

THE CENTER FOR  
FAITH, SEXUALITY & GENDER

# Pastoral Paper

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GUIDANCE FOR CHURCHES ON MEMBERSHIP,  
BAPTISM, COMMUNION, LEADERSHIP, AND SERVICE  
FOR GAY AND LESBIAN PEOPLE

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# Preamble

I'm writing from the perspective of a pastor who holds a historically Christian view of marriage and sexual expression, and my intended audience is Christian pastors who hold the same. However, most of the questions we'll wrestle with below are complex and will necessarily be handled differently by churches with different structures, sizes, ethnicities, denominations, and theological beliefs. And yet I want this paper to be relevant for all. My goal, therefore, is not to provide a cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all answer, but to help you think through the various issues and considerations involved, so that you can contextualize a response in your own church with clarity, compassion, and conviction.

While I will sometimes use the acronym LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other [+] sexual and gender minorities), my focus will be on LGB persons, or those who experience same-sex sexual attraction.<sup>1</sup> The transgender (T) conversation involves many different complexities and would require its own paper—something *The Center* wishes to produce in the near future.

# Introduction

## ***Can I Belong?***

There is perhaps no question more central to the human heart than this: *Can I belong?* We are made for communion with God and others. We are created for relationship, crafted to know and be known, designed to walk with others—made to belong.

This question is also at the heart of what LBGT+ individuals are asking of their churches. When they ask about membership, baptism, leadership, service, and communion, these are questions not just about doctrine, but about belonging. Their significance strikes to the heart of our humanity.

## ***The Jesus Way***

Jesus is our center. As we approach this or any question, we look to him as our highest priority. Faithfulness to his voice comes before every other consideration. Loving obedience to his command is our delight and joy. Our goal is not so much to be successful, but to be faithful.

Jesus embodies two characteristics that should help frame our goals as churches. These virtues, though our culture may pit them against one another at times, are gloriously held together in the person of Christ:

### *1) Radical Embrace.*

Jesus embodies a posture of radical embrace, self-giving pursuit, and sacrificial love towards those pushed to the outer periphery of society. Jesus opens up the hospitality of God to people

marginalized by the religious, political, and cultural authorities of his day. Jesus doesn't just say, "You can come to my church," but enters the homes of the rejected to fire up the grill, share a feast, and talk into the night.

### *2) Radical Obedience.*

Jesus embodies a posture of radical obedience towards his Father, and calls all who follow him to a cross-bearing discipleship that raises the bar rather than lowers it. Jesus's invitation is to die to ourselves that we might live unto God, to lose our life to save it, to give everything for the sake of the kingdom. We cannot compartmentalize things like sex, money, or power as "off-limits" to his reign—as King, he lays claim to all of our life.

This radical embrace and radical obedience can help frame our conversation around membership, baptism, leadership, service, and communion. Following Jesus, we strive to embody both his compassion and his conviction, both extravagant hospitality and devoted fidelity, both outstretched arms with our neighbor and worshipping love of our Creator.

# What Do We Mean by LGBT+?

"I'm gay; can I join your church?" At face value, this is a simple question. But there's actually a world of complexity in defining the terms: what do we mean by *gay*, and what do we mean by *join*? How we define *join* will shape our approach to membership, baptism, leadership, and communion, and how we define *gay* will shape its impact for the people we're talking about. So let's take each in turn.

When people hear terms like lesbian, gay, or bisexual (the "LGB" of LGBT+), they may have any of the following four associations in mind: attraction, identity, lust, or sexual behavior. Let's consider how each might impact a church's membership policies.

## 1. Attraction

Attraction to the same sex is not a good reason to bar anyone from membership or the sacraments. This would be a hypocritical double-standard: would you ever tell a heterosexual man "You can't be a member here" because he experienced attraction to a woman who is not his wife? (Your church would get really small, really quick!)

James makes clear there is a distinction between being tempted by desire and gratifying that desire in sin (Jas. 1:12-15). This is true for all of us, straight and gay alike. And attraction, or orientation, is a broad category that has to do with more than just sexual desire.<sup>2</sup>

In the church body where I pastor, some members identify as gay, referring to their

attraction, and hold to a traditional sexual ethic by living celibate. Their faithfulness should be celebrated, not restricted.

## 2. Identity

Some people would take issue with anyone who follows Jesus using terms like *gay* or *lesbian*, to describe their identity, arguing that our identity is in Christ and it's dangerous to make anything else so central to our identity.

The reality, however, is that we all identify ourselves in all sorts of ways: I've never met a Christian who's had any problem telling someone they're Brazilian (their nationality), a mother (their family relation), a doctor (their vocation), a Presbyterian (their denomination), or a runner (their hobby).

Some of these descriptors are more "core" to our identity (like nationality or family relation), while others are more "secondary" (like vocation or hobbies). Some are things we are born into, others things we've chosen. None of them are inherently opposed to our identity in Christ. Instead, they help describe our experience in the world that shapes who we are.

For every Christian, our primary and ultimate identity is this: we are in Christ. But we also have other aspects of our identity that are significant. Some members in our church body use terms like *gay* and *lesbian* to describe the reality of their orientation—and as we've seen above, orientation is not inherently sinful.

It's true there's a danger we all face to make anything more central to our identity than Christ. And it's true some will struggle with making their sexual orientation too central to their identity (similar to how others make things like their nationality, or their vocation, too central to their identity).

But I would suggest that "identity" is an ongoing discipleship area for pastoral leadership to guide their entire congregation through over time. We all need to be continually encouraged towards finding our primary identity in Christ. So long as someone submits to Christ as Lord and first in their life, consider leaving ongoing conversations around identity for pastoral care in the church body, rather than for church policy around membership and the sacraments. And keep in mind that someone's choice to identify as gay does not necessarily mean they are according too high a significance to their sexual identity."

### **3. Lust**

While attraction and identity are not necessarily sinful, lust is. Jesus teaches that the problem with sexual immorality goes deeper than simply our behavior; it is rooted in the illicit desires and affections of the human heart (Matt. 5:27-30). So for *all* of us (straight and gay alike), desire can be evil—depending on its trajectory.

There's a danger, however, in making the avoidance of lust a standard for membership and the sacraments. How do you know who is lust-free? Lust is fairly hidden. My church members don't usually tell me "I've been lusting" unless the context is confession. And even if you had Superman X-ray vision to see beneath the surface: how much lust is enough to disqualify someone from membership

and the sacraments? A glance too long at the woman passing by? Indulging memories of past romantic flings? Racking up \$10,000 in online pornography fees? There's a matter of degree.

You're not God. If you try to play "thought police" on this front, wielding membership and the sacraments like a baton, the greatest danger is that you will create a legalistic, moralistic environment opposed to the grace of the gospel.

While we should hold a high sexual ethic that recognizes the sinfulness of lust, it is wiser to approach this ethic through preaching, teaching, and pastoral care in the life of the church body, rather than making it a standard for membership and the sacraments.

### **4. Sexual Behavior**

This leaves us with sexual behavior. As churches, we should hold a high standard: any sexual activity outside of marriage is sinful. Yet when it comes to membership and the sacraments, there are still important considerations to keep in mind. Is the person repentant and pursuing faithfulness, or impenitent and hardened to the call of Christ? Was it a remorseful one-time slip, or a chronic pattern?

Austin<sup>3</sup> is a friend of mine in our church who's gay, loves Jesus deeply, and strives to live celibately. But once or twice a year he gets lonely, succumbs to temptation, and has a sexual encounter. He shows greater transparency and repentance with me than many heterosexual singles in our church, who will often try to hide the one-night stand or justify the pre-marital sex. We would, once again, be hypocritical to hold Austin to a different standard than we would the heterosexual college student who made a mistake at a party.

Pastoral discernment is needed. Our membership policy should hold a high ethical standard while also holding space for pastoral discernment around themes like confession and repentance. Failure to do so can move us towards legalism and create a culture of hypocrisy.

### ***Suggestions***

As you develop your church's approach to membership and the sacraments—which we'll get to below—make sure you are clear on the distinctions between *attraction*, *identity*, and *action* in your language. It would be horrible for someone to be unnecessarily turned away, for example, because they thought you were referring to their *attraction*, or the simple fact that they *identify* as gay, when you were referring to *sexual behavior* outside of marriage.

Consider framing your policy around what you're *for*, rather than what you're against, and be sure to apply it to the broader spectrum of straight members, not only gay folks. For example, you might simply say something like this:

We give our bodies to God, pursuing sexual fidelity as an avenue of faithfulness to Jesus. We believe God intends sex to be practiced within the covenant of marriage, defined as the "one-flesh" union of one man and one woman in a life-long covenant before God. We believe that any sexual activity outside of this covenant of marriage (adultery, divorce, pre-marital sex, same-sex sexual activity, etc.) violates Jesus's call upon those of us who follow him.

This statement centers around what you're for rather than what you're against, emphasizes sexual behavior over attraction or identity, avoids double-standards by including heterosexual immorality as well, and leaves room for pastoral discernment while setting a Christ-centered goal.

Notice also the language, *We believe*. This phrasing implies another category to keep in mind (one we'll explore further below): the difference between people who are *living* against a church's ethical vision and those who are *believing* against that vision. For instance, a straight person could believe that same-sex marriage (and therefore gay sex) is perfectly fine, and yet that person is not actually *living* against the church's ethical vision; they are simply *believing* something different. It can be helpful to keep this distinction in mind, as we'll see later, when thinking through ethical expectations.

So, how do we apply our discussion thus far to membership, baptism, leadership, and communion? Let's turn to that now.



# What Do We Mean by Join?

"I'm gay; can I join your church?" We've talked about the complexity involved in the first half of this question (What do we mean by *gay*?) Now for the second half: what do we mean by *join*?

Churches practice the sacraments differently, look to membership for different things, and have different standards for leadership. So when an LGBT+ person asks, "Can I join your church?" how the sacraments are practiced and membership is defined are important factors to consider.

For the purposes of this paper, I will use the categories "high-buffer" and "low-buffer" to describe the opposite ends of a spectrum of church standards for membership and other practices (baptism, communion, etc.). I don't assume one end of this spectrum is better than the other, and I won't argue for either view. I simply want to articulate the unique challenges and advantages that each approach brings as it pertains to LGB inclusion.

"High-buffer" communities are those that are harder to get into, but once people are inside the circle, they often share a stronger group identity. Think, for example, of the military: there is a high bar of commitment for entrance, an expectation of significant sacrifice, and a standard of laying down your life for others 'within the circle.' While it's harder to get through the group's "buffer" and join, troops are famous for the unbreakable, lifelong bond they share once inside.

"Low-buffer" communities are those that are easier to get into, but may have a weaker common identity. Think, for example, of a nightclub: there's easy access, anyone can join (assuming you're over

21), and it's more inviting for a broader array of people. Low-buffer groups have the benefit of easily welcoming a broad array of people inside, and those people may form stronger connections, be challenged, and grow once inside, but the community will often struggle with greater transience and a weaker group identity.

So the "buffer" refers to how hard it is for someone new to join the group (with *high* being "difficult" and *low* being "easy"). Let's look at how this frames different approaches to membership and the sacraments by churches, and the implications for LGB individuals seeking to join.

We'll start with a more extended discussion of membership, to explore the relevant issues, then move to shorter discussions of the sacraments and leadership.

## **Membership**

*High-buffer:* some churches have a formal covenant process with extended teaching or catechism, and clear expectations (doctrinal and ethical) established up front before someone becomes a member of the local church.

*Low-buffer:* in other churches, particularly in the age of transient urban populations and mega-churches with more fluid participants, membership expectations can be more "bare bones," and the process as simple as a piece of paper to download from the church website, sign, and mail in.



*Implications*

A “high-buffer” church has the opportunity to establish a clearer vision for the church’s ethics, including (but not limited to) sexuality, with conversation up-front and response to questions. LGB individuals, like anyone else, can receive a clear vision of the ethical expectations for life as a member of this community. Living outside of this vision, in unrepentant behavior, can result in church discipline or (worst case scenario) the eventual revoking of one’s membership in excommunication.

In a “low-buffer” church, where joining might revolve more around assent to basic doctrine, you still have an opportunity to include the church’s ethical vision, practices and policies within the context of a membership covenant, even if this is simply a piece of paper to be signed. Don’t, however, simply tack a “sexual ethics” policy onto an otherwise doctrinal statement; be consistent. What are your church’s ethical expectations for members in areas like money (generosity) or power (servanthood)? This is an opportunity to frame your church’s vision for the life of the community under the authority of Christ. Becoming a member of a church involves both *orthodoxy*—right belief—and *orthopraxy*—right behavior.

This is also an opportunity to consider the power that belonging has for the person involved—especially for the gay or bisexual person who may have experienced tremendous rejection from the church. We should go above and beyond to welcome, embrace and remove unnecessary stumbling blocks to people exploring Jesus and life in our community.

*Family vs. Club*

For many, the language of membership itself can sound cold: it can invoke the image of a “club membership” at an elite golf club in a gated

community trying to keep the riff-raff out. For this reason, our church has moved to using the language of “Family / Guest” rather than “Member/Non-Member,” as we’re being invited to be members not of a social club, but of a family, “the household of God” (Eph. 2:19).

Why is this important? Family’s based not around performance but belonging. You’re still stuck with that awkward uncle who says all the wrong things at Christmas dinner, and that sister who still owes you money, because you’re bound together by blood. The Church is a family bound by blood—the blood of Christ—that draws us into the home of the Father united in the power of the Spirit.

Paul calls us members of a “body” (1 Cor. 12), not of a Netflix account or a jelly-of-the-month club. There’s a radical sense of intimacy and interdependency, defined not by what I can consume from my “membership access,” but what I can contribute through being bound to the body of Jesus, the family of God.

In a family, guests are not outsiders to be kept at bay but friends to be welcomed with hospitality. At our church, we invite guests to join the church family, but if they’re not ready we’re stoked to welcome them into the “living room,” give them the “best seats” in the house, and lavish the best we have in our “cupboards” to care for them and make them feel at home.

For those exploring your church, don’t let the first word be, “You can’t be a member here because of x, y, or z.” Let it be, “We want to welcome you and care for you and lavish on you the best we’ve got to give; you are welcome here, be our guest and let us pour out our hospitality on you.” Go out of your way to find creative ways to communicate this.

But there are expectations in a family: *This is how we do life together*. People joke about parents saying, “As long as you live under my roof...” but there is a reality that family needs a cohesive vision of life together. Family membership clarifies what we believe God the Father’s vision is for us as his children, adopted into his home “under the roof” of his authority, through the presence of Jesus in the power of his Spirit.

We can both welcome guests and challenge each other as family.

#### *New Testament and Today*

It’s also worth recognizing the difference between the New Testament church and our modern church models for membership. The New Testament church didn’t have explicit membership policies because membership was simply synonymous with being part of a church—grafted as a member into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12).

Today, however, membership helps address some of our unique challenges that the early church didn’t face. Some Christians in the 21st-century, for example, live in a Christianized culture where there’s no risk in going to a church. Others find themselves in a post-Christian culture where everyone *thinks* they know what Christianity is, but have rejected (or selected) one version from a smorgasbord of options. Also, consider the significant size of many modern church services (a far cry from 25 people gathering in a house in Corinth), where it can be easy to sit for years, listen to some messages and sing some songs, and go home with no further commitment to live obediently under the way of Jesus.

This isn’t to say these ways of doing church are “wrong” (I pastor in a large church in a

post-Christian city and believe fully in what God has called us to), but to recognize some of the unique challenges of our modern context that more formal membership policies can help address.

#### *Believing and Belonging*

So what are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?

“High-buffer” approaches tend to place belief before belonging: I first believe in Christ and make a commitment to him, before committing to join the local body of Christ. To become a member, then, it’s helpful to know the church’s doctrinal and ethical vision up front, what it means to belong to this particular community, with expectations for what obedience to Jesus entails.

This approach is tougher up front, with expectations for membership more clearly laid out, but easier down the road, with a strong foundation in place.

“Low-buffer” approaches tend to place belonging before belief: I first belong to a community, trying it on “from the inside” before “buying it,” so to speak, under the recognition that people often experience belonging prior to their conversion experience. To become a member, then (or to *function* as a member when no strong culture of membership is in place), there is often a lower barrier of expectations, committing more generally to journey with this group of believers in seeking to follow Jesus.

This approach is easier up front, but can be more difficult down the road, if someone feels “bait-and-switched,” for example, spending years investing in the community and only later

realizing there were unspoken expectations.

It's worth noting, if you like the "family/guest" model, this will probably imply a "high-buffer" approach, while making space for the hospitality and welcome that a "low-buffer" approach is often striving for.

#### *Case Study*

Kim was a new Christian and confided to her pastor that she was a lesbian, asking if she was still welcome to join the church. "Of course!" he said, not wanting to bring up anything by probing deeper that might turn her away as a new believer.

Years later, however, Kim was heartbroken—she'd grown in her life with Christ at this church and developed many close, solid friendships. She'd signed the doctrinal statement years ago. She now wanted to lead a community group, and was told she'd be unable to because of the same-sex relationship she was in.

She approached the pastor, saying, "You told me I was welcome to join?" She learned he'd meant she was welcome to join in the life and activities of the church, but not necessarily as a member or leader. She felt bait-and-switched, like he had avoided a hard conversation because of cowardice, and now she had to face the difficult outcome of deciding whether to leave a community she'd invested years in, or stay knowing she'd be unable to fully "join" in the sense she'd originally intended. She eventually chose to leave that church and visited our church; she wanted to know up front where we stood so as not to get burned again.

Kim's story affirms the importance of clarity. We can sometimes feel it's more loving to avoid the hard conversation to keep a person from possibly

leaving, but on the receiving end people can (rightly) feel deceived when we withhold important information to keep them under false pretenses. Clarity is important.

#### **Baptism**

*High-buffer:* some churches require catechism before baptism, for weeks or months, where catechists get a clear understanding of what they're stepping into. This practice raises the bar by requiring people to "count the cost" of following Christ, before plunging beneath the waters.

*Low-buffer:* other churches may ask on a Sunday like Easter, *Does anyone want to be baptized, here and now?* Anyone can get dunked on the spot, with the simplicity of a profession of faith and commitment to follow Jesus; there is a low buffer, or barrier, to baptism.

In the New Testament, only a confession of faith was needed for baptism. But in the early church era, as the faith grew beyond Jews, proselytes, and those with greater proximity to Judaism (who had a greater understanding of Israel's Scriptures), and as many heresies arose, creating confusion over basic Christian beliefs and ethical expectations, catechism arose to help catechists get a clear understanding of what they were stepping into.

So you could argue that the New Testament only requires a confession of faith to baptize someone (a "low-buffer" view). But you could also argue that people in the New Testament had a much greater understanding of what they were confessing and what baptism meant. Today, things are not the same. Given how cluttered

Christianity has become with misunderstandings and imported cultural values, you could discern a need—given our cultural context—for more education and greater clarity about the Christian faith a person is confessing and being baptized into (a “high-buffer” view).

#### *Implications*

If you are in a “high-buffer” church, you have an opportunity to present a clear and compelling vision for sexual ethics in your catechism process. A person who is gay can receive a clear understanding of your church’s vision and practice before deciding whether to be baptized. This is not to say anyone will perfectly live up to those ethical standards—we are all in need of ongoing sanctification and grace. But there is an agreed-upon “target” we’re aiming for, and a standard for discipleship within the community, in our pursuit of radical obedience to Christ.

In this context, anyone seeking to be baptized (gay or straight) as an expression of faith in Christ and commitment to following him as a disciple should commit to the church’s ethical vision for what this discipleship entails in every area of life, including sexuality. Where infant baptism is practiced, the expectation is that the believing parents will guide the child into this holistic vision of life under Jesus.

If you are in a “low-buffer” church, most of those being baptized (if not all) will likely have all sorts of areas in their lives where they will need to work out a clearer understanding of what obedience to Christ looks like in the years to come. If you’re not asking heterosexuals whether they sign on to your church’s sexual ethics before baptism, don’t place a double standard on gay people. Issues of sexual fidelity for everyone will likely have to be worked out through your church’s preaching,

teaching, and discipleship practices in the regular life of the church.

#### *Case Study*

I pastor in a “low-buffer” church. One Easter, my friend Marco came forward to be baptized. When asked if he professed faith in Christ, he responded, “Yes, I’ve been inspired by Jesus’ sacrificial love that he would die for me, though I must confess I don’t believe in the resurrection. I can’t wrap my head around a ‘zombie Jesus’ up and walking around post-mortem.”

We explained we could not baptize him at that time, joking, “If you don’t believe in the resurrection, we can put you *under* the waters (identifying with Christ in his death), but unfortunately we can’t raise you back *up*!”

I use this example to say there is room for pastoral discernment, even in a “low-buffer” church, around whether or not someone should be baptized. But in this scenario, the question was specifically around the meaning of baptism and a narrower sense of what “faith in Christ” entails, as the “criteria” we’d established when asking that day if anyone wanted to be baptized. If we have additional criteria in mind on the front end, and are not up front about that in the invitation process, we are likely setting people up for confusion and rejection when they are turned down.

#### **Communion**

*High-buffer:* some churches practice “closed table” communion, in which the elements are only intended for members within that church or denomination. Here there’s a stronger emphasis on communion being not only with Christ, but

with the local body of Christ as a tangible community of faith, under the shepherding authority of its leadership.

*Low-buffer:* other churches practice “open table” communion, in which either 1) anyone who follows Jesus is invited to the table, whatever their church background or affiliation might be; or 2) anyone, including unbelievers, is welcome to the table. With these approaches, there is a stronger emphasis on the conscience of the individual to be at play in determining whether one receives communion.

#### *Implications*

In a “high-buffer” church, anyone living outside of your church’s standards for sexual ethics can be barred from receiving communion, while under church discipline, until the issue is resolved. This issue is not specific to LGB individuals but applies to anyone, straight or gay, practicing sex outside of the “one flesh” covenant of marriage.

In a “low-buffer” church, it is likely unwise to attempt “policing” the communion table. Since open table communion is ordered more around the conscience of the individual before Christ, your elders will likely have to navigate the matter of anyone living outside of the church’s ethical standards more through personal conversation with them, where they might be challenged to refrain from communion until the matter is resolved.

#### *Case Study*

Our church practices open-table communion (inviting any who follow Jesus). When Sean abandoned his wife and children in pursuit of an affair and refused to respond to leadership, I confronted him and explained we saw him as not only walking away from his family, but walking

away from the body of Christ (in whom his family was embedded), and walking away from Jesus (who identifies with his family in their vulnerable position and the broader communion of faith of which they are a part).

I added that he was no longer welcome to receive communion in our church body, until he changed course and went through a restoration process with us to resolve the issue. I explained grace was still abundantly available to him, but it was available through repentance and return to Christ, his family, and the communion of faith.

The point of this example: pastoral confrontation is appropriate and necessary, even in an “open table communion” church, when there is blatant and unrepentant sin amongst members. A “high-buffer” church may refuse to give communion, whereas a “low-buffer” church might confront the person not to receive communion, until the matter is resolved.

#### ***Leadership and Service***

Finally, let’s look at leadership and service. I want to look at these together since the line between them isn’t always clear. By service, I’m referring to any sort of contribution to the church other than simply sitting in a pew. Serving coffee, singing in the worship band or choir, helping out with the homeless ministry, leading a small group, and serving as a Sunday morning greeter are all acts of service but might not be considered leadership positions. By leadership, I’m referring to paid or unpaid roles that involve teaching or high levels of influence, such as the roles of pastors, elders, directors, and Bible study leaders. As we’ll see, however, the line between leadership and service is sometimes fuzzy—like when a person is

starting a weekly prayer meeting or heading up a homeless ministry.

Put simply, all positions of leadership are service, but not all positions of service are leadership. And sometimes there's a messy middle where these two categories are blurred.

To clear up the blurry middle, it may be helpful to consider two more categories: teaching and influence.

Most positions that involve teaching (preaching, leading a Sunday school class or Bible study) are considered to be leadership. And rightly so. They are leading people through the communication of doctrine and theology, which should align with the ethical vision of the church. However, there are other positions of influence that might not be formal positions of leadership, and might not involve teaching, but still carry a good deal of influence over the hearts and minds of people.

For instance, a person in charge of an outreach to the homeless may not be considered a formal "leader" and therefore not held to the same standards of resonance that other leaders are, but they still carry a good deal of influence over people. They are often looked upon for guidance, wisdom, counsel, and *leadership*. Other influencers might include worship leaders, volunteers in the youth group (who are discipling kids), and spouses of persons who are in clear positions of leadership. These might not be viewed as formal leaders, and they may never venture on stage to teach. But they still carry a good deal of influence whether they know it or not.

I don't have a magic formula or bullet-proof criteria to sort all of this out. I'm only suggesting that church leaders establish clarity up front

about what they consider to be positions of leadership that include teaching and/or influence, and positions of service that are less influential and more functional. If you consider the historically Christian view of marriage and sexuality to be a significant issue and not simply a disputable matter, then it's probably a good idea that all those in positions of leadership (teaching and influence) be like-minded on questions related to marriage and sexuality, while affording other positions of service more latitude.

Here is an example of how churches might break down different positions of leadership versus service. I give these not as an exhaustive list—there are many more positions we could list—but as an array of the types of positions that could be categorized according to our discussion above.

#### *Positions of Leadership (Teaching and Influence)*

- Pastor
- Elder
- Leading a community group (or Bible study, life group, etc.)
- Leading any ministry as a representative of the church (outreach ministry, women's groups, men's groups, youth or children's ministry, etc.)
- Serving as a leader in any discipleship ministry (youth groups, etc.)

#### *Positions of Non-Leadership Service*

- Greeter
- Playing on the worship team
- Serving in an outreach ministry
- Helping with sound, A/V, or other tech ministries
- Serving on the operational team



It almost feels like I'm separating important from non-important ministries. But please hear me—I'm not! I don't think positions that might be insignificant in the world's eyes are insignificant in God's eyes. The 80-year-old grandmother who prays for an hour every morning is just as vital—if not more!—to the kingdom as a celebrity pastor preaching to thousands. My distinctions are not between important and non-important ministries, but between positions of influence/teaching and positions of service that don't carry the same degree of influence.

Some of the positions listed above defy neat categorization. A greeter, for instance, who's radically affirming might miscommunicate the church's vision to the visitor who's gay. Every human carries *some* degree of influence over *some* people. There's no perfect formula that will ensure that the church's beliefs are always communicated and embodied to everyone at all times. I'm only encouraging churches and leaders to communicate a standard with as much clarity as we can when it comes to the ethical expectations of the church. It's better to err on the side of clarity up front than to be accused of cowardice by committing the sin of "bait and switch" down the road.

#### *Leadership Covenant*

To ensure clarity, you might consider crafting a "Leadership Covenant," which outlines doctrinal and ethical expectations for leaders/influencers—including your expectations for their level of resonance with the church's view of marriage and sexuality. Again, clarity up front is much better than ambiguity that leads to confusion down the road.

Expectations for positions of non-leadership service should also be clear. A "high-buffer"

church might have very similar standards of resonance for those serving in non-leadership positions, while "low-buffer" churches might have more latitude. Whatever the case, it's always better to communicate this up front and in writing—even if it feels pedantic and un-relational. (As we'll see below, it's not always wise to post such written statements online for all to see.)

This can also help if your church includes positions of service that are open to non-members. All people in positions of service—leaders and non-leaders—should know what's expected from them in terms of ethics and doctrine. For example, we once hired a sound person to lead our soundboard teams for our Sunday services. He was not a Christian (and so could not align with the doctrinal portion of our membership), yet he was strongly connected with us relationally, we felt he was the right fit, and he was open to the ethical expectations we uphold for leadership.

A Leadership Covenant can create space in scenarios like this for some people to lead with clear expectations while not necessarily becoming members of the church body.

#### *Case Study*

Jasmine was a ministry leader who had moved in with her boyfriend. When I approached her about it, she explained that she planned to marry him, though he was not a follower of Jesus. I had presumed she was a member, and she was living in violation of our membership covenant, practicing sex outside the covenant of marriage, and pursuing marriage as a believer with an unbeliever.

When it became clear she was unwilling to



change course, I explained I would have to remove her from ministry leadership. Jasmine was offended, because she didn't see how her sexual activity impacted her ability to serve hurting people in our city through the ministry she led. She made a distinction between her "personal" life and her "ministry" life, a distinction I hold to be unbiblical.

When I pointed to our membership covenant, I discovered she had never read it and was not actually a member of our church. Jasmine was a relatively new believer who had come from a rough history and had a powerful story of transformation. She had stepped into leadership after significant involvement in another ministry in our church, and we had mistakenly assumed she was already a member—this was an oversight on my end that led to unnecessary confusion and understandable resentment for her.

Jasmine was rightly hurt because I had not established clear expectations with her, up front, of what leadership as a member entailed. It is better for people to understand up front what they are getting into and signing onto, than for them to be blindsided downstream by unspoken expectations. In both "high-buffer" and "low-buffer" churches, we have a responsibility to provide clarity up front when it comes to expectations for leadership in our churches.

### ***Summary***

High-buffer and low-buffer churches will approach membership, the sacraments, service, and leadership differently. It's important to think through how your church's ethical vision, including your vision of sexual ethics, impacts each of these areas. Clarity here is one important

way church leaders can serve LGB individuals participating, or considering participation, in the life of your church community.

# Living vs. Believing

What if a member is not engaging in sexual behavior that violates your church's ethics, but is *affirming* and encouraging of those who do? Thus far, we've focused on sexual behavior, but how might one's *beliefs* about what sexual practices are permissible impact the areas above? This is the distinction between *living against* and *believing against* we alluded to above.

Let's look at three different types of *living/believing against* scenarios that can show up.

## 1. Open to Practice in the Future

Luke confided to me that he is gay and committed to monogamy, but not currently in a romantic relationship. He knows where our church stands on sexual ethics and disagrees with us, but claims he experiences the Spirit of God at our church in a way he doesn't in other churches. He wants to receive communion from our table, potentially help lead in a ministry, and is not currently engaging in sexual behavior that would violate our ethics—yet he is up front about being open to pursuing a same-sex relationship in the future.

This is a problem. Paul sharply critiques not only those engaging in sexual immorality, but also those who “approve of such things” (Rom. 1:31), like some of the churches in Revelation 2 who were *teaching* (not just engaging in) sexual immorality. Jesus himself castigates people who promote sexual immorality:

I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed *sexual immorality*. (Rev. 2:14)

The Greek word for “sexual immorality” is *porneia*, and it includes all forms of same-sex sexual behavior according to Leviticus 18:22 (cf. 20:13). And Jesus rebukes not only people who *live against* this standard, but people who *believe or teach against* it as well. Again, a few verses later, Jesus says:

I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into *sexual immorality* and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. (Rev. 2:20)

It's the teaching, not just the act, of sexual immorality that elicits a very strong rebuke from Christ himself.

Back to our scenario. While Luke is not violating our ethical vision in *practice*, he differs from our *beliefs* about which types of sexual practices are permissible, and is open to violating them in the future. Should this keep him from membership or the sacraments?

If you answer *no*, you probably have an implicit “low-buffer” view in play, and should ask: is this sharp dichotomy between belief and practice

unbiblical, and possibly harmful in the long run?

If you answer *yes*, you must ask: are we being consistent in holding heterosexual affirming members to the same standard? In other words, if the criterion is *belief* in your church's sexual ethic, you should be consistent with heterosexuals who disagree as well. Let's turn to that now.

## 2. Counseling Others to Practice

Ben was a home community leader who tried to set up Julie, a member of his home community who had recently come out as a lesbian, on a date with his friend from work who was also a lesbian.

Ben is straight, married, and a member of our church. He is not *living* against our church's sexual ethic, and has no desire to do so in the future, yet he is counseling others in our church to do so out of his conviction that our belief is wrong. If Ben is unresponsive to pastoral conversation on the matter, should his membership or leadership position in the church be in question?

If you answer *no*, you must ask if you are wedging a double standard between straight and gay members, allowing one to counsel an affirming position and not the other. We must seek to be consistent in faithfulness to Christ without discrimination.

If you answer *yes*, it's a good idea to ask whether you draw similar lines in other areas: if a leader is counseling others to be greedy with their finances, or to abuse their power rather than exhibit servant-hearted leadership, do we hold their membership to the same standard?

There's still a third type of affirming situation, perhaps the most common and pressing today.

## 3. Holding Internal Convictions

Amy's brother came out as gay. Growing up, their father used cruel, demeaning language for gay people. She's seen the pain and hurt in her brother's life, and has concerns over the way churches have contributed towards the discriminatory treatment people like him have received over the years.

When it comes to your church's sexual ethic, she is not openly teaching or counseling others against it, but confides in you that she has strong reservations and is questioning whether she can believe in it. Should this impact her ability to participate in the life of your church in any way?

If we answer *yes*, then we must ask whether we are creating a legalistic atmosphere that attempts to "police" everyone's internal thoughts and convictions, and preempts the sanctifying work of the Spirit over time through other avenues (like Word and Sacrament) to work in us as we honestly bring our deepest concerns before the living God.

We must also ask if we are being consistent in other areas of our church's beliefs. For example, if a mother loses her son in Iraq, and begins to question the sovereignty of God for a season ("Where were you for my son?"), I doubt anyone I know would restrict her full participation in the life of the church, even if the sovereignty of God is a significant doctrine dearly and highly held in the life of the church.

If we answer *no*—the mother doubting the sovereignty of God is *not* in sin—which I would

advise doing, we must acknowledge that we are drawing a line between holding beliefs contrary to the teaching of the church, and actively teaching or being divisive on the basis of those beliefs.

I would suggest, even if someone lands in disagreement with your church's sexual ethic, so long as they are not seeking to actively teach or counsel others against it, this should not impact their access to membership, the sacraments, service, and some leadership positions. This is not to say the sexual ethic is a debatable issue (that is, I do not believe it is a legitimate opposing view under biblical, historic, and apostolic authority). Instead, this approach is a pastoral accommodation recognizing the particular challenge of our cultural context, understanding that it often takes gracious time and space for followers of Jesus to come around to orthodoxy.

### ***Public or Internal***

A final consideration is whether you publish your church policy publicly (such as on your website), or use it more internally to create common understanding amongst leadership and guide pastoral practice within the life of your church.

I would recommend much caution before posting statements related to LGBT+ issues online. Statements are inherently impersonal, and the church's history with this conversation has been—unfortunately—impersonal. At the pastoral level, in our cities and neighborhoods, we need more conversations, more dialogues, and more listening. Plus, statements often fail to capture the beautiful complexities of actual people—complexities that can only be understood through real, embodied relationships. Lastly, written statements are

subject to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Given the volatile history between the church and LGBT+ people, even well-intentioned and linguistically clear statements can be taken to mean something very different than what you're actually saying.

This doesn't mean you should never post a statement about sexuality and gender online. I'm only saying that you should exercise a *lot* of caution and wisdom before doing so.

If you're going to post it publicly, I suggest making it more comprehensive around your church's sexual ethics as a whole, rather than narrower around the more specific LGBT+ issues. This is for the sake of consistency. Don't pigeon-hole gay individuals as a separate class of people—do you also have a public position paper on divorce, adultery, use of porn, etc.? This is a chance to present a positive vision for Christ-centered sexuality: not just what you're against, but what you're for.

Also, I recommend focusing your statement around your understanding of marriage and the limits of sexual expression, since this is really the heart of the debate. Rather than saying, "We welcome gay and lesbian people, but we don't allow them to engage in same-sex sexual relations," it's better to focus on the institution of marriage, something like: "We believe that marriage is a one-flesh lifelong union between two sexually different people, and that God intends all sexual relations to be expressed within this covenant bond." This puts the focus where it belongs: God's design for marriage and sexual expression, something relevant for all God's children.

If you're going to solely use the policy internally, it might not need to be as broad, given that your

pastors and leadership team might already be on the same page on your church's sexual ethic as a whole, yet need some more specific guidance in navigating some of the sensitive, controversial, and complicated scenarios that can arise in pastoring gay and lesbian individuals amidst the culture wars of our day.

It's also worth considering what resources you can make available for individuals who might want to learn more about your church's position. For example, when I receive inquiries about our church's position, I often respond something like this:

*Question:*

I was wondering what the church's "official" stance is about the LGBT+ community?

*Response:*

Thanks for your inquiry!

We believe that LGBT+ individuals are created in the image of God, loved radically by God, with inherent dignity, value and worth, with great gifts to bring to God's world and to the body of Christ, and that Jesus calls all who follow him to honor and treat them as such. And we have several LGBT+ people who are part of our church. We celebrate their gifts, delight in their humanity, and call them brother and sister.

We also believe Jesus calls all of us who follow him, gay or straight, to a sexual ethic in which sex is reserved for the lifelong covenant of marriage between one man and one woman (what is often called the "traditional," as opposed to "affirming," sexual ethic), a "one flesh" union between two sexually different persons.

If you're interested, this is a sermon<sup>4</sup> our lead pastor gave a while back that goes into more depth. Also, I know this can be a polarizing conversation in our culture today and an extremely personal one for many people, and I'd love to be available to listen or share more if that's helpful to you.

Sincerely,  
Josh

# Conclusion

Jesus calls us to radical embrace and radical obedience: those who follow him must strive to show generosity, hospitality, and sacrificial love to those outside the communion of faith, and to live into obedience, trust, and faithfulness within the communion of faith. The conversation in this paper lives between these two poles, largely revolving around how we relate membership, the sacraments, and leadership as identity and boundary markers to the communion of faith.

When someone asks, “I’m gay; can I join your church?” much depends on what we mean by *gay*, and what we mean by *join*. Terms like *gay* can refer, as we’ve seen, to *attraction, identity, lust, or behavior*. I recommend focusing your policy on behavior, while leaving room around desire and identity for pastoral shepherding and discernment through other avenues. You should also strive to be consistent, framing your policy within a positive Christ-centered vision of sexual ethics as a whole, centered around what you’re for (not just what you’re against), and addressing a broad range of sexual practices common in our day (adultery, divorce, etc.) confronted by this ethical vision.

How you define *join* will also be largely determined, as we’ve seen, by whether your church practices a “high-buffer” or “low-buffer” view of membership, the sacraments, and leadership. It’s worth taking time to think through the implicit practice of your church, and what it means to be consistent with gay and lesbian individuals seeking to join.

Because at the end of the day, this is a

conversation about belonging. It’s a conversation central to the deepest questions of the human heart and integral to who Jesus is and what he’s come to do: reconcile us back into intimate communion with God and each other, as participants in the family of God.

# Notes

1. Moreover, I use the acronyms LGBT+ or LGB as a broad description of anyone who experiences attraction to the same sex or some level of gender incongruence regardless of how they identify or whether they uphold a historically Christian view of marriage and sexuality.
2. For more on this, see the pastoral paper "Is Same Sex Attraction (or "Being Gay") a Sin?" available at [www.centerforfaith.com](http://www.centerforfaith.com).
3. All personal names in this paper have been changed for confidentiality purposes.
4. <http://idcpdx.com/sermon/week-4/?a=your-questions-about-the-bible-week-4>



# About the Author

Our collaboration is a growing team of Christian leaders, pastors, scholars, and LGBT+ persons to serve as advisors, writers, speakers, researchers, and board members. Learn more about our collaborative team at [www.centerforfaith.com/leadership](http://www.centerforfaith.com/leadership).



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