

# Responding to Same-Sex Marriage



CONGREGATION & VISITORS



# Practical Ministry Skills: Responding to Same-Sex Marriage

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**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE****Leader's Guide**

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This special theme on **Responding to Same-Sex Marriage** is designed to help you think through how the legalization of same-sex marriage impacts your church and its witness, and to prepare your leaders and congregation to engage this issue in ministry. You may either use these handouts for personal edification or for a group training session. Or you may choose to provide copies to the church board, staff members, or those involved with specific ministry teams at your church. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

We hope this training tool will guide your efforts and encourage you as you seek to improve the emotional health of your church. And ultimately, we hope that your congregation, your ministry, and you will be blessed as you see God working through your ministry.

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**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE****Leading the Conversation**

*A faithful response means adopting a proper posture, not just correct doctrine.*

John 13:34-35

With the weight of the Supreme Court's 5-4 decision to legalize same-sex marriage in all 50 states, the church is likely not caught off-guard, and yet, many churches may be unprepared for the challenges they will face in the coming months.

From North Carolina's magistrates fighting for a choice in the matter, to the frequent cases of prosecution toward small businesses who refuse services for religious reasons, the church is logically the next group who must decide how to handle the cultural shift.

Justice Anthony Kennedy attempted to allay fears when he wrote for the majority in "Obergefell v. Hodges":

Finally, it must be emphasized that religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction that, by divine precepts, same-sex marriage should not be condoned. The First Amendment ensures that religious organizations and persons are given proper protection as they seek to teach the principles that are so fulfilling and so central to their lives and faiths, and to their own deep aspirations to continue the family structure they have long revered.

But what should churches say to their congregants in the wake of the ruling? While maintaining a unified stance in favor of traditional marriage as a church body, many pastors are choosing to approach the issue one-on-one rather than from the pulpit.

**A Consistent Biblical Ethic**

For many pastors, the difficulty is the way that they view the issue differently than many of their congregants.

At Church of the Resurrection, an Anglican church in Wheaton, Illinois, associate rector Kevin Miller says that he understands homosexuality traditionally, which is different than some of the younger individuals who approach him.

"People want to make it an abstract political issue," Miller said. "As a pastor, you can't do that. I have to theologically teach to the whole person."

One of the phrases Miller has coined is "a culture of consistent sexual sacrifice," referring to the fact that all Christians, not just those who struggle with same-sex attraction, are called to sacrifice in pursuit of sexual holiness.

Not only should pastors teach traditional marriage, but they should teach a holistic and consistent biblical ethic of sexuality and family to everyone.

"You earn the right to speak by maintaining a culture of consistent sexual sacrifice," he said, referring to situations of divorce, any sex outside of marriage, and similar issues. "I do that for everyone else in the church."

He added that clarity is the most important thing in communication: "You can't do ministry if you're not clear. This is a crucial time for clarity."

**A Fresh Urgency**

In a piece for *Christianity Today*, Mark Galli writes that pastors will have to think again about how to handle a gay married couple with a desire to get involved in church:

It nearly goes without saying that we will welcome them unconditionally as we would anyone who walks in the door. But what does love look like in this particular instance? How much participation do we encourage before we ask them to adopt the Christian sexual ethic? Much of this depends on a church's tradition and its beliefs about baptism, church membership, eldership, and so forth. But many evangelical churches do not have a denominational tradition to lean on and will need to think through these matters with fresh urgency.

Brad Williams, of New Covenant Baptist Church in Albertville, Alabama, is a pastor of one of those churches. Instead of preaching about the topic of homosexuality in light of the events, he said that he will interact with his 100 members as they come to him.

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“I address the issue as the Bible comes to it,” Williams said about preaching, adding that he will approach the subject individually. “I’m certain it will be a topic of conversation.”

Still, Williams has already been addressing the issue with his congregation.

“If you start talking about it now, it’s too late,” he said. “You should only be talking to calm people down. If you’re trying to whip people into more of a frenzy, that’s throwing gas on the fire.”

He’ll also monitor social media to better understand the reactions his members have.

“I’ll see how they handle it and reign it in if I need to,” Williams said. “This isn’t the worst thing that’s ever happened. I’m going to gauge people and make sure they’re not manipulated by conservative or liberal media.”

To counteract the despair that some might hold in the coming days, Williams said he will “retweet positive things that leaders might say,” Facebook message them assurance – but most of all, continue the personal conversations on next steps for the church.

### Not Just Doctrine, but Posture

J.R. Briggs heads up The Renew Community in southeastern Pennsylvania, a church that alternates weekly between a large gathering and smaller communities in the home. For him, too, social media is important to watch.

Briggs is clear – his congregation will not avoid the hard conversations. In fact, his priority in shepherding the nearly 200 congregants seems to be focused on preparation and handling disagreements with kindness.

“Why is it that the more right I think I am, the less kind I have to be?” he said. “We train our church not just on doctrine, but on posture. When we react we often have regrets. We need to respond as a church, not reactionary. It’s more important to prepare than plan.”

Russell Moore, leader of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, writes that the way pastors preach must change.

“Following Jesus will mean taking up a cross and following a hard narrow way. It always does. If we’re going to preach that sort of gospel, we must make it clear that this cross-bearing self-denial isn’t just for homosexually-tempted Christians. It is for all of us, because that’s what the gospel is ...

Same-sex marriage is headed for your community. This is no time for fear or outrage or politicizing. It’s a time for forgiven sinners, like us, to do what the people of Christ have always done. It’s time for us to point beyond our family values and our culture wars to the cross of Christ as we say: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”

Whether speaking the truth from the pulpit or over a cup of coffee, church leaders will need to decide how to best approach their congregation. This isn’t the first decision to heavily affect church culture, and it won’t be the last. But with communication, leaders can make steps toward unity in the midst of turmoil.

— KARA BETTIS is a Raleigh, North Carolina reporter and a regular freelancer for Relevant Magazine, Christ and Pop Culture, and others; adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.LeadershipJournal.net](http://www.LeadershipJournal.net).

## Discuss

1. How does our church’s view on same-sex marriage fit within our larger ethic of sexuality? Is it consistent? How are we handling situations of divorce, or sex outside marriage? How can this inform how we handle same-sex marriage?
2. How will we respond when a gay couple seeks church membership or leadership positions in our church? If we have not already prepared our response, who should be in charge of doing that?
3. How are we preparing people to engage these issues over social media? How are our leaders modeling this well? What examples have we seen of people doing this well? Of people doing this badly?

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**Gay Marriage, Abortion, and the Bigger Picture**

*Living out God's will requires us to look beyond single issues.*

Colossians 1:17

In 1973, the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* and *Doe v. Bolton* rulings, together legalizing abortion in all 50 states, took everyone by surprise. Forty-two years later, the court's legalization of gay marriage in *Obergefell v. Hodges* surprised almost no one.

Both cases mark historic "losses" for American evangelicals. Minutes after the Supreme Court ruling came down, Southern Baptist leader Russell Moore called it the "*Roe v. Wade* of marriage."

Though many evangelicals oppose abortion and gay marriage as violations of natural law, they are significantly different issues with different social consequences. As Christians, we recognize the value of God-given life; when society authorizes the deprivation of life, we commit the gravest possible injustice. The results of abortion are as immediate, visceral, and individual as they are sweeping: an estimated 20 percent of pregnancies in the US end in abortion, over 56 million since 1973.

The social consequences of legalizing same-sex marriage have yet to be seen. Currently, they comprise less than one half of one percent of all married couples in the country. And unlike abortion, gay marriage remains an act rooted in love. As Wesley Hill [writes](#), even if we disagree with the expression of homosexuality, we can affirm the longing to be loved and belong.

Yet, what abortion and same-sex marriage have in common is that they each attempt to deny the procreative nature of the sexual union. Each forms a deep crack in the mirror of nature that reflects the image of God.

Thankfully, the decades since *Roe* offer lessons for the challenges we face. As a church, we have repented of the shame and rejection once conferred on unwed mothers, responses that drove many women into abortion clinics. We understand that to love the unborn child, we must love the mother (and father), first. Yes, we have still protested abortion—sometimes loudly. But even more, we opened our hearts, homes, and pews to mothers, fathers, and families in crisis. We established pregnancy help centers. We welcomed and comforted the women (and men) who regret their abortions—and, I pray, those who don't.

The Centers for Disease Control now reports historic lows on all measures of the US abortion rate. And for the past two decades, the percentage of Americans identifying as pro-choice has significantly declined. We can take hope in the fruit of perseverance.

In the case of same-sex marriage, our work is just beginning. We must now repent of the injustices we have perpetrated on LGBT people. Not only is such mistreatment wrong, but—in a bit of cosmic irony—it played a significant role in galvanizing social momentum toward acceptance of gay marriage. *Obergefell v. Hodges* mentions injustice as part of its rationale for legalizing gay marriage. Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the majority, stated:

Especially against a long history of disapproval of their relationships, this denial [of the right of same-sex couples to marry] works a grave and continuing harm, serving to disrespect and subordinate gays and lesbians.

The sense of injustice among LGBT Americans did not emerge *ex nihilo*. It came from real discrimination often carried out in the name of Christ. As Mark Galli wisely wrote for *Christianity Today*:

What actions and attitudes have we imbibed that contribute to our culture's dismissing our ethics? Our homophobia has revealed our fear and prejudice. Biblical inconsistency—our passion to root out sexual sins while relatively indifferent to racism, gluttony, and other sins—opens us to the charge of hypocrisy. Before we spend too much more time trying to straighten out the American neighborhood, we might get our own house in order.

Our house has long been out of order. As a result, we no longer live in a society that esteems the sexual and spiritual union of male and female as essential. But we have not lived in such a society for a long time. Both *Roe* and *Obergefell* represent the logical outcomes of ongoing cultural changes. Today:

- The abortion rate among Protestant women is slightly higher than the overall rate.
- Co-habitation rather than marriage is "the new normal."
- Over 40 percent of US births are to unmarried mothers.

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- Between 40 and 50 percent of married people in the United States divorce. The divorce rate for subsequent marriages is even higher.
- About two-thirds of men view pornography at least monthly; the figures for Christian men don't vary significantly from the general population.

These numbers remind us that gay marriage is but one characteristic (and a statistically insignificant one at that) of a culture whose understanding of sex and marriage has long been unmoored from biblical principles.

While public policy and legal experts debate the recent decision and the ramifications for people of faith, our most meaningful response as Christians will come from our daily lives. We witness through how we love: our God, our church, our spouses, and all of our neighbors.

So just as ultrasound images of the babe in the womb often serve as the best argument against abortion, the portrayal of our own robust marriages—signifying the mystical union between Christ and his church—will make the case for natural marriage. Just as we have shown compassion toward those who have gone to the abortion clinic and to the divorce court, so must we do the same for those who go to the altar of gay marriage. We can stand for principle and love people, too.

While both rulings attempt to deny the nature of the sexual union, neither alters the essence of human life or marriage. *Roe v. Wade* decreed, inexplicably, that the court “need not resolve the difficult question of when life begins.” In *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the ruling boldly proclaimed the re-definition of marriage rooted not in a self-evident natural law (or, as Chief Justice Roberts put it in his dissent, “in the nature of things”), but in human desire.

In the “empire of desire,” the body is the shadow ruler—always to be either denied or obeyed, but never subordinated, its desires not “ordered toward something higher.” As citizens in this empire, we who advocate natural marriage can expect disdain and derision (which are by no means the same as persecution) for our quaint views.

A culture that sees through the dark lens of radical autonomy (“Don’t like abortion/gay marriage? Don’t get one!”) will likely misunderstand our motives. We can expect accusations against our character, calling us driven by hatred (“misogyny!”), fear (“homophobia!”), and personal piety rather than social good (“how does gay marriage threaten your marriage?”).

If we know these charges to be false, then we must show them to be. If we are confident we are not on “the wrong side of history,” as many aver, then we must acknowledge and repent of the times when the church was on the wrong side: slavery, segregation, women’s suffrage—the list is much too long. We must reprove such accusations less with our words and more with our lives.

From this day forward, we must forfeit our tendency to address cultural issues in piecemeal fashion. If we believe in a natural law that reflects the order of creation as ordained by the Creator, then we must steward creation as a whole, where one part touches the rest.

If we want to support marriage, we cannot wink at divorce and adultery. If we wish preserve the lives of unborn children, then we must care about the environment in which they will be born and grow. If we respect bodies as God made them, we must reject the vanity of drastic cosmetic surgeries and interventions that deny the body’s natural condition, functions, and processes. If we believe Christ is the Good Shepherd who cares for his sheep, then we must lovingly shepherd the animals beneath us. If we care about God’s Creation, then we cannot treat the earth’s resources as disposable.

We must not tear the created order asunder in well-intentioned attempts to tackle “issues.” To worship God who exists in fullness and wholeness, we don’t get to pick and choose. We must dedicate our all to affirming and celebrating his right order.

From this day forward, we must embody—both as a church and as individual believers—a compelling image of the abundant life as a whole.

—KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR is professor of English at Liberty University, Research Fellow with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, and a member of the Faith Advisory Council of the Humane Society of the United States; adapted from our sister publication *Her.meneutics*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.christianitytoday.com/women](http://www.christianitytoday.com/women).

**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE****Discuss**

1. What would a broader ethic of marriage and sexuality look like for our church? How do the criticisms of the ways the church has mishandled treatment of LGBT people in the past show us where we can do better?
2. How do the various accusations people have made against Christians for the ways we have responded on this issue (hatred, fear, personal piety over social good) ring true to what we have seen, in the past and today? Where did those responses go wrong? How can we show these charges to be false?
3. How does our view of sexuality and marriage offer “a compelling image of the abundant life as a whole”?



**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE****A New Kind of Ministry**

*We need a better approach to the traditional biblical ethic on sexuality.*

Matthew 5:16

This recent change in public policy need not—and should not—settle the issue for the church. Instead all of us are being compelled to examine our beliefs and practices. This is a good thing. We deeply need a new approach to our neighbors and our churches' own members, especially those who live with a same-sex attraction or orientation. To find this will require acknowledging the tragedy of our recent history, the continuity of Christian teaching, and the opportunity for a new kind of ministry.

**The Tragedy**

We must start with the tragedy that evangelical Christians who long to be biblical are widely perceived as hostile to gays. And it is largely our own fault. Many of us have actually been homophobic. Most of us tolerated gay bashers. Many of us were largely silent when bigots in the society battered or even killed gay people. Very often, we did not deal sensitively and lovingly with young people in our churches struggling with their sexual orientation. Instead of taking the lead in ministering to people with AIDS, some of our leaders even opposed government funding for research to discover medicine to help them.

At times, we even had the gall to blame gay people for the tragic collapse of marriage in our society, ignoring the obvious fact that the main problem by far is that many of the 95 percent of the people who are heterosexual do not keep their marriage vows. In fact, self-described evangelicals get divorced at higher rates than Catholics and Mainline Protestants! We have frequently failed to distinguish gay orientation from gay sexual activity—even though if any of us were judged by the persistent inclinations of our hearts, on sexual matters or otherwise, none of us could stand.

If the devil had designed a strategy to discredit the historic Christian position on sexuality, he could not have done much better than what the evangelical community has actually done in the last several decades.

Some believe that the track record of evangelicals is so bad that we should just remain silent on this issue. But that would mean abandoning our submission to what finally I believe is clear biblical teaching. It would mean forgetting the nearly unanimous teaching of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians over two millennia. And it would mean failing to listen to the vast majority of contemporary Christians (who now live in the global South).

**Biblical Consistency**

The primary biblical case against homosexual practice is not the few texts that explicitly mention it. Rather, it is the fact that again and again the Bible affirms the goodness and beauty of sexual intercourse—and everywhere, without exception, the norm is sexual intercourse between a man and a woman committed to each other for life. Although this is familiar ground, and less and less contested even by those who advocate for a revision of Christian ethics, it is important to state just how strongly and consistently the Bible speaks to the goodness of marriage between a man and a woman, and equally consistently to the immorality of sexual acts (heterosexual and homosexual) that do not honor that bond.

If the biblical teaching on sexual intercourse is decisive for the church today, then celibacy is the only option for those who are not in a heterosexual marriage. But many today argue that celibacy is impossible for most gays. Dan Via, a proponent of same-sex practice, argues that a homosexual orientation is the “unifying center of consciousness” for a gay person, and that God’s promise of “abundant life” must include “the specific actualization of whatever bodily-sexual orientation one has been given by creation.”

Such an argument would have astonished Jesus and Paul—both unmarried celibates who went out of their way to praise the celibate life. It is profoundly unbiblical to argue that one’s sexual orientation is the defining aspect of one’s identity (the “unifying center of consciousness” as Via insists). For Christians, our relationship to God and the new community of Christ’s church provide our fundamental identity, not our sexual orientation. That is not to claim that our identity as men and women with particular sexual orientations is irrelevant or unimportant for who we are. But that sexual orientation dare never be as important to us as our commitment to Christ and his call to live according to kingdom ethics.

Indeed, the historic position that sexual intercourse must be limited to married heterosexuals demands celibacy for vastly more people than just the relatively small number with a same-sex orientation. Widows and

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widowers, along with tens of millions of heterosexuals who long for marriage but cannot find a partner, are also called to celibacy.

In addition to the unanimous biblical teaching, church history's nearly unanimous condemnation of same-sex practice and the same teaching on the part of the churches that represent the overwhelming majority of Christians in the world (Catholics, Orthodox and churches in the global South) today ought to give us great pause before we bless same-sex intercourse.

### A New Approach

Simply repeating biblical truth (no matter how strong our exegesis or how sound our theology), listening to two millennia of church history, and dialoguing carefully with other Christians everywhere are not enough. We need a substantially new approach.

For starters, we must do whatever it takes to nurture a generation of Christian men and women who keep their marriage vows and model healthy family life.

Second, we need to find ways to love and listen to gay people, especially gay Christians, in a way that most of us have not done.

In addition to living faithful marriages and engaging in loving conversation, I believe evangelicals must take the lead in a cluster of additional vigorous activities related to gay people.

We ought to take the lead in condemning and combating verbal or physical abuse of gay people.

We need much better teaching on how evangelical parents should respond if children say they are gay. Christian families should never reject a child, throw her out of their home, or refuse to see him if a child announces that he is gay. One can and should disapprove of unbiblical behavior without refusing to love and cherish a child who engages in it. Christian families should be the most loving places for children—even when they disagree with and act contrary to what parents believe. Please, God, may we never hear another story of evangelical parents rejecting children who “come out of the closet.”

We ought to develop model programs so that our congregations are known as the best place in the world for gay and questioning youth (and adults) to seek God's will in a context that embraces, loves, and listens rather than shames, denounces, and excludes. Surely, we can ask the Holy Spirit to show us how to teach and nurture biblical sexual practice without ignoring, marginalizing, and driving away from Christ those who struggle with biblical norms.

Our evangelical churches should be widely known as places where people with a gay orientation can be open about their orientation and feel truly welcomed and embraced. Of course, Christians who engage in unbiblical sexual practices (whether heterosexual or gay Christians) should be disciplined (and disciplined) by the church and not allowed to be leaders or members in good standing if they persist in their sin. (The same should be said for those who engage in unbiblical practices of any kind, including greed and racism.) However, Christians who openly acknowledge a gay orientation but commit themselves to celibacy should be eligible for any role in the church that their spiritual gifts suggest.

Imagine the impact if evangelical churches were widely known to be the best place in the world to find love, support, and full affirmation of gifts if one is an openly, unabashedly gay, celibate Christian.

I have no illusions that this approach will be easy. To live this way will be highly countercultural—contrasting both with our society at large and our own past history. Above all, it will require patience. Restoring our compromised witness on the biblical vision for marriage will be a matter of generations, not a few years. But if evangelicals can choose this countercultural, biblical way for several generations, we may regain our credibility to speak to the larger society. I hope and pray that the Lord of the church and the world will weave love, truth, and fidelity out of the tangled strands of tragedy, tradition, and failure we have inherited—and that the next generation will be wise and faithful leaders in that task.

—RON SIDER is the founder of Evangelicals for Social Action; adapted from sister publication *Christianity Today*, © Christianity Today.

**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE****Discuss**

1. When we talk about homosexuality and same-sex marriage, have we ever acknowledged the ways the church has handled them poorly in the past? Why would it be important to do this? How would this help our witness and message?
2. Consider what a call to lifelong celibacy asks of a person, not just physically but relationally. How does our church support those who are called to celibacy, both temporarily and permanently? How could we do this better?
3. If someone in our church was struggling with his or her sexuality, would they know where to go for counsel? How would they know this? What would keep them from feeling safe to do so? How can we make this process more clear and safe for people in this position?

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**Loving Without an Agenda***Interview with Glenn Stanton*

John 1:14

*Glenn T. Stanton is the director of Family Formation Studies at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs and a research fellow at the Institute of Marriage and Family in Ottawa. He has also published multiple books on relationships, family, and marriage. His latest book, [Loving my \(LGBT\) Neighbor: Being friends in grace and truth](#) talks about what it looks like for the church to love those in the LGBT community.*

**You've spent a lifetime doing research on the family. What trends do you see that are positive among American families and what trends give you pause?**

First, there has never been a golden age of family. Each generation has its own challenges, its own strengths and weaknesses. But some do better than others of course. There are indeed positives movements today. Polling consistently shows us that both marriage and parenthood remain the most important life desire for most people. This has to do, I think, with the fact that so many of them were deprived of strong, intact families in their childhood. Each generation is shaped significantly by what they were denied. The generation of the Great Depression became one of the most prosperous generations, and this generation has some very deeply held pro-family desires because of what they were denied. This is a great opportunity for the church today to help them know their desire is reasonable and attainable.

At the same time, we have lots of family confusion. The two largest run-away family trends in the US and throughout the West are cohabitation and unmarried child-bearing, with nearly half of them taking place in cohabiting relationships. I believe this has much to do with what I call "the man problem." Women will always deeply desire to marry and become mothers. They don't need convincing or encouragement generally. If they cannot find dependable, marriageable men, they will settle for the next best thing: getting a man they can at least live with and have babies with before their biological clock ticks down. This is what we are seeing, especially where unmarried child-bearing is increasing.

I am also very concerned about our growing confusion on the importance of male and female for the family. There is a deep theological perspective, as it's male and female that represent God's image in the world. No wonder their necessity is being challenged. Attached to this is the growing brave new world of artificial reproduction technology which is reducing the essential essence of female and male down to merely sperm and egg and the sexual communion between a mother and father is superfluous.

**The topic of marriage is very divisive in the culture. It seems that many Christians don't know how to hold both truth and grace in tension on this subject. How would you advise them as they engage the issue of marriage?**

I would strongly encourage all Christians to engage the issue of marriage today. It has both profound theological and sociological importance. Being obedient to Christ's two great commandments require that we be concerned about the nature, understanding, and practice of marriage today. That surely seems like a stretch to many, but not at all.

Marriage is the nature of the relationship between Christ and his church. The deepest part of his heart for us is of a Bridegroom in pursuit of his bride. To say marriage is a side issue for the church is to say something deeply insulting to God. Concerning love of neighbor, the health of marriage in a culture is the most important and impactful measure of how well children, women, and men will thrive in that society. Every natural human pathology we experience is driven as significantly as anything by the marital status of adults and parents. There is no important well-being indicator personally or societally that is not positively impacted by marital health or negatively impacted by its decline.

Polling consistently shows us that both marriage and parenthood remain the most important life desire for most people.

**You talk about loving your LGBT neighbor. Some view love only in terms of affirmation of behavior and lifestyle. But is there a way to love and yet gently lead someone toward gospel truth?**

Unfortunately you are so right. It has become a false truism in the culture today that to truly love our LGBT neighbors—which we are commanded to do, as we are all neighbors—we must approve of same-sex sexual expression or at least remain silent. To not approve is to be obtuse at best and hateful and bigoted at worst.

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This is not only incorrect, but illogical. What other issue or topic do we insist that agreement and affirmation is required for genuine friendship?

Regarding this issue and the effectiveness of our gospel outreach, I would first say that loving our LGBT neighbors and developing such friendships cannot be for the purpose of sharing the gospel. Friendship is an inherent good, an end in itself. Now as friendships develop, the issue of Christ's love, death and resurrection for us will come up. Given that, I strongly reject the assumption so prevalent in the church today that taking an active and vocal stand against the mainstreaming of homosexuality will hinder the gospel. Now we can do it in a horrible way, and that can be a hindrance. That's on us. It must be done in the nature of Christ, full of both grace and truth as we read in John 1:14.

Rick Warren made this point so strongly in his address at the recent Vatican colloquium on the family, saying he has taken a strong position both scripturally and politically on same-sex marriage and at the same time just baptized his 40,000<sup>th</sup> adult convert. The two can certainly co-exist, and must!

**How would you advise pastors and church leaders to preach, teach, and lead on this subject?**

First, don't make the "gay issue" a different kind of issue. Every person—gay, straight or otherwise—has two basic things true of them: 1) All of us are unconditionally loved by God. No exceptions. 2) Each of us is stricken with a terminal illness—sin. No exceptions. So should we welcome our gay and lesbian neighbors to our churches? Of course. Sinners are the only folks that Jesus and the church know what to do with, right? That includes everyone. No good church fails to call all to repentance for our own unique sins.

This is advice I give in the book, a nice three-point sermon: a) Totally love all those who come to you. b) Boldly preach the Word of God, faithfully in both grace and truth. c) Cooperate with the Holy Spirit as best you can as he convicts each member of your flock of their sin. At least don't get in his way as he does. Do these well and you will do fine.

Loving our LGBT neighbors and developing friendships cannot be for the purpose of sharing the gospel. Friendship is an inherent good, an end in itself.

**You've traveled around the country debating and discussing marriage with people who vehemently disagree with you and yet you've maintained friendships. How can Christians do this well?**

Have the desire and understanding of why doing so matters. Developing these very meaningful relationships with those I debate and duke it out with drives me to seek to be fairer in what I say and write, even in personal conversations with my friends. It also keeps me from operating from false stereotypes regarding what "those people" believe. I have the benefit of hearing what it is they actually believe. And I can then affirm those things that are true about what they actually believe and challenge those beliefs that I believe are false. This is true with all our relationships with those who disagree with us.

But beyond realizing the importance and value of such relationships, I try to follow the simple example of Christ, as I just mentioned we find in John 1:14. Approach these relationships at every moment in full and equal measures of grace and truth. Treat the person as much as possible in uncompromising grace. Treat the issue itself in clear and uncompromising truth. Getting these two things as right as possible will see you through the difficulties inherent in such relationships. And it can transform them into some of the most rewarding friendship you will have.

—DANIEL DARLING is vice-president of communications for the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. He is the author of several books, including his latest, *Activist Faith*; adapted from our sister publication Leadership Journal, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.leadershipjournal.net](http://www.leadershipjournal.net).

**Discuss**

1. How do younger generations view marriage and family differently? How can we better speak into this?
2. How can John 1:14 be a model and guide for our response on these issues?
3. Where have we experience tension in leading on this issue? Which of Stanton's three points addresses this? How could we lean into this aspect of our response better?

## RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

**A Test of Unity**

*A public response from the pulpit can bring people together.*

1 Peter 3:8

*How we talk about sexuality and same-sex marriage from the pulpit is critical. It is easy to forget that LGBT people, or people with LGBT family members or loved ones, are most likely sitting in our pews, and how we talk about these issues is communicating something important to them about who God is. This anonymous pastor, who leads an inner-city church in a large, American city, is well aware of who is listening, and crafted an intentional, loving, and firm response to deliver from the pulpit. Consider this response and how this might provide a template for your church.*

I lead a church in an urban neighborhood with a strong LGBT presence. We gather for worship just steps from our city's Gay Pride parade, which followed on the heels of the Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage.

Until the weekend the ruling came down, I had not addressed LGBT issues in any public way, given our work to build trust and goodwill in our city and neighborhood. On Sundays I preach the gospel, aware that spiritually curious neighbors may be in our midst. If they choose to follow Jesus, I engage matters of sexuality in individual conversations in the course of discipleship.

But over the weekend I realized it would be pastoral malpractice for me to stay silent. Our congregation all felt a certain degree of confusion and anxiety in the wake of the cultural moment. When I looked at my Facebook feed, I felt the tremors of division within my flock. Some were jubilant over the Supreme Court's decision, unsure if they could share their excitement at church. Others were deeply concerned and wanted to hear me take a strong stand. Many felt torn between their love for their LGBT friends and their Christian commitments and association.

After consulting with some other key advisors, I decided to draft a statement addressing the elephant in the room from the pulpit. In this statement I acknowledged that the same-sex marriage decision was on everyone's mind, and that people were in different places on it. Drawing on Jesus' call to love God and neighbor with all our hearts, I exhorted everyone to practice active listening with each other, with the LGBT community, and with God. I concluded by affirming the historic teachings of the Christian church on human dignity and marriage, and announced an upcoming teaching series on sexuality, gender, and marriage.

The response was encouraging; I saw anxiety turn into trust. The congregation expressed appreciation that the statement was both direct yet disarming. And even though I only mentioned it in passing, there was a surprising level of interest in the upcoming teaching series.

It's difficult to say exactly how this new law will affect our community in the days of ahead. But at least so far, it has provided a teachable moment and a chance to foster unity, even around a difficult topic. The hunger for pastoral leadership and theological education on sexuality was more acute than I realized.

—adapted from our sister publication *Leadership Journal*, © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.leadershipjournal.net](http://www.leadershipjournal.net).

**Discuss**

1. What have we publicly said in response to the Supreme Court decision? Does this fully and lovingly communicate our church's view on this issue? What do we want people to know about our response?
2. What are people in our church asking us about this issue? What do they want to know? How are we discipling and teaching on this subject?
3. Would a public statement from the pulpit be a good idea for our church? What would we put in it? What would we hope it would accomplish?

**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE****Leading Effective Conversations about Same-Sex Marriage**

*A primer to help guide conversations about this heated topic.*

1 Peter 5:2

There's no doubt that this ruling will be a topic of interest in your church's small groups, and it will come up in conversation. With such an explosive topic, though, how can you facilitate a discussion effectively?

**1. Pray.**

Pray, even now, for wisdom in facilitating this discussion. The truth is, most people have a strong opinion about it. Pray that God will help you lead with love and truth, facilitate honest discussion, and ultimately lead your group members to, above all else, look to God for answers and guidance. Pray that you will be sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading, and that group members will be sensitive to one another, truly listening to each other's hearts.

**2. Know the facts.**

Educate yourself on the facts of this case so you can lead well. Here some great resources for your group members if they're seeking clarification.

[CT Magazine's Coverage](#): Learn the facts about the Supreme Court ruling.

[Evangelical Leader's Declaration on Marriage](#): Over 90 leaders have signed this declaration, agreeing on where they stand when it comes to marriage.

[Barna Research on Christian Reactions to the Ruling](#): 9 key findings

**3. Leave room for grace.**

Very likely, group members will present a variety of thoughts and emotions. Leave space for these, and lead a discussion that allows honesty, openness, and disagreement. Let group members share their hearts in a safe environment. In a world where nearly everyone has a friend or family member who is gay, this topic is not theoretical—it has a loved one's face and life attached to it. (Let's be honest: there may be people in your group who experience same-sex orientation.) Be sensitive to this fact.

I would recommend starting your conversation with time for group members to share their thoughts and feelings first. Withhold judgment and instead ask follow-up questions for clarification. It may be wise to steer clear of sharing your own opinion, or your church's official stance, just yet. This contributes to a safe environment for honest sharing and questions.

Group members may have some specific questions, though:

- What does the Bible say?
- Where does our church stand?
- What does this mean for our church?

You don't have to know all the answers to these questions, but it's wise to have some references for your group members. Check with your coach, director, or pastor for guidance on answering these questions.

With so many questions still about what this will mean for churches, know that we'll keep you posted as details come to light. In the meantime, stress what we do know: God is sovereign, and God is good.

Encourage group members to be wise in their interactions—both in person and on social media. God asks us to love our neighbor—and that includes our LGBT neighbor. Pray aloud that your group members' words and actions would be full of love and grace, especially in this time.

If things start to get heated, take a break to pray. Thank God for this opportunity to wrestle through real-life questions and look to his Word for answers.

**Here are a few questions to guide your discussion:**

1. What were your thoughts and feelings when you heard the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage? How are you feeling now?

**RESPONDING TO SAME-SEX MARRIAGE**

2. Why do you feel this way?
3. What questions do you have around this ruling?
4. How should we act toward the LGBT community?

This is uncharted territory for us, and only time will tell how this will unfold. In times of uncertainty, I find it helpful to remember that God is not shaken. He is not surprised. He is not stammering for a response. God is unchanged. Let us cling to God, filled with his love, honoring one another as we discuss this topic.

—AMY JACKSON is managing editor of SmallGroups.com; adapted from our sister publication *SmallGroups.com*; © Christianity Today. For more articles like this, visit [www.smallgroups.com](http://www.smallgroups.com).