

**How should the Church respond to homosexuality?
Part 3: What Does The Bible Say About Homosexuality?**

*In many of the more relaxed civilizations on the Outer Eastern Rim of the Galaxy, the Hitch Hiker's Guide has already supplanted the great Encyclopedia Galactica as the standard repository of all knowledge and wisdom, for though it has many omissions and contains much that is apocryphal, or at least wildly inaccurate, it scores over the older, more pedestrian work in two important respects. First, it is slightly cheaper; and secondly it has the words **DON'T PANIC** inscribed in large friendly letters on its cover.*

That is the introduction to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. I have often wondered if we shouldn't put "DON'T PANIC" in large friendly letters on the front of the Bible. There are moments, such as when a friend or loved one tells you they are gay, when the reassurance "DON'T PANIC" would be a real comfort.

DON'T PANIC. We tend to panic when it seems everything is out of our control, when we feel there is nothing we can do. Fear results from a sense of helplessness and leads to anger. This fear is not necessary when dealing with homosexuality. You are not helpless. There are many, very powerful things you can do now that you know your loved one is homosexual. I'm going to cover many of things you can do using the goals in "A Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families" from the Taskforce on Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families, The Lutheran church – Missouri Synod.

Change of Orientation is NOT the goal:

One thing you will not see in this list is any goal aiming to change the person's sexual orientation.

"To many pastors and counselors who are heterosexual, it would seem that the most obvious goal of working with a homosexual parishioner or counselee would be to help that person change his or her sexual orientation. Accordingly, change is what they work for and what they pray for. Unfortunately, that strategy can often result in frustration and hurt. In some instances, a homosexual will be able to attain that goal. But not all homosexuals can reach the goal of becoming heterosexual. In fact, God may allow them to continue to face this temptation for a reason (which, it must be said, may remain hidden in God's good and gracious wisdom). Like St. Paul's "thorn in the flesh," it may be God's will that the person go on struggling against homosexual temptation, in the process learning that when he or she is weak, God is strong."ⁱ

Do not try to accomplish what is not in your power to do. You can not "fix" a homosexual. You can not make them want to change orientation. You can not argue them into changing. You can not plead with them till they change. You can not threaten or bribe them into changing. You can not pray the change into reality.

Neither can a homosexual create change of orientation within themselves. It will not matter how much they want to or how hard they try. Most wanted very much to be heterosexual and tried very hard throughout their teen years to change. It did not work. And it won't work. This kind of change is a change that no one can create within themselves.

This does not mean that change is not possible. It is difficult to study and measure how effective any kind of counseling program is. This is no different when it comes to homosexuality. There is no hard and fast method by which we can measure how much a person changed, how fast they changed or whether the particular program had anything to do with the change. The few studies that have been done have, at least, shown that many homosexuals feel that they have changed to one degree or another after being in a support group such as the ones sponsored by Exodus International. Interestingly, religion seemed to have a positive impact in facilitating change while counseling seemed to have little affect. Also, anecdotally, those who entered support groups with unrealistic high expectations or goals for change seem to find the programs to be less help than others.

So, yes, change of orientation is possible. But that does not mean that each and every person will find that change in their lives. And even if they do, it may not be as dramatic as from exclusive homosexual feelings to exclusively heterosexual feelings. Homosexual "orientation" is a condition of being tempted by the desire to have sex with people of one's own gender. Temptations have a place in God's plan (James 1:2-4, 12 – the word "trial" is the same as "temptation" in Greek) though God Himself does not send the temptation (James 1:13). Even Christ was tempted on multiple occasions. It should not surprise us, then, if God, in His wisdom, allows some to face temptations for a much longer time period than others, perhaps for a person's whole life. It may be that there is still growing the person can do through continuing to face temptation. It may be that, for the moment, God is working on some other area of the person's life and change from one orientation to another is simply not the priority. Since we can not read the mind of God, we can not know who may change or how fast or how much.

In the end change is in God's hands not ours. If we make it our goal then only frustration, hurt and anger will result. Let it be God's goal and instead, let us focus our goals on things which God has placed in our hands, on using the tools He has given us to do the task He has put before us.

No, you can not make change of orientation a goal. Nevertheless, what you can do is powerful. You can

- 1: Confront with the Law
- 2: Assure with the Gospel
- 3: Offer fellowship in the Church
- 4: Encourage Sanctification through the Gospel
- 5: Bear one another's burdens

1: Confront with the Law

Confronting with the Law may seem self evident to a Christian. After all, God's Word so clearly spells out homosexual behavior as wrong. But two things make it difficult to hold to the law as strongly as we should. Firstly, in all likelihood, the person you are talking to is a close friend or family member, such as a son or daughter. There is a relationship of trust and bonds of love between you. It is hard to tell a loved one that you believe they are committing a sin. Secondly, few homosexuals have grown up without some kind of major hurt in life. Because of its very nature, it is likely that the person to whom you are talking experienced a sense of hurt or loss very early in life and/or experienced a severe emotional injury while still a child. Along with that, they may very well have suffered ridicule and isolation for much of their teen years. As they tell you their story the temptation not to add to their burden by telling them Law may be very strong. Many many parents have let go of their own hold on the truth of God's Word rather than admit a son or daughter is sinning.

But it is no more a kindness to remain silent about the Law than it would be if you failed to warn your loved one about any dangerous situation. Would you refuse to wake a friend and tell them to leave a burning building just because they had a long day and you did not want to disturb their rest? Neither is it love to allow a loved one to enter into actions that could destroy their faith in God just because it would be uncomfortable to warn them. If you love them, you will make sure they know what God says about homosexual action.

As you proclaim the Law, however, remember that it is narrow, has strict limitations and is inclusive.

The Law is narrow. It condemns actions of the mind, word and deed but does not condemn temptation. Be very clear that you are in no way blaming your loved one for facing a particular kind of temptation, only that you are concerned that they may have chosen the wrong way to respond to temptation.

Of course, if they are telling you of their homosexual struggle but agree that homosexual action is wrong, then you may, and indeed must, move on from the Law to the Gospel.

Chances, are, however, that they are telling you they are homosexual because they have decided to act on their temptation or have already done so. So be firm but loving. Do not call names or become angry. Don't break off friendships or kick a loved one out of your house. Tell them that God's Word says homosexual activity is wrong and, because it will injure them in the end, you can not back down on your moral stand. It may also be wise to live out the Law by setting rules that are to be obeyed in your house. Barbara Johnson, whose middle son was homosexual, had a very difficult time dealing with his homosexuality. Eventually, however, she developed an excellent rule when it came to her son bringing home his current partner. They were welcome to come visit at any time or to join in any family function. She learned to treat her son with the same love she always had and learned to treat his lovers as she had always treated his friends. However, they were not allowed to sleep in the same room or engage in any homosexual activity such as kissing while in her home. She responded with compassion and firmness and, consequently, not only kept communication open with her son but had the opportunity to witness to several other young men as well.

The Law has strict limitations. It can only lead to repentance and no further. It can not save, It can not establish a relationship with Christ. It can not change a person. And it can not motivate. It can only show where we have failed to follow God's Law. It gives no power to actually follow that Law.

Once a person has told you they are repentant, the Law has done its work. Do not, under any circumstances, try to make it do any more than that. Do not in any way attempt to threaten a person into changing either action or feelings by thundering Law at them. I often hear Christians attempting to judge whether a person is truly repentant or not with phrases like, "but if they were truly sorry for their sins then they would stop doing them." That is not true. Repentance can only go as far as wanting the sin to stop. It can not actually remove the sin. That is the job of the Gospel through faith. Yes, it is frustrating when someone says they are sorry yet continues to fall into sin again and again. But keep in mind that Christ said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4) Never ever try to make the Law do the Gospel's job. As soon as there is repentance, forgive!

Finally, keep make sure you are inclusive in your preaching of the Law. We are all sinners. We are not saints trying to reach sinners to bring them up to our level. We are forgiven sinners sharing that forgiveness with one another. We must preach Law strongly. But we must include ourselves under that Law. For this reason, we must model repentance as well as ask for it. Let your loved one know that you too are a sinner and that you have also broken God's Law. Especially if you have ever sinned against your loved one, be sure to repent to them. Perhaps you said cruel things about homosexuals around your friend without realizing they were homosexual. Let your loved one know that the Law speaks to all, not just some, letting us know our need to repent and be forgiven.

With regard to homosexual feelings, the Law must be allowed to say that homosexual behavior (in thought, word, and deed) is sin. In letting the Law speak in this way, all hearers of it (especially, but not exclusively, teen age hearers) must be shown that the condemnation they feel over specific sins that they identify as their own is intended by God to show a larger problem than just this sinful deed or that sinful thought. The Law condemns our sinfulness, our sinful nature.

The specific sins over which the Law brings condemnation are but results of the true dilemma, namely, that "I am a sinner, through and through." Teenagers struggling with homosexual feelings, or even with homosexual acts, need to be shown that their real problem is *not* homosexuality (however this condition might arise) but rather is the fact that they are in bondage to sin just like everyone else.ⁱⁱ

Let your loved one know that when you tell them they are a sinner, you are saying "I am just like you, a sinner too!"

The next 4 points all deal with applying the Gospel, the good news of forgiveness. Do so gladly and generously, but don't forget the Law while doing so. Forgetting the Law robs the Gospel of its power. Use Both, each in its appropriate way.

2: Assure with the Gospel

Many Christians who experience homosexual temptations or feelings have been repenting since they began to have homosexual thoughts and feelings, praying that God would change them. Without the comfort and power of the Gospel, however, such repentance only pushes the person further into despair.ⁱⁱⁱ

Here is where Christians often make our greatest mistake. Preaching more Law to a person who is already sorry for their sin can only drive that person away from God. It is not the Law which saves. The Law does not make a person a child of God. Only the Gospel can do that.

The Gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ forgives all sin, is the most powerful force on this planet. It and it alone can create a relationship between ourselves and God. The Gospel, and only the Gospel can change hearts, minds and souls. I like the way one homosexual tells he heard the Gospel from a friend,

On my journey to Christ in the early 1990s, a friend of mine asked me, "Randy, do you take a bath so you can take a shower?" I shook my head and laughed at her silly metaphor and said no. She, undaunted and committed to the metaphor, said, "Well the Lord doesn't want you to figure it all out before you come to Him ... just come to Him. Everything else will be sorted out in due time."^{iv}

Her advice was wise. Let the Gospel do its work. The forgiveness of Christ really is the only thing that can wash away sin and its power. Use it.

Of course, it may be that you can not share the Gospel with your loved one in a direct manner. If they have not expressed repentance, then telling them they are forgiven would be a lie. But you can still share the invitation to the Gospel by saying things like, "God wants to forgive you" While asking for repentance, you can point ahead to the goal of repentance, a knowledge of the forgiveness and love of God.

Just like the Law, model the Gospel. Be sure to share what Christ's forgiveness means to you and how it has impacted your life.

Follow the example of Jesus in speaking to the woman at the well. (John 4). He sat down with her and had a friendly conversation with her, letting her know by His actions that He cared about her. In fact, she is the only person to whom He ever directly said "I am the Messiah" in the entire three years of his ministry up until the night before He died. Quite an honor for an outcast quintuple divorcee. At the same time, He let her know that He was very aware of her sin and did not excuse that sin for moment. He did not excuse. He forgave.

"But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 5:20-21)

Trust grace to do its job. Share the Gospel. It is powerful

3: Offer fellowship in the Church

Christ calls us to be salt and light to the world. We do this most effectively when we support and build one another up in the fellowship of the body of Christ. That sense of fellowship, of belonging, is especially important when dealing with a homosexual friend or love one.

The reason that it is so important to assure the homosexual of acceptance in the church is that one of the greatest realities in the lives of homosexuals is the feeling of isolation. In order to protect themselves.....homosexuals have difficulty getting close to people, even parents or siblings. To reveal their "secret" is just too dangerous, because of the likelihood that once others know, they will reject the homosexual.^v

This sense of isolation is illustrated in the following account of an Exodus Youth conference

Almost all young men who struggle with homosexuality have bad memories of humiliation and rejection from gym class, little-league, or just outdoor sports with the family. At a recent Exodus Freedom conference, Exodus Youth took all the young men up to a recreation field and played football.

First, we had a short lesson simply on how to throw the football. Then we numbered off into teams (we didn't pick teams!) and played all afternoon. The purpose of this was not to "butch-up" the guys. We did this because sports are just a natural way for guys to connect. In our culture the sporting arena is like a proving ground, and those humiliations of the past can convince us that we are failures as boys, destined never to be real men. But on that day, playing in a safe atmosphere without fear of punishment or ridicule, many of those guys were surprised to discover that football is actually fun! They could catch and they could throw! And when they didn't perform like star athletes, nobody called them a "fag" or a "girl." Some were even able to laugh at themselves a little bit.

Several of the guys said afterward that the afternoon of football had helped heal a lot of hurt in their lives. It didn't make them straight, but it replaced some of their shame with confidence, and sorrow with joy. That's where healing begins.^{vi}

Contrast that sense of isolation with the acceptance that the gay and lesbian subculture will offer your friend or loved one and you can see why it is so necessary for the Church to offer real fellowship. The sad fact is that if a friend or loved one has found the courage to tell you they are homosexual, chances are pretty good that they have at least tried out the gay subculture and have made friends there who will accept them if you reject them.

In asking a person to give up homosexual activity and come back to the Church, we are often asking people to give up many current friends and a powerful support group to return to a world they feel has isolated and condemned them for experiencing temptations they could not help. If we are going to ask them to leave such a strong support system, the Church must provide a support system that is just as strong.

Because of this great need on the part of the homosexual, the best thing that the church has to offer is acceptance and inclusion in the body of Christ. The homosexual is already included in the body of Christ by virtue of Holy Baptism, but that reality needs to be affirmed and manifested by other members of that same body. For too long, people in the church have excluded homosexuals based on their temptation and not sin. Jesus did not hesitate to associate with the "despised" of His day; while not condoning any sin, He did offer them love and acceptance, and it was that action of the Gospel that changed them and brought them to Him. The church, as His body, can and should do no less.^{vii}

I might also add that ministries like Exodus International (which helps people get out of the gay lifestyle) are worried that an ex-gay subculture is starting to form. If you go to www.exodus.to and look for their church network (a list of churches which hold to the biblical standard that homosexual behavior is wrong but want to reach out to homosexuals in a loving manner), you will find that not one church in Iowa is listed. Of the thousands of LCMS churches in America, you will find only one listed. Because churches have been so slow to respond to the needs of homosexuals trying to overcome their temptations, most ex-gays rely primarily on the fellowship of their support group(s) instead of their congregation. In fact, many have never told anyone in their church what they are experiencing. Creating an ex-gay subculture within the Church is NOT the goal of Exodus. But, unless congregations learn how to handle the situation in a firm but loving manner, it may very well happen. So you may have to have the courage to work with your pastor and congregation to make sure your friend or loved one has a positive and supportive church experience.

4: Encourage Sanctification through the Gospel

God does not appoint a person — heterosexual or homosexual — to a life whose dominant theme is sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is not the centerpiece in God's design. In the divine economy, every life has a mission and purpose. Help each person to recognize the gifts he or she is divinely endowed with, and encourage him to use these gifts to build up the body of Christ, to spread the Gospel, and to serve the community.....

.....People will vary in their ability to live out their baptismal vocation by leaving their homosexual behavior behind. There will be those who have no problem (humanly speaking) abstaining from sexual engagement, and there will be those who struggle with great difficulty. In either case, encourage the person to continue to receive strength and support in Word and Sacrament; keep communication open and frequent; and direct the person to persons or groups that can support him or her. ^{viii}

The path of sanctification is never smooth and there will be many falls along the way. The only God-pleasing use of sex is within a lifelong monogamous marriage to a person of the opposite sex. Outside of that usage, celibacy is the only Biblical alternative. It is not an easy goal and it is likely that a Christian will fall and sin from time to time on the way to reaching that goal.

Each time a person falls, it is vital to remember that the Law can only bring to repentance. If your friend or loved one falls and does not express repentance, remind them of the Law. But if your friend expresses sorrow after a fall, go straight to the Gospel and the Gospel only. Do not accuse. Do not scold. Do not be disappointed. Continue to share the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

And, once again, do not expect full change from homosexual orientation to heterosexual as part of sanctification. That may not be in God's plan for every person. In fact, I know one man who did indeed experience a virtually complete change and, though he is glad it happened, he is now finding himself experiencing adolescence all over again. Having set up strong defenses against homosexual sin, he is now having to rebuild the same defenses against heterosexual temptations. Changing orientation did not end temptation, it merely changed the focus. Not everyone is strong enough to do that and it may be that God will not make that kind of change in your friend's life. So don't judge their progress based on "orientation." Encourage them, instead, to put faith and hope in Christ.

It might also help to share your own slip ups with your friend so they do not feel like they are alone in stumbling on the road of sanctification. For none of us is perfect and we each sin much daily and need the blood of Christ to wash away that sin and strengthen us for the next day's journey.

Sanctification is a long process in anyone. It takes faith in Christ and hope in forgiveness to grow in the Christian life. Use the Law when necessary but encourage your friend with the Gospel at every opportunity.

5: Bear one another's burdens

"Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

Sy Rogers is a well known Christian in the ex-gay ministry. 20 some years ago he had been living as a woman for nearly 2 years and was only a few months away from the operation that would physically change him outwardly when he felt that God was telling him it was the wrong thing to do. He asked God for a sign and 3 days later the director of the clinic where he was to have his operation announced to the media that they were closing down the entire program. Having received his sign, Sy gathered up his courage and began attending church. It was not easy. He did not fit in and spent most of his time with the women, with whom he felt more comfortable. However, some of the men decided to make an effort to be friends with him. They invited him to join the men's study groups and went out of their way to help him feel like he fit in. This was a real turning point for him. For the first time he had met men who neither wanted to hurt him nor have sex with him. He began to build an identity of himself as a man and, in time, fell in love with woman, married and is now a father.

In the end, homosexuality is caused by a broken gender identity, beginning either in very early child hood or through some traumatic experience. We all need to feel confident of our identity as man or woman. For the homosexual this identity was shattered and, as a consequence, has been sexualized.

What any homosexual needs, therefore, is what every person needs – good friends. He or she needs friends who will care about them and be close and committed friends with them in a non-sexual way.

We've looked at how same-sex strugglers have a void in their life where they should have experienced a connection with their same-gender parent and peers. Part of the healing of that wound is going to happen on the playing field of friendships. I say "playing field" because it's not therapy and it's not super-spiritual. As we saw in the last section, some of the most effective healing can literally be play. Games, laughter, affection and just plain hanging out can be as healing as any prayer and worship service.^{ix}

This may be the reason why support groups seem to have more success at changing orientation than counseling does. Support groups can supply what is lacking, a sense of belonging and friendship.

I said earlier that change of orientation is not the goal, a relationship with Christ and healthy fellowship with Christians is the goal. But supplying those things often has the effect of making change of orientation possible. Many many homosexuals have experienced that change in their lives and that is great. You can read their stories and get more information on how that change happens by going to www.exodus.to. You can help supply the need by providing real Christian friendship. Just don't make change of orientation the goal of you friendship. Your friend may not experience a changed orientation. That should not change your friendship one bit. Your goal is just to be a friend, to meet the need to be loved and to know the greater friendship of Christ.

Above all, help them to see through your actions the friendship of their Savior. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Homosexuality is a cry for friendship, identity and belonging. Christ supplies all those things better than we ever can. So be a friend and continue to point your loved one to their identity as a loved child of Christ, who wishes to forgive all sin and invites us all to repent and trust in Him.

Don't Panic:

So, don't Panic. There is no need to be afraid. "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." (1 John 4:4). Through Christ you have tremendous tools to help when faced with homosexuality. There are lots of things you can do to help your friend or loved one. Just be a witness to the Law, Love, Word, Grace and Power of God and trust in God to work when and how He knows best.

For more information try www.exodus.to

ⁱ A Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families” from the Taskforce on Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families, The Lutheran church – Missouri Synod. Pg 18

ⁱⁱ pg 22

ⁱⁱⁱ pg2222

^{iv} Randy Thomas, www.exodus.to

^v A Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families” from the Taskforce on Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families, The Lutheran church – Missouri Synod. Pg 25

^{vi} Truth and Tolerance, A Student’s Guide to Homosexuality, Exodus International pg 11

^{vii} A Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families” from the Taskforce on Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families, The Lutheran church – Missouri Synod. Pg 25

^{viii} A Plan for Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families” from the Taskforce on Ministry to Homosexuals and Their Families, The Lutheran church – Missouri Synod. Pg 24

^{ix} Truth and Tolerance, A Student’s Guide to Homosexuality, Exodus International pg 13