

Should the Church Speak of “Gay Christians”?

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It’s difficult to overstate the importance of a name. Young parents feel the weighty responsibility of naming their children—do you go traditional? Ultra-modern? Use family names? Create your own? The possibilities are endless, even bewildering, but through it all, many young fathers and mothers feel the pressure of identifying their children by naming them.

A new text published by a historically evangelical imprint has raised afresh the question of name and identity for believers. In his new book *God and the Gay Christian*, Matthew Vines seeks to legitimate homosexual practice among evangelicals.¹ There’s much to handle and refute in this new book. Interestingly, I think the very descriptor in his title invites more thought. Is it a good idea to identify some Christians who experience some degree of same-sex attraction (SSA) as “gay Christians?” Is this a name—so to speak—that Christians should gladly assign to fellow believers?

We should note, initially, this is not a new descriptor. Some well-known evangelicals have used it in recent days. Vines, however, has infused new meaning into this terminology. Authors who have previously described themselves as a “gay Christian” have done so with the understanding that they are a born-again believer who experiences, to some degree, ongoing same-sex attraction and who willingly resists gratifying this

desire. Vines, however, uses the term to signify a born-again believer who experiences same-sex attraction and indulges this desire in mutual, covenantal relationships to the glory of God. There is, in short, a vast and unbridgeable gulf between these two definitions.

The Present State of the Conversation Over SSA

Before looking more closely at the theological ramifications of the descriptor “gay Christian,” we need to think for a moment about the state of the conversation among evangelicals on the subject of SSA. Speaking generally, in past days, most churches had little sense of how to lovingly help a fellow believer who experienced some degree of SSA following their conversion. The general assumption was that coming to Christ effectively cancelled out homosexual desire of any kind. If a believer did continue to feel pulled in this way, he or she needed to “Pray the gay away,” as the phrase indelicately went.

Today, for a variety of reasons, the church is discovering new and needed nuance in its approach to SSA, and its pastoral care for believers who experience it. In short, many scholars and pastors now recognize a range of experiences on the part of those who have historically struggled with SSA.

- *Some believers with this past battle find that, upon conversion, they no longer experience sexual desire toward the same sex.* Their desire in this area is effectively mastered.
- *Some with SSA see the goodness of marriage and pursue it.* When married, these believers find that they are happy in marriage, though they must still manage their temptations of various kinds.
- *Others with some degree of SSA might see the goodness of marriage, but for whatever reason (lack of a suitable spouse, contentment in singleness, etc.) find themselves remaining single.* They are open to marriage but not sure they should presently pursue it.
- *Still other believers experience some level of ongoing attraction toward the same sex and do not find in themselves attraction to the opposite sex.* They are committed to fighting all sexual temptation, whether it is related to the same sex or not.

The church needs this kind of taxonomy, however limited it might be. In my view, and the judgment of other theologians and pastors, each of these believers is, in fighting sin by the overcoming power of the Holy Spirit, glorifying the Lord and pursuing holiness. Among these people are a range of experiences. Not all believers with SSA will get married; not all will face monumental degrees of SSA; some will experience a blend of temptations. Too often, evangelicals have adopted one of the preceding categories as that which all believers with SSA know. One hopes that the church will continue to nuance its understanding of this issue.

The Heart of the Matter

In this broader discussion, one common theme has emerged: the key matter is how one responds to temptation. Whatever one's exact experience, believers with SSA must, like all Christians, fight their lusts by the power of the gospel, kill sin, and pursue what is good and holy and God-glorifying. Like all Christians, they must never be comfortable with fallen instincts, but pray to God for overcoming power in the face of them. The gospel, as the biblical counseling movement has made so clear, is the true solution for all our fallenness, all our sin.

This is a much-needed perspective today. Even as the church has rightly expanded its understanding of how a Christian with SSA might live faithfully before Christ, we still fall prey to some problematic views. We must not make the common mistake, for example, of thinking that Christians who experience SSA are somehow consumed by their sexual desires. Sometimes this is the case, yes. But other times it surely is not. Christians with SSA are not tempted by only one sinful practice. Like any other believer, Christians with SSA must fight sin of many other kinds: pride, laziness, foolishness, anger, and so on, just as every follower of Christ must.

This is not to minimize the difficulties of SSA. Something is fundamentally amiss when one experiences homosexual desire. This is a fiercely controverted statement, but it is a biblical one (Romans 1:26–27). We must not cease to believe and preach it. But we must also avoid any spirituality that would make homosexual desire the sin of sins. To make this mistake is to fall into exact same trap that our secular culture makes: it defines Christians with SSA by their sexual temptations.

Sam Allberry, a pastor and author of the important book *Is God Anti-Gay?*, said just this at the 2014 Together for the Gospel conference.² Here's what I recorded him saying: "The culture says you are your sexuality. That is an appalling sense of identity to give people." Christians of any background can appreciate this incisive comment. We are not the sum of our lusts, our perversity, our fallenness, whatever shape such sin takes, whether heterosexual, homosexual, or any other form.

We must not be like the well-meaning but ultimately damaging Christian friend who, in first learning of a fellow church member's struggle with SSA, approaches them wide-eyed, fearful that their friend is perpetually on the brink of a Sodom-like outbreak. It is simply not the case that every Christian who experiences such temptation—or any other temptation—is about to lose themselves in gratification of their lusts. Those who respond to their brothers and sisters in this way seek to help. I fear, however, that they end up doing damage. This is caused, in particular, by making the ironic mistake of reading SSA as an

identity-shaping sin. It is not.

The Identity of Every Believer: Christ in Us

The preceding invites us to revisit biblical commentary on the identity of the believer. Though we could consider many texts, a couple will suffice. Think of the apostle Paul's words in Romans 6:6–7, which read:

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

To connect some textual dots, this cruciform selfhood means that born-again believers are, in the words of the same author, “new creations” in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). In Christ we have a new identity, a new self-understanding, a new daily experience. To the core of our being, we are remade. We are, in fact, renamed. The central truth about us is brand-new. We have taken on the name “Christian,” and lost the name “sinner” which we once did so much to deserve.

This is not to say, of course, that conversion means the cessation of sin. The apostle Peter in himself proves that we can know the Lord yet dishonor him by our thoughts and actions (see John 18). We must regularly “put off” the old nature and “put on” the new, according to Paul in Colossians 3:1–11.

In this sense, then, every believer is something like a former alcoholic. We are not mastered by our sin. In fact, we are a new person. We have broken with our old self and its old practices. But to varying degrees and from a range of sins, we still hear the Serpent's whisper in our ear. Sadly, we still give into temptation, even as we are being changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18). So it is that Paul's words ring in our ears, words addressed to a Corinthian congregation that knew in all too familiar terms the reality of indwelling sin:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of

God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9–11)

This is remarkable stuff. Such *were* some of you. Paul teaches the Corinthians this even as he is aware that some of them were, at the time of his writing, struggling at a visceral level with various forms of iniquity. Yet we note carefully, very carefully, his teaching. Being “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified” meant that his audience was made new. They could no longer self-identify as an adulterer, a thief, or one who practices homosexuality. Paul directly teaches against such thinking here. The old had passed away, and the new had come.

So in sum: we have a new name, a new identity, even though we still sin. We take confidence in this, that we are being progressively changed.³ All of this is possible because we are a “new creation” through the atoning crucifixion and the vicarious resurrection of Christ. The regenerative agency of the Spirit has rendered us “more than conquerors” in the face of any sin and any trial (Rom 8:37).⁴

What does all this mean, practically? I believe this has overpowering significance for every Christian, whatever particular temptations they might face, and whatever their pre-conversion background might be.

- The converted person who was once an alcoholic and is still tempted by drunkenness is not an “alcoholic Christian” but a “Christian” who must battle his or her inclinations and by grace wrest victory over them.
- The former pornography addict who is still tempted by wicked images is not a “pornographic Christian” but a “Christian” who must by grace battle his or her lusts and subdue them.
- The former gossip who is still tempted to cut down his or her friends is not a “gossip-

ing Christian” but a “Christian” who must by grace fight the tongue and tame it.

- The former fighter who used to get violently angry is not a “violent Christian” but a “Christian” who is committed to mastering his or her temper by the power of God’s grace.
- The former doubter of God’s goodness is not a “doubting Christian” but a “Christian” who by grace steels his or her mind with Scripture to oppose and defeat doubt.
- The former pedophile is not a “pedophilic Christian” but a “Christian” who by grace fights and ignores the whispers of Satan to abuse little children.
- The former adulterer is not an “adulterous Christian” but a “Christian” who by grace struggles with and wards off adulterous desire.
- The former self-promoter who was enslaved to “selfish ambition” and obsessed with becoming famous is not a “self-promoting Christian” but a “Christian” who by grace dies to self.
- And finally: the person formerly ensnared by same-sex attraction is not a “gay Christian” but a “Christian” who by grace fights all sin, including same-sex desires, and experiences the transforming power of the cross.⁵

Conclusion: We Have a New Name

Can a Christian experience same-sex attraction of some kind and still be a believer? Yes, they can. Can they, like Matthew Vines, celebrate and enfranchise these desires, viewing them as part of their essential identity? They cannot. They must not. Tragically, Vines makes sin the constituent part of his identity.

No Christian, whatever their fallen predilections, can make them their identity. We do not have this authority. We are Christ’s. We have a new name. We still sin, but we are renewed, transformed, set free. Of course, Christians must be honest about our fallenness. We were all disordered by the fall: all of us. But our perversions and sins are not, *must not*, be our identity.⁶ Our identity is a reality that belongs only to Jesus. We have no power to ascribe our identity to sin. Satan would have us believe that, but he lost all power to mislead us in this way when Christ split his skull at the cross.

We’re all going to face in some way the challenges of nomenclature and identity. This is true

whether one is a stressed new parent or a Christian wrestling with how SSA fits with personal identity. In light of the foregoing, I urge this conclusion: let us as believers not use the term “gay Christian.” Let us, like the apostles, rejoice that we may suffer for the name of Jesus, and that his name is in fact ours (Acts 5:41).

In owning a one-word description of ourselves, “Christian,” let us exult only in this identity. This is no trifling term. Loaded with theological and practical weight, this name is the gift of God to every sinner who, comprehending the certainty of God’s just and terrible judgment, repents of all their wickedness and trusts in the magnificent work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

¹Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent, 2014). See the response by the Conversant imprint of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary entitled *God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines*, ed. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (SBTS, 2014), accessed on line, <http://126df895942e26f6b8a0-6b5d65e17b10129dda21364daca4e1f0.r8.cf1.rackcdn.com/GGC-Book.pdf>. I contributed a chapter to this eBook, as did my SBTS colleagues Jim Hamilton, Denny Burk, and Heath Lambert.

²Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions About Homosexuality, the Bible, and Same-Sex Attraction* (Purcellville, VA: Good Book Company, 2013).

³For more on progressive sanctification, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 371–76; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 746–62.

⁴Two recent resources that explore at a pastoral level the believer’s identity in Christ and its ramifications: my book *Risky Gospel: Abandon Fear and Build Something Awesome* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013) and my colleague Heath Lambert’s *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013). For specific ethical treatment of sexual sins from a shared perspective, see Denny Burk, *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

⁵It is helpful to consider the theological *loci* of “union with Christ” in light of this section. See K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011); J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).

⁶For one helpful treatment of sexual disorder, see Justin and Lindsay Holcomb, *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Abuse* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).