 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10



Questions to relate to your own church context

- How does the church communicate what communion and baptism mean, both for the individual and the wider church?
- What approach does the church take to who can take communion or be baptised?
- In what circumstances would you not baptise someone who has committed to following Christ?
- How are someone's personal decisions about whether they take communion related to wider church discipleship and pastoral care?
- How should the church respond to someone who wants a stricter approach, and how could that be done with consistency and grace?
- What pastoral care structures do you have in place to support those who are committed to living in line with biblical teaching but find this hard?

For further reflection

Churches should be open places where all people are able to come in and discover what it is like to be part of a community of people worshipping God and growing in likeness to Him. Part of this will be worked out in the regular rhythm of church life, but there will also be particular points where it is helpful to pay careful attention.

It is within the context of a church that congregations learn together what it means to follow Christ, and that should include teaching on all areas of discipleship including sex and sexuality. Challenging topics such as these should be handled with care and sensitivity but also with clarity and conviction. It does not serve people well to

avoid teaching what the church believes.

How are people in the church equipped and supported to help each other grow closer to God and discover what it means to be a disciple of Jesus? There can be a tendency to escalate matters of sexuality very quickly to senior leadership in a way that does not occur in other areas of life. This is understandable due to the hesitation people may have in navigating it poorly but can communicate that some people have a greater hurdle to cross than others.

A couple of areas where churches are likely to benefit from considering their approach are around communion and baptism. This is where different traditions will take different approaches, especially in relation to the first.

Some churches operate an open table approach to communion, and others a closed table. In the first approach communion is open to anyone who in their own conscience can join in. In such a context it would be inappropriate to place additional hurdles in the path of same-sex attracted people who wish to participate. Other churches that take a closed table approach will often limit communion to those who are in membership of the church. Under such conditions it will depend on what is necessary for church membership.

Baptism is perhaps an area where churches will need to give greater thought to how they navigate different situations that might arise. Baptism is a visible symbol of someone's commitment to follow Christ and therefore it would be normal for a church to see in that person's life evidence of this commitment. Issues arising when someone comes forward to be baptised may be indicative of a need to pay greater attention to wider teaching and discipleship within the church.

Further resources

Resources from the Evangelical Alliance on relationships, identity and sexuality are available at eauk.org/sexuality

Organisations

Living Out
livingout.org

True Freedom Trust
truefreedomtrust.co.uk

The Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender
centerforfaith.com

Books

Ed Shaw, *Purposeful Sexuality*

Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?*

Rachel Gilson, *Born Again This Way*

David Bennett, *A War of Loves*

Preston Sprinkle, *People to be Loved and Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?*

Darrin Belousek, *Marriage, Scripture and the Church*

Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?*

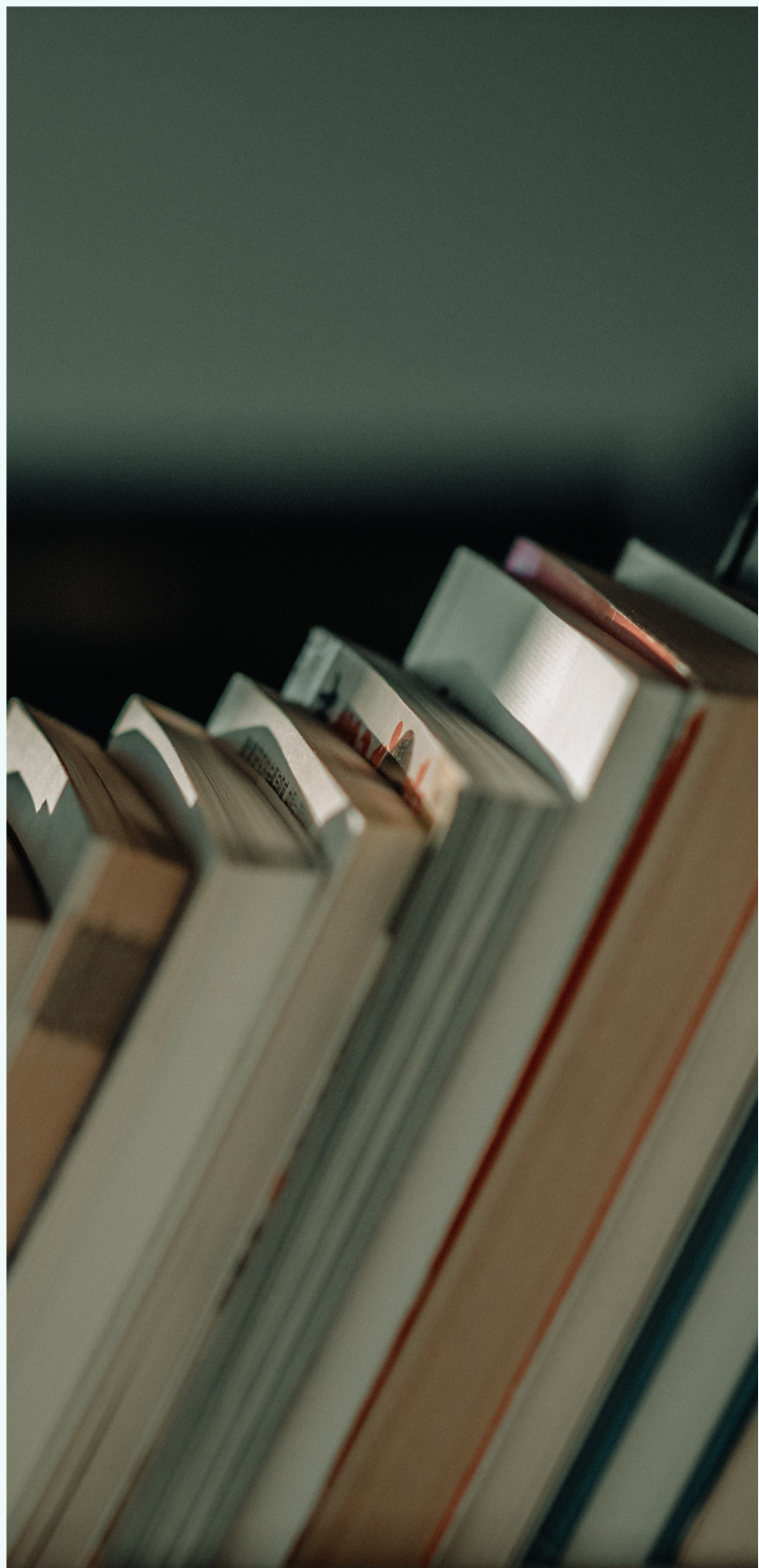
Ian Paul, *Same-Sex Unions: The Key Biblical Texts*

Ray Ortlund, *Marriage and the Mystery of the Gospel*

Jackie Hill Perry, *Gay Girl Good God?*

Rebecca McLaughlin, *Does the Bible Affirm Same-Sex Relationships? Examining 10 Claims about Scripture and Sexuality (Biblical response to LGBTQ+, homosexuality)*

Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*



Endnotes

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- 8 For more on the theology and practice of adoption and fostering, see the various resources provided by the charity Home for Good <https://homeforgood.org.uk/tags/theology> (Accessed 19/5/24).
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