



# PASTORAL CARE HELP FOR LGBTQIA RELATIONSHIPS

Pastoral Care 501

Term Paper

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## **Introduction**

Little boys dream about marriage, too. In every culture, at every age, boys dream about their future. I believe that this is a universal, if only internalized norm, and one that the Bible recognizes. The difference between boys and girls on this issue is a social and cultural construct. We, in our consumer and religious-inspired ways, have divined that boys will dream about career, while girls will play at becoming the most beautiful bride possible. This illustration was even one shared by my now-former father-in-law and pastor when officiating my own wedding ceremony in 2003. But, is it a fair characterization of boys and girls? Or, is the gender-norming of society the higher call, and we live into this tradition, because it has prevailed as a dominant construct for a long time?

I will not answer these specific questions during the course of this paper, but I want to build for the reader from the notion that when we minister to couples that represent only one gender, we are more than likely talking to two people whom have been coached in the same way within the constructs that most Christians understand, but they are seeking guidance beyond their comfort-level. Ultimately, this means for most LGBTQIA or same-sex (“queer”) Christians that marriage, stable family life, and faith lived in the context of home are still the paramount goals by which they are judged, and how they judge themselves. Yet, they probably do not have a vivid picture of how to operate in this reality. In addition, this seeking of a more traditionally structured relationship is true even though views on marriage as an institution do not necessarily mesh with queer culture seamlessly. This “seam” will be examined later.

The comparison of the queer experience with heteronormativity has been a significant influence on this author’s life, as well as numerous other queer Christians with whom I have

worked, and it is reflected in the work being done on behalf of queer Christians in communities all over the world. In this paper, I will attempt to analyze the best and prevailing views for queer Christian counseling around relationships and marriage. In doing so, I will highlight queer thinking around marriage; outline counseling issues that are present for queer couples; and, compare and contrast pre-marital resources for queer and straight couples. It is my objective that in doing so, I prepare the reader – in most cases, a peer pastor or counselor – for emerging work with queer couples that will allow for more meaningful outcomes.

### *Tips for Success with Queer Couples*

Before diving into my analysis, I wanted to offer a brief primer to my colleagues that will aid in one's ministry, as well as one's understanding of some of the concepts in this paper.

Please, be open and curious with this advice.

1. Language is extremely important to the LGBTQIA/same-sex (queer) community. Already, I have introduced the term “queer” to this analysis. This term probably has varied meanings to readers. I have selected it precisely for its meaning to the queer community. As is the case with all marginalized groups, there are terms that serve as short-hand for describing general experiences, and for descriptions from outsiders about said community. For some time the short-hand, popular term among heteronormative society for the queer community has been the word “gay”. For example, the Gay Christian Network<sup>1</sup> was originally designed over a decade ago to appeal to “straight allies” and queer Christians alike.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.gaychristian.net](http://www.gaychristian.net).

The growing consensus, however, among many queer people is that gay connotes a strongly masculine tone, and usually a white, male masculinity, thus feeding into other important distinctions that define the queer community, such as individuality versus community dynamics. Queer is a gender neutral term, and, while controversial, it also signals a type of empowerment through language that many queer leaders see as the taking back of language from enemies that might use it in contexts meant to harm queer individuals.

All this is to say is that throughout this paper, and throughout your experience with queer people you will occasionally hear terms that will challenge your understanding. Embrace them as they appear and do not be afraid to clarify meaning, but also be aware that if you use code language that sensitivity to tone will be monitored. Ultimately, asking questions, like “Am I correct in saying gay? I understand that queer is now the growing term.” or “How do you refer to your partner? Do you say spouse?” in a loving tone will flag for the queer person in front of you that you want to speak their language.

2. Queer people hate being categorized and dissected. Another power of the use of the term queer (or gay, if you find yourself defaulting to it) is that it does not welcome additional questions about preferences or identity. This is especially important for queer Christians, who feel like they are on an endless cycle of self-and-community-discovery. In the process of “coming out” to others and having to explain oneself – repeatedly and frequently – queer people are fatigued with having to make others feel comfortable with their individual identities.

Know that the queer person in front of you expects that you will make assumptions about them from the moment that they have “outed themselves”. The longer they are forced to remain in the mode of describing how they fit into the queer and heteronormative communities, the bigger the gap will form between your advice and their needs. This is all a way of advising you to take people as they come, and wait to discover peoples’ character as you are counseling them – not as a starting point for the discussion.

3. Meet us halfway. Queer Christians understand and sympathize that many of the changes and advances that we have experienced, thus far in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the developed world, have derived from legal and political battles fought and won. We, also, understand the divisions over these victories, and desire that this change is not a battle in the Church. Rather, we hope that the outcome is a broad and organic transformation ordained by God. We do not want you to change who you are for us. We want you to be transformed by coming into the richness of the experience that we have had, will have, or want to have with God as we experience new freedom, acceptance, and love.

You can be the soldier on the other side of our battle, or you can be our partner in finding God’s meaning for our lives. It is a choice, but one that is richly rewarding once you have heard some of our stories, and allowed us to be part of your personal communion with God. I realize I just drew a distinct line of demarcation for the opportunity for relationship with the queer community, which is not itself a helpful move, but I really want to empower you to understand that the experience of being a queer Christian can be an immeasurable blessing. It has been one of the most amazing transformations in my life, for example, and has brought me closer to God

in such a way that I am dedicating my career to the Church. I also know this to be true of many of our other brothers and sisters.

Start a journey with us, not for us.

### **Two-Grooms or Two-Brides**

As highlighted in the introduction, queer culture, including queer Christian culture, has experienced a flood of new legal and cultural victories during the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Most prominent among them was the United States Supreme Court's decision against the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in order to grant nationwide access to the legal right to marriage for all citizens of the U.S. As predicted, this important but striking change has created a backlash from conservative Christian political and religious leaders. Such as reflected in this quote from Franklin Graham of the Billy Graham Evangelical Society (among his other roles), "Homosexuality is sin. Same-sex marriage is a sin against God. Now, people who don't believe in God don't care about that, but at the same time...God is going to judge sinners..."<sup>2</sup>

Quotes like this one and others are to be expected. They represent a series of notions shared by many of Franklin Graham's ilk in defining a pretend breach in relationship between God and those on the side of queer sexual identities. Some call it sin, others an abomination, but all ascribe it to a fictitious form of God's judgmental relationship to people who identify as queer.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, Kathleen. "Rev. Franklin Graham on Gay Marriage Ruling: 'There Is a Storm That's Coming'" CNS News. June 30, 2015. Accessed November 1, 2015. <http://www.cnsnews.com/blog/kathleen-brown/rev-franklin-graham-gay-marriage-ruling-there-storm-thats-coming>.

This divide is only exacerbated by the queer community that has generally taken this rejection as a sign that God possibly, and the Church definitely, does not represent or love it. This belief is as long held as Graham's above and found in statements from people, like famed icon of gay rights Carl Wittman, who said, "Traditional marriage is a rotten, oppressive institution... Gay people must stop gauging their self-respect by how well they mimic straight marriage..."<sup>3</sup>

Each of these positions between Graham and Wittman are fairly well-known in the sense that one community feels rejected and the other threatened (or visa versa); however, what is less known by most ministers and Christian leaders is the toll that this long-term culture war, coupled with the noted recent political successes has unfortunately mutated the concept of marriage in the hearts and minds of the queer community.

Arlene Stein argues that the political fight over marriage has opened up a host of other issues for the queer community that go beyond marriage. These include economic, misogynist, and racial discord within the queer community.<sup>4</sup> Further Mary Bernstein and Mary C. Burke have been able to quantify in certain instances a measured impact within the queer community of divisions between queer Christians and queer agnostics linked in significant part to activism and political mainstreaming of same-sex marriage.<sup>5</sup> In summary, the state of constant antagonism surrounding marriage has made the civil action desirable by trumpeting the importance to the

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<sup>3</sup> Wittman, Carl. "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto | Carl Wittman (1970)." Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto | Carl Wittman (1970). 1970. Accessed November 2, 2015. <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/wittmanmanifesto.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor, Verta A., ed. *The Marrying Kind?: Debating Same-sex Marriage within the Lesbian and Gay Movement*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2013. Pages 39-42

<sup>5</sup> *The Marrying Kind*, 330-332.

right, but simultaneously made the actual institution of marriage as presented by the Church undesirable to most queer people.

Many queer Christians and non-Christians to whom I have ministered now openly question, and sometimes mock, the need to be married in order to live into a faithful and honorable relationship with the person whom they consider their spouse or partner. Speaking on cultural and spiritual grounds, most individuals live out their relationships with others, especially their “significant other”, largely outside of the traditions of their Church or family. This is due to a desire to protect their loved one from the same or worse scrutiny that they received during their initial coming out experiences. In other instances, it is has been provoked by the response of a family member, usually a parent, who has clearly stated a disinterest in connecting with a new partner of their adult child’s choosing, while still wanting to maintain a relationship with their adult child.

With such internal and external discord around the topic and idea of marriage, it is easy to understand why many queer people would not want to extend themselves into the already messy negotiation for family and religious acceptance. This is why so many of my friends and colleagues live in a construct that holds elements of a marriage, but ultimately achieves and seeks alternative outcomes.

As a burgeoning minister who lives in this divide between communities due to my gay identity, I find myself with many questions that go unanswered or unsatisfied by the current attempts to answer them. Are queer people wrong by wanting alternatives? Are Christians achieving our purpose? What is the argument that should win over a queer heart to understand the value and principles of marriage? Is marriage a zero sum game in the eyes of God?

*Toward a Same-Sex Marriage Ethic*

In turning to the Bible, I offer one small distinction in that it is not my objective to outline and summarize a scriptural argument for queer identity. If you run into a queer person who is struggling with the notion of being a homosexual, which is highly likely even within the context of a queer relationship, then I would have to refer you onto a completely different course of pastoral care. In this specific instance, I am assuming that you understand my conclusion that that Bible is clear and that scripture provides for the honor of transparent queer identities.

What I do want to accomplish in brief is to build a platform for your eventual discussions about same-sex marriage and specifically why it is an important covenant for queer Christians. In his masterful book *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-Sex Relationships*, theologian Robert Song argues that to read the prohibitions and limitations about queer sexual behavior is a short-sighted misinterpretation of multiple verses. One such example is Romans 1 in regards to the marital “breach” with God that is popularly identified as anti-queer rhetoric. He argues that the breach is actually a break from the order of Jewish law, thus making the present-day fixation on the need to uphold old law strange.<sup>6</sup> He goes on to point out that the punishments outlined with such a breach are not the break with a relationship with God, but rather sacrifices on the part of the same-sex couple, such as not being able to produce children.<sup>7</sup> This is a far cry from damnation, but let’s turn to the study of the ethics of relationship for queer couples.

Song points to the variety of freedoms and prohibitions about marriage itself as a covenant. In Ephesians, Galatians, I Corinthians, and Matthew, Song describes an alternative

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<sup>6</sup> Song, Robert. *Covenant and Calling: Towards a Theology of Same-sex Relationships*. London: SCM Press, 2014. 63-64

<sup>7</sup> *Covenant and Calling*, 64-66.

view on marriage espoused by Jesus Christ's, which honors it as an element of relationship beyond the reach of Jewish or human law.<sup>8</sup> In other words, marriage itself is a radical form of love requiring mutuality, equality, and holy submission to God and to the covenant. In fact, Jesus does not describe traditional sexual behaviors linked to marriage at all. Furthermore, the New Testament broadly deals with sexuality within the marriage in a completely different way than the Old Testament. This shift was controversial in the First Century, and as Song more convincingly points out this shift that we hold today as a norm casts a shadow over what one might label as a present-day conservative arguments that favor Old Testament traditions for New Testament marriages.

My frustration with both my conservative brethren and my queer community alike stems from the need for such an exercise as having to parcel out scripture to attempt to locate meaning that essentially feeds one norm for one side over the other. So, in trying to address the need for such a covenant among the queer community, I argue that – like Song – the covenant of marriage still exists for a reason, which is still to protect and prosper all of God's children. More importantly, however, is to reflect on the supernatural character of God as a cornerstone in our intimate relationships. As ministers of this gospel, I think that it is important for us to defend marriage for and with the queer community as something that God values, despite the pain and suffering that some may have experienced because of previous homophobic abuse. The structure of same-sex marriage may look and feel different as we move into a discussion of pre-marital counseling in just a few moments, but ultimately there is a responsibility as Christians that we

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<sup>8</sup> Covenant and Calling, 66.

recognize an accountability to God for the relationships that we recognize as sexual, romantic, and familial.

On the other side of this counseling equation; in other words, when dealing with homophobic or conservative family and friends, I attempt to help the homophobic person in front of me to reflect on their real objective. Much like the concept shared by Franklin Graham previously, this is usually to satisfy some approximation or fear that a loved one will not achieve forgiveness to gain entry into Heaven. In this sort of emotionally charged, relational space, I have found it reliable to lean on my belief that the forgiveness extended to all people through the example and story of Jesus Christ is extended to queer Christians, as well. My belief is that God sees and honors our willingness to love one another through disagreement.

Frankly, this is a 50/50 shot in winning over hearts and minds, but my point is that at some point in this divide, the objecting party needs to choose to focus on the humans in the room, and not whether or not their viewpoint is exulted more than that which they oppose. And, unfortunately, sometimes this may require you to advise a queer Christian to cut ties, hopefully temporarily, with beloved people in their life. It is a hard tragedy to see unfold, but there is a line between living out one's designed purpose with God, including that found in a loving marital relationship, and living a life of fear and cheap sacrifice just to gain temporary approval.

### **They are (mostly) just like us...**

An interesting set of surveys show that between 40% and 60% of gay men and between 45% and 80% of lesbians are currently involved in an intimate relationship.<sup>9</sup> A further study

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<sup>9</sup> "Relationships." <http://www.PBS.org>. 2009. Accessed November 10, 2015.  
<http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/relationships/same-sex-couples>.

demonstrated that same-sex couples report the same or better level of satisfaction within their relationships as their straight peers.<sup>10</sup> This is a glaring success considering the multitude of additional external stresses that most queer couples experience in comparison to their heterosexual brothers and sisters.

Scientists have theorized that this substantial success rate is due the fact that “Gay and lesbian couples are not only more honest with one another, they are also more likely to exhibit affection and humor in negotiating relationship stressors...”<sup>11</sup> While positive statistics are always welcomed news, you will generally find that the issues that creep into queer relationships differ, and your wise counsel will be requested with the same level of seriousness as those seen from heterosexual couples.

### *Homophobia and Internalized Homophobia*

As with any group, relationship stability increases with the regular support of friends and family. People who feel stigmatized, discriminated against, or bullied can bring a range of issues into a relationship. This undue stress can put a lot of pressure on couples, especially in regions that experience a disproportionate level of violence and legal discrimination – such as the ability to terminate an employee for being gay. Psychologists of any strip would theorize that this type of environment might force one or both members of a couple to actively hide parts of their

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<sup>10</sup> Mundy, Liza. "The Gay Guide to Wedded Bliss." The Atlantic. June 1, 2013. Accessed January 18, 2016. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/06/the-gay-guide-to-wedded-bliss/309317/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Relationships." <http://www.PBS.org>. 2009. Accessed November 10, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/thisemotionallife/topic/relationships/same-sex-couples>.

identity, which is draining emotionally and can frustrate a person into wanting to be single or at least independent enough from their relationship to be able to make decisions in their own favor.

Although I see it decreasing, thankfully, internalized homophobia is still a present problem that can lead to breakdowns and break-ups, especially among queer Christians. In his beautifully, yet highly-journalistic book, *Does Jesus Really Love Me?: A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America* (2014), Jeff Chu describes in vivid detail his experience hating himself and hiding his identity from his church and family. His process of overcoming fear culminates in an amazingly story of his mother breaking tradition to serve a ceremonial, traditional meal to Chu's then new husband.<sup>12</sup> Although anecdotal, Chu shares many stories in his book about the experience of others in coming to terms with their self-hatred. As ministers, it is important to hear these stories as they come to us, because we cannot assume to know that a person's internalize feelings will not lead to violence against themselves or others.

### *Domestic Violence*

Of particular concern is the state of Domestic Violence among queer couples. As it turns out Domestic Violence is as prevalent and similarly experienced among queer couples as their heterosexual counterparts, which calculates to 1 in 4 relationships reporting some form of abuse.

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<sup>12</sup> Chu, Jeff. *Does Jesus Really Love Me?: A Gay Christian's Pilgrimage in Search of God in America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.

What sets queer relationships apart was wonderfully summarized in a 2011 report published by the Center for American Progress (CAP).<sup>13</sup> In the report, CAP reports that queer relationships are distinct in their patterns of Domestic Violence in the following ways:

- Gay or lesbian batterers will threaten “outing” their victims to work colleagues, family, and friends. This threat is amplified by the sense of **extreme isolation among gay and lesbian victims** since some are still closeted from friends and family, have fewer civil rights protections, and lack access to the legal system.
- Lesbian and gay victims are more reluctant to report abuse to legal authorities. Survivors may not contact law enforcement agencies because doing so would force them to reveal their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Gay and lesbian victims are also reluctant to seek help out of fear of **showing a lack of solidarity** among the gay and lesbian community. Similarly, many gay men and women hide their abuse out of a heightened fear that society will perceive same-sex relationships as inherently dysfunctional.
- Gay and lesbian victims **are more likely to fight back** than are heterosexual women. This can lead law enforcement to conclude that the fighting was mutual, overlooking the larger context of domestic violence and the history of power and control in the relationship.
- Abusers can **threaten to take away the children** from the victim. In some states, adoption s do not allow same-sex parents to adopt each other’s children. This can leave the victim with no legal rights should the couple separate. The abuser can easily use the children as leverage to prevent the victim from leaving or seeking help. Even when the victim is the legally recognized parent an abuser may **threaten to out the victim** to social workers hostile to gays and lesbians, which may result in a loss of custody. In the worst cases the children can even end up in the custody of the abuser. (CAP, 2011)

The report goes on to summarize that queer couples often suffer longer in abusive relationships due to ill-equipped counselors, law enforcement, and legal codes that would otherwise assist an abused person in a heteronormative relationship from gaining legal access to

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<sup>13</sup> "Domestic Violence in the LGBT Community." [Http://www.americanprogress.org](http://www.americanprogress.org). June 14, 2011. Accessed November 9, 2015. <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/news/2011/06/14/9850/domestic-violence-in-the-lgbt-community/>.

services and help. This unfortunate norm can be mitigated and defeated by talented and committed ministers who want to live into a call to counsel people appropriately. My advice is to treat abuse of this nature the same whether the victim is male or female, which is to help them come to terms with their abuse and seek resources to flee an abusive environment, while making decisions about their future. It is a tough stance, and some might complain that it might seem anti-marriage, but it is impossible and dangerous to allow someone to remain in an abusive situation for the sake of marriage that in most cases might simply perpetuate a cycle of abuse.

### *Family Structure or Gender Roles*

Another challenge of providing pastoral care to queer couples is to help two members of the same gender to know how to relate to one another when they have been raised in a traditional family model. The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy provides a great outline of gender norms and breakdowns for queer couples.<sup>14</sup> The AAMFT says that despite the fact that most queer couples have an easy time bonding deeply, due to similarities within their gender identity that stereotypes of gender identity, such as male and female patterns of communication and relating to conflict can as easily deteriorate a relationship. In these circumstances, if a couple is seeking pastoral counsel, it is probably best to refer them onto professional therapy. This is only due to the fact that the counsel that they seek will require deconstructing of age-old patterns, requiring them to renegotiate how they communicate, and probably what they believe is to be expected of oneself and one's partner. It is fair to categorize

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<sup>14</sup> Ritter, PhD, Kathleen. "Therapeutic Issues for Same-sex Couples." Therapeutic Issues for Same-sex Couples. Accessed November 8, 2015. [http://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Content/Consumer\\_Updates/Therapeutic\\_Issues\\_for\\_Same-sex\\_Couples.aspx](http://www.aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Content/Consumer_Updates/Therapeutic_Issues_for_Same-sex_Couples.aspx).

this issue as a bit messy, but hopefully it is one primed for community-wide change as the Christian community comes to terms and embraces different gender norms and theologies.

### *Pre-Same-Sex-Martial Counseling*

I realize immediately that this advice of helping couples relate to one another better is not the most helpful. So, in a spirit of helping you develop tools for your ministry, I now offer to provide you some references for how to conduct pre-marital assistance for queer couples.

After extensive reviews, the best resource that I have found comes from the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA).<sup>15</sup> In a public manual that the UUA provides is a good model of how to conduct sessions for a queer couple, because it is simple and neutral; however, what it provides in clear questions and examples, it lacks in specific spiritual references. While maintaining traditional counseling tools, like genograms, it does not provide a spiritual study for preparing a couple for God's ordination of their marriage. This is a distinction of many religious guides provided by other Christian communities. As to be expected, however, the tone, language, and case studies provided in these heteronormative manuals would easily confuse or exclude any queer couple seeking advice.

The worst case scenario in which one might find oneself is to reinforce the lack of language clarity and marital stereotypes that have led many queer people to avoid entering into this holy covenant. The middle ground might be to incorporate a bible study on communication into the sessions that one might outline for an individual queer couple. Further, it is imperative at the end of each session that one has with a queer couple to remind them that they are welcome to

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<sup>15</sup> Kron, Keith. "Premarital Counseling Guide for Same Gender Couples." 1997. Accessed November 13, 2015. <http://www.uua.org/documents/lgbtq/pre-maritalcounseling.pdf>.

seek counsel and connection with your church or you throughout and after their wedding planning. Frankly, this type of counseling could use much attention and work, but in the meantime, make sure to follow these and other tips, and you will be assured of the ability to bless any queer couple seeking your counsel.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have covered a range of issues. We began with identifying queer perspectives and perceptions on gender-norming, language, as well as my perspective from being a gay man and burgeoning minister. Then, we demystified a queer view on marriage as a measure of queer acceptance and judgment for queer Christians, and established how both sides of the same-sex marriage debate have led to a different valuing and desire for a traditional marriage-like construct for queer Christians. Next, we outlined common issues distinctive to queer couples. This work included external and internal pressures on queer couples to address homophobia, reformed gender roles, and included a comment on domestic violence. Furthermore, I offered a generalized comparative analysis of the differences between same-sex and heteronormative pre-marital counseling as presented by religious and non-religious entities.

For me, this has been a helpful and dynamic study. Even though I spoke from a place of personal experience and frustration, I found it helpful to formally guide the good work of my peers in addressing some of these issues. By giving voice to some personal and other impersonal scenarios, research, and naming desired outcomes, I found myself feeling more capable at addressing some of the common questions and requests for referrals that I receive as an openly gay, religious leader. Now, the real question is why I cannot seem to land a boyfriend. (Next, paper, maybe?)

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