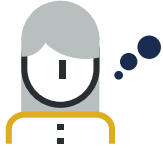


# CELIBACY CONVERSATION MAP

START  
HERE

Conversations about celibacy usually focus on two main arguments. Follow The Reformation Project's conversation map below to help you think critically through these questions.



**A: If LGBTQ Christians are unable to enter into a successful heterosexual marriage, they must commit to lifelong singleness and celibacy to respect the Bible's teaching on same-sex relationships.**

1

## BIBLICAL TEACHING ON CELIBACY

**B: Mandating lifelong singleness for gay Christians goes against the Bible's teaching on celibacy:**

- Paul calls celibacy a spiritual gift in 1 Corinthians 7, saying that those who do not have it should marry rather than "burn with passion."
- Jesus says in Matthew 19 that renouncing marriage is viable only for those to whom celibacy has been "given."
- In the creation narrative, God calls everything "good" or "very good" except for one thing: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18).

2

## ORIENTATION/BEHAVIOR DISTINCTION

**B: If that is your position, do you think it is morally acceptable for Christians to experience same-sex attraction as long as they do not act on it?**

**A: Yes.** Celibate gay Christians show that it is possible for gay people to be faithful followers of Jesus as long as they remain celibate.

**B:** While I appreciate your desire to make that accommodation for gay Christians, that approach doesn't square with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. According to Jesus, if an action is morally wrong, then the inclination toward that action is also a manifestation of one's inner sinful nature.

That's why Jesus says that lust is the same as adultery (Matthew 5:27) and anger is the same as murder (Matthew 5:22). So if all same-sex relationships are sinful, then same-sex attraction would have to be viewed as morally culpable as well.

(Continued on next page)

(Orientation/Behavior Distinction map continued)

A: But Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.” So it can’t be the case that temptation itself is morally wrong, as Jesus was sinless.

B: Temptation has two connotations in Scripture: a neutral sense of “testing,” as when Satan tempted Jesus in the desert (Matthew 4:1-11), and a negative sense of a manifestation of internal sinfulness. Jesus was tested many times, but he never inwardly desired sin. But if all same-sex relationships are sinful, then same-sex attraction would constitute a desire for sin—and thus be morally culpable.

This understanding is in keeping with James 1:14-15, which says, “But one is tempted by one’s own desire, being lured and enticed by it; then, when that desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and that sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death.” The desire for sin, according to Jesus and James, cannot be seen as morally neutral.

A: But not all aspects of a gay orientation are about sexual attraction. Being gay also shapes people’s desires for friendship, intimacy, companionship, and community, all of which are capable of sanctification. So in all but the sexual sense, then, it is OK to be gay as long as you don’t act on it.

B: It’s absolutely true that being gay, bisexual, or queer affects far more than one’s sexual attractions—but sexual attraction is still an ineradicable, pervasive component of a person’s sexual orientation. If same-sex sexual attraction cannot be sanctified—if there is no possible channel for expressing it in a holy way—then it is *not* OK to experience that attraction, regardless of whether one is celibate.

To be clear, this differs substantially from straight celibacy, which does not entail a wholesale rejection of straight sexuality for all people. While some argue that straight people who don’t find a spouse are in the same situation as gay people—required celibacy—there are major differences between the two situations. A straight person can always hold out hope that they may find a partner, while a gay person cannot. Moreover, a single straight person doesn’t have to deal with the heavy weight of regarding every sexual attraction they ever experience as disordered.

A: If that’s the case, then perhaps gay Christians need to commit to rooting out their same-sex attraction through reparative therapy.

B: Unfortunately, reparative therapy has been tried and found deeply damaging. Exodus International, the leading “ex-gay ministry” in the country, closed its doors in 2013 after its president said that 99.9% of its clients had failed in their efforts to change their sexual orientation. He apologized for the pain, trauma, and false hope his organization had caused.

A: Rosaria Butterfield rejects reparative therapy but says that homosexuality “is a sin to be mortified, not modified.” She encourages believers who experience same-sex attraction to seek to overcome those attractions, even if they may not experience full sanctification this side of heaven (through developing a heterosexual orientation).

B: In essence, that view is just “do-it-yourself” reparative therapy. Gay Christians’ attempts to extinguish all of their same-sex attraction have proven no more successful than their attempts to develop a heterosexual orientation. Given the resistance of sexual orientation to change, either Rosaria’s approach or Exodus’s (before it closed) consign gay Christians to a lifetime of inner torment and crushing shame. They do not manifest the fruit of the Spirit in gay Christians’ lives. These dilemmas raise doubts about whether Butterfield’s assumption that same-sex attraction is a sin is accurate. If same-sex attraction is a sin, why doesn’t the Holy Spirit help to “mortify” it?

(Continued on next page)

(Orientation/Behavior Distinction map continued)

A: That's unfortunate, but Christ's call is to take up your cross and follow him, and that is a painful and difficult road for us all in different ways.

B: Absolutely. But while pain and suffering are part of the Christian life, those experiences should conform us more closely to the image of Christ in us—not tarnish our image-bearing capacity by leading us to try to eradicate our sexuality entirely, a path which shuts gay Christians off from manifold relational opportunities.

But there is a way to resolve this tension! Saying “it's OK to be gay as long as you don't act on it” isn't the way, for the reasons I've shared above. But if at least some same-sex relationships are *not* sinful, then same-sex attraction would be capable of being sanctified. For heterosexual attraction, the path to sanctification is through lifelong commitment in marriage. We should at least be open to the possibility that same-sex attraction can be sanctified in a similar way, or else we will remain mired in an untenable situation—either pastorally or theologically.

A: So are you saying that marriage is the ideal for all Christians and that single people fall short of that?

B: Not at all. In fact, if anything, marriage is likely overemphasized and even idolized in the church today. After all, Jesus was celibate, and celibacy has long been honored in the Christian tradition as a spiritual gift and vocation. But the Christian tradition has never supported mandating celibacy on an entire group of people who never get to make that choice for themselves. Doing so actually undermines the heart of the celibate vocation, which should serve as a complement to marriage and sexuality, not as a rejection of sexuality itself.