

Is God anti-gay?

And other questions about homosexuality,
the Bible and same-sex attraction



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Introduction



I first began to properly understand something of my sexuality around the same time that I began to understand Jesus Christ.

I was in my final weeks of high school. Exams were coming to an end and we were all looking forward to the prospect of a long, study-free summer. It had been a hectic final few months. A couple of uncomfortable home truths were sinking in. The first was that it is quite hard to prepare for exams when you haven't paid much attention in class. Revising is much harder when you haven't done much "vising".

The other home truth was even more uncomfortable. I had always been someone who formed close friendships, but I was now beginning to realise there was something a bit more than that going on. Though I'd had a couple of girlfriends, I'd never felt the same kind of bond as I had with one or two of my close male friends. As the long summer began and there was less

going on to distract me, the truth began to bite. The words began to form in my mind: *I think I'm gay.*

This was not a welcome development. I wanted to be like everyone else, and to be into what everyone else was into. I wanted to have feelings for girls like my friends had. And yet, instead of having feelings for girls *with* my friends, I was finding myself having feelings *for* my friends.

It was during this same period that I got to know some Christians for the first time. I was working Saturday afternoons in a local Christian-run coffee shop, and this was the first time I'd ever really got to know Christians my own age. They became fast friends and when, after exams were over and I had nothing else to do, they invited me to their church youth group, I decided to go along. I liked these guys and was interested to know more about what they believed. The message of Jesus, it turned out, was quite different to what I had imagined...

The message I heard

When Jesus began his public ministry, he made the following announcement, and it takes us right to the heart of his message:

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1 v 14- 15

Jesus says the kingdom of God has come near. Whatever God had planned to do to put right the wrongs of this world, *right then* was when he was doing it. It was all about to kick off.

And the response Jesus looks for is **repentance** and **faith**.

Repentance means turning around, to change course. The implication is pretty clear and a little uncomfortable: *we're not heading in the right direction*. We're like the elderly man I read about recently in our local newspaper: in a moment of confusion in the middle of the night, he'd ended up driving a mile or so on the wrong side of the motorway. Thankfully at that hour there was hardly anything coming the other way; if it had happened when the commuters were up, it might have been a very different story.

Jesus is claiming that we're heading in the wrong direction, and that the rush hour of God's purposes is heading toward us. We need to change direction and line up with what God is doing. And that means **believing the gospel**: the announcement that, through Jesus' death and resurrection, we can be put right with God; that we are being offered a fresh start to begin to live as God always meant us to. This is his message.

And it's his message for all people. When Jesus burst onto the scene, he didn't subdivide humanity into categories and give each one a separate message. One for the introverts; another for the extroverts. One (with logical charts and bullet points) for left-brain types, and one (with different colours and ambient music) for the right-brain folk.

God's message for gay people is the same as his message for everyone. *Repent and believe*. It is the same invitation to find fullness of life in God, the same offer of forgiveness and deep, wonderful, life-changing love.

Same-sex attraction v "gay"

It was this message I first heard at my friends' church, the message I have tried to live in the light of in the years since. Through it all, as someone who lives with homosexuality, I have found biblical Christianity to be a wonderful source of comfort and joy. God's word to me on this issue at times feels confusing and difficult. But it is nevertheless deeply and profoundly good. The gospel of Jesus is wonderful news for someone who experiences same-sex attraction.

I used the term "same-sex attraction" just then because an immediate challenge is how I describe myself. In western culture today the obvious term for someone with homosexual feelings is "gay". But in my experience this often refers to far more than someone's sexual orientation. It has come to describe an identity and a lifestyle.

When someone says they're gay, or for that matter, lesbian or bisexual, they normally mean that, as well as being attracted to someone of the same gender, their sexual preference is one of the fundamental ways in which they see themselves. And it's for this reason that I tend to avoid using the term. It sounds clunky to describe myself as "someone who experiences same-sex attraction". But describing myself like this is a way for me to recognize that the kind of sexual attractions I ex-

perience are not fundamental to my identity. They are part of *what I feel* but are not *who I am* in a fundamental sense. I am far more than my sexuality.

Take another kind of appetite. I love meat. A plate without a slab of animal on it just doesn't feel right to me. But my love for meat does not mean I would want someone to think that "carnivore" was the primary category through which to understand me. It is part of the picture, but does not get to the heart of who I am. So I prefer to talk in terms of being someone who experiences homosexual feelings, or same-sex attraction (SSA for short in what follows).

And as someone in this situation, what Jesus calls me to do is exactly what he calls anyone to do. Take another well-known saying of Jesus:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."
Mark 8 v 34

It is the same for us all—"whoever". I am to deny myself, take up my cross and follow him. Every Christian is called to costly sacrifice. Denying yourself does not mean tweaking your behaviour here and there. It is saying "No" to your deepest sense of who you are, for the sake of Christ. To take up a cross is to declare your life (as you have known it) forfeit. It is laying down your life for the very reason that your life, it turns out, is not yours at all. It belongs to Jesus. He made it. And through his death he has bought it.

Ever since I have been open about my own experiences of homosexuality, a number of Christians have said something like this: “the gospel must be harder for you than it is for me”, as though I have more to give up than they do. But that fact is that the gospel demands *everything* of *all of us*. If someone thinks the gospel has somehow slotted into their life quite easily, without causing any major adjustments to their lifestyle or aspirations, it is likely that they have not really started following Jesus at all.

And just as the cost is the same for all of us, so too are the blessings. Over the past few years of wrestling with this issue, this has become one of my favourite sayings of Jesus:

“Come to me, all who are weary and burdened,
and I will give you rest.” *Matthew 11 v 28*

This is a wonderful promise. Jesus assumes that, left to ourselves, we are weighed down. Life out of sync with God does that to us. But as we come to Jesus we find rest. Not just rest in the sense of a lazy weekend afternoon or a long sleep-in on a day off. Jesus means something far deeper: rest in the sense of things with God being the way they’re meant to be. Rest in the sense of living along the grain of who we really are and how God wants us to live. Rest in the sense of being able truly to flourish as the people God made us to be.

Is God anti-gay? *No*.

But he is against who all of us are by nature, as those living apart from him and for ourselves. He’s anti *that*

guy, whatever that guy looks like in each of our lives. But because he is bigger than us, better than us, and able to do these things in ways we would struggle to, God loves that guy too. Loves him enough to carry his burden, take his place, clean him up, make him whole, and unite him for ever to himself.

Being a Christian and living as a Christian with SSA raises all sorts of questions—questions I hope we can cover in this book. My own experiences of homosexuality do not mean that I can speak for everyone for whom this is an issue. Over the years I have got to know many people for whom this is not an abstract issue. Men and women; young and old; some with a faith; and some who are hostile to Christianity; those who have shared with me in strictest confidence; and those who publicly and proudly self-identify as gay. Every one of those conversations has been a privilege. Some have shared stories of painful rejection (in one case, of being spat at by his peers); others of surprised acceptance. In some cases there have been strong similarities with my own experiences and feelings, and in other cases it has been very different. So I am not presuming to speak for others. My aim instead is to try to take each question and to see what the Bible has to say.

Almost the first to be asked is: “What does the Bible actually say about homosexuality?” and we’ll get to that soon. But the more I look at the Bible, the more convinced I am that what it says about sexuality makes most sense in light of what it says in general about sex and marriage.

So that’s where we’ll begin...