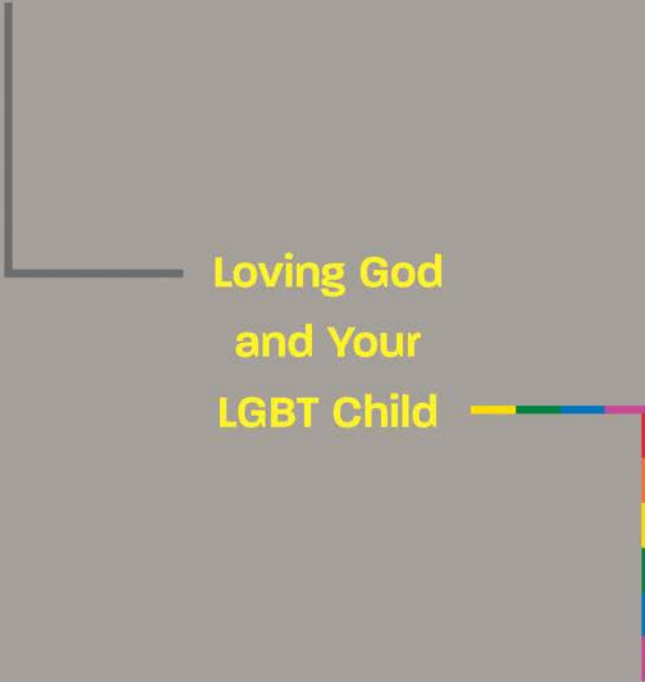


When Grace



Loving God
and Your
LGBT Child

Meets Conviction

ROB JACKSON

FOREWORD BY JIM DALY
Focus on the Family President

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY.

Rob Jackson is the right person to write this book. He thoroughly and accurately understands the key issues, and he has years of experience discussing them with parents. He understands the parent-child dynamic and, most importantly, he believes in God's truths, addressing them with joy and passion. *When Grace Meets Conviction* will help you feel known and not alone with your confusion, fear, or grief. With kindness and compassion, Rob offers clarity, confidence, peace, and hope. While it's important to him to help you solve problems, he considers the quality of your relationship with your child most significant. *That's* why you should read this book.

DR. KATHY KOCH, speaker, podcaster, founder of Celebrate Kids, and author or coauthor of several parenting books, including *Start with the Heart*, *Parent Differently*, and *Raising Gender-Confident Kids*

When Grace Meets Conviction is a lifeline for those with a gay- or trans-identifying loved one. Rob Jackson is a trusted Christian therapist who has helped thousands of clients through almost every struggle imaginable. This book tackles one of the toughest issues of our day with straight talk, grace, and biblical backing. It's a resource I'll keep close at hand for the students and families we work with in our ministry.

JEFF MYERS, PHD, president of Summit Ministries and coauthor of *Raising Gender-Confident Kids*

As a psychiatrist who spends his days at the intersection of brain science, broken hearts, and the breathtaking grace of Jesus Christ, I'm always looking for resources that tell the truth without forgetting to love the person. *When Grace Meets Conviction* does exactly that while also managing to lower everyone's blood pressure in the process. Rob Jackson offers parents something rare and desperately needed: a way to stay rooted in historic, biblical Christianity without turning dinner conversations into theological cage matches. He treats loss, confusion, and love not as abstract ideas but as parts of real family life. This book is clinically wise, pastorally tender, and refreshingly sane, helping parents separate identity from behavior, conviction from control, and love from fear. If you want a

resource that speaks clearly, loves deeply, and doesn't require a counseling degree to understand, this is it. Grace and conviction don't have to be enemies, and Rob's book shows that they can be teammates.

DR. KARL BENZIO, board-certified psychiatrist and cofounder/medical director of Honey Lake Clinic

In *When Grace Meets Conviction*, Rob Jackson delivers foundational biblical insights and practical tools for navigating an unexpected, complex, and often divisive and painful dynamic. This comprehensive resource goes beyond theory, equipping parents for difficult conversations with the grace and wisdom needed to maintain connection and pursue lasting healing through an understanding of God's steadfast love and incredible design for sexuality. This is a must-have resource for parents!

DANNY HUERTA, vice president of parenting and youth at Focus on the Family

In this thoughtful and carefully written book, Rob Jackson draws on Scripture and his many years of counseling experience to offer counsel and guidance for parents and their LGBT children, addressing the personal, emotional, and familial challenges associated with these issues. Wrestling with dozens of real-life questions, Jackson offers both conviction and clarity, doing so with compassion, care, and concern. Even those who might disagree with Rob's counsel will recognize his efforts to navigate these questions with both grace and truth. I am grateful for Rob's writing and ministry, and I am glad to recommend this book. It genuinely manifests grace *and* conviction while encouraging parents to love God and their LGBT children.

DR. DAVID S. DOCKERY, president and distinguished professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

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Foreword

Over the last several decades we've seen a steady rise in the number of young people who identify as LGBT, and Christian families have not been immune to this growing trend. Nearly every day Focus on the Family hears from moms and dads who've learned that their children are struggling with their sexuality or gender identity, and often these parents don't know where to turn or how to respond.

That's why I'm thankful that Rob Jackson has tackled this difficult (and often contentious) topic at a time when parents are desperate for answers rooted in Scripture. The book you're about to read extends hope that there *is* a way for parents to continue loving and supporting their LGBT children without embracing or affirming behaviors that are opposed to biblical teaching. In other words, it is possible to stay true to your convictions while nurturing a strong relationship with your LGBT child.

What I especially love about Rob's book is its practicality. Rather than offering platitudes, Rob gives readers concrete guidance related to very specific scenarios and questions. The dilemmas he describes within these pages are the very situations and struggles that reach us regularly here at Focus on the Family. With compassion, wisdom, and an unwavering commitment to God's Word, Rob has come alongside families with a

message of hope: Loving Jesus and loving your LGBT-identifying child are not mutually exclusive goals. To the contrary, we love our children best—no matter their struggle—when we are wholeheartedly committed to following Christ and living out His truth.

By recounting stories of real people with real problems, Rob reminds us that, for many hurting families, interacting with LGBT-related issues is not simply an exercise in political or theological debate; it's a serious reality of life in our fallen world.

As we contend with all the ways families are impacted, I think it's important to emphasize a crucial point: Those engaged in LGBT behaviors are not engaging in some unforgivable "super sins." Even as our culture has placed its stamp of approval on all kinds of immoral behavior, the Christian church often camps out on the other side of that extreme by treating certain battles as especially shameful. Let's be reminded, however, that sin is sin—and that the Lord longs to transform hearts and lives by bringing sexual brokenness into the light of His grace and truth.

With that in mind, it's my prayer that God's people will be faithful in upholding Scripture's teachings about the hope, healing, and mercy available to those who repent and look to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. And as the church, let's be a people who extend our Savior's tender compassion not only to those wrestling with same-sex attraction and gender confusion but also to the people who love them.

For Christian parents it's an especially challenging and complicated task to care for an LGBT-identifying child while refusing to stray from God's Word. There's often tremendous heartache, fear, or grief involved when loving moms and dads discover that their precious children are walking a path that runs contrary to God's design for life, marriage, and families. These parents need love and support, just as their children do, and I'm grateful that Rob's book is there for parents who are searching for biblically based and therapeutically sound answers. Reading Rob's wise and compassionate advice is like looking into the eyes of a trusted

friend and counselor who both sees your pain and gently steers you in the right direction.

If you are traveling the painful journey Rob describes in the pages that follow, please know that your friends at Focus on the Family understand your situation and would love to hear from you. May you also take comfort in the assurance that our heavenly Father is in the business of changing lives and that He “is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20). His love for your child knows no bounds, and He is ready and willing to equip you with divine wisdom, peace, and courage as you navigate this chapter in your child’s story.

God bless you, friend. It’s my hope that you will be strengthened and uplifted by the benediction offered to us in 2 John 1:3: “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son, in truth and love.”

Jim Daly
president of Focus on the Family

The Language

Focus on the Family Uses

Think of these common (and evolving) statements in our day and culture:

- “My neighbor is gay.”
- “Is he gay or bi?”
- “She is a lesbian.”
- “I am pansexual.”
- “He’s a gay Christian.”
- “My child is part of the LGBT community.”
- “They are nonbinary.”
- “My preferred pronouns are *ze/zir*.”

In an age of ever-changing language to indicate ever-changing gender and sexual preferences, words can get downright confusing. It’s as if there is a constantly revised glossary of seemingly unknowable terms. The words change faster than most of us can keep up with. Academics and social media influencers push ever-shifting gender ideologies, and website menus for selecting one’s sexual identity often have a lengthy list of choices and labels.

Modern culture no longer views sexual/gender identity as based on biology. No, your sexuality today is considered to be something you *feel* or *elect*, no longer dictated by your body or any sort of male/female reality. You're told that it's your *essence*—something to be discovered. And that it's *essential* to who you are.

This is why words matter, now more than ever. They also matter in ways you might not expect. You will notice that those of us who offer counseling from a Christ-affirming perspective will often say that people *identify* as gay rather than that they *are* gay. We also use language such as “My neighbors are in a lesbian relationship” versus “My neighbors are lesbians.” We choose to be *descriptive* of the situation, not *prescriptive* with labels.

Yes, it can sometimes seem overly wordy to write things this way, but it's a more accurate way to describe actual persons—individuals created in the image of God. The language we use helps shape our thinking, our emotions, and even our behavior. Language is a teacher both to us and to those around us. So if something seems a little different as you read this book, especially when compared to what you normally hear from others, we want you to know why.

We hope the questions and scenarios presented in this book (and the nuanced language used) will help you relate in meaningful ways with your child.

Jeremy Keeton

senior director of counseling services
at Focus on the Family

Introduction

When a cousin of mine told me many years ago that he was gay, I was shocked but not surprised. For years I had noticed things that had caused me to wonder, but I don't think either of us really knew how to start the conversation. We had grown up together and loved each other like brothers, and neither of us wanted to hurt the other.

He had always appeared effeminate and seemed comfortable with it. As we grew older, I reminded myself that being effeminate doesn't mean that one identifies as gay. I knew my cousin marched to the beat of his own drummer, and I could make room for that.

Besides, he was absolutely hilarious. His sense of humor was contagious, and people couldn't help but like him. You never knew what he was going to say next, and he was always the life of the party.

I noticed over time, however, that his humor began to shift. He became more sarcastic, though with me he remained protective and kind.

His words could cut with surgical precision one moment while with the next breath he'd have you laughing again. At family gatherings he seemed to revel in challenging others' values and personal convictions.

These awkward moments started to occur with increasing frequency in adulthood. I didn't learn this until much later, but at some point along the way, my cousin had begun living a double life. This was still years before he came out to me, but when he finally did, he seemed quite vulnerable. He said he wanted to tell me before telling some of his other family members.

As is often the case, it seems his immediate family was among the last to learn he was living with his male partner. (Back in the 1980s and '90s, coming out wasn't as easy as sending a text. And no, I *don't* recommend texting for coming out or for any other important family matters!)

My journey with my cousin and the associated complexity of our family dynamics probably impacted me more than I realized. At the same time, I think those experiences now help me relate to what many people reading this book are going through, though our stories might be vastly different.

I went on to become a professional counselor and therapist. As a result, I know a lot more about this topic than I knew back then, and I'm still learning today. I'm particularly grateful to those who have shared their personal stories with me. They've taught me a lot, and I trust that we can now walk this road together.

When Grace Meets Conviction was written for parents who love both God and their LGBT-identifying child. It's also for anyone who has a loved one or close friend who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. I had already chosen the subtitle for this book when a father said to me over the phone, "I love God, but can't I love my son, too?" I want this book to reassure people like this father. With my heart aching over this man's pain, I assured him that it's not only possible but absolutely *necessary* to love both God and his child—no matter how the child identifies.

Perhaps the loved one in your life is a parent, a grandchild, a niece, a nephew, or maybe one of your children from a blended marriage.

Perhaps you have a neighbor who flies a rainbow flag on their porch, a school administrator who celebrates LGBT activism, or someone in your church who holds a much different interpretation of Scripture from yours. Whatever the situation, rest assured that the same principles, precepts, and approaches I speak about with parents can also apply in those relationships. With all of us in mind, I've written the book that I wish I could have read many years ago.

With more than forty years of personal experience as both a Christian and a licensed counselor—one who has engaged in thousands of personal and clinical interactions—I'll do my best to impart the knowledge, truth, and grace that I've learned along the way. I'll also address some of my mistakes as I offer you, my readers, a path through what can seem like a maze of various concerns and conflicting viewpoints.

I hope you experience a loving approach to one of the most difficult topics facing families, churches, and communities today. We all likely know people with strong opinions on these issues—many of whom have experienced significant pain and misunderstanding. I prayed for months while writing this book, hoping to find the right tone and balance. I also asked some of my most trusted family members, friends, and advisers to review my work. I have zero desire to offend anyone, and I certainly don't want to add to anyone's pain.

When Grace Meets Conviction is my best attempt to clarify what I believe is a sound Christian position and relational approach to these issues, beginning with parents who struggle with how to respond to a child who is often also struggling.

I know it's impossible to address every single facet of this subject in a single book. I also believe it's impossible for any single author to address these issues in a way that will satisfy every reader. For some I might seem too harsh. For others, too moderate. Yet my single focus remains: It's my desire to be compassionate to all, practical for everyday living, and faithful to Christ and to the Scriptures.

In *When Grace Meets Conviction*, I'm combining my four decades of professional experience as a Christian counselor and life coach with my personal experience with my cousin and others. As one of more than twenty members of Focus on the Family's counseling department, I average about a thousand phone consults a year. Most of those calls are related to sexuality, and our department is seeing a significant increase in heartfelt phone calls about LGBT-related family matters. I hope and pray you can benefit from my experiences and apply what I've learned to your own situation.

As you'll see, I've written this book in three sections:

1. **Caring for You and Your Concerns:** If you're a parent or loved one of an LGBT-identifying individual, you need to practice healthy self-care that promotes a *response* rather than a *reaction*. I can help you do that.
2. **Caring for the Ones You Love Unconditionally:** I affirm your unconditional love for your child or other loved one. However, in fairness to both you and your loved one, we need to talk about what unconditional love means and how to express it. I'll help you craft and maintain the healthy boundaries that can preserve your relationship in a way that models God's love for us.
3. **Caring for Others Wisely:** Your family is a microcosm of what is playing out in the larger community. Let's apply what you learn navigating your own family relationships to the larger community around you—the community that includes your friends, your family, your church, and the LGBT-identifying people in your life.

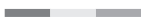
In the following chapters, we'll explore several individuals' experiences with the ones they love. Together we'll look at the dynamics, challenges, and heartbreaks, plus the inevitable highs and lows. We'll get into the thick of their situations so you can then apply what you learn to your situation. We'll grapple with tough questions and difficult situations that are complex, nuanced, and potentially stressful for almost anyone to navigate.

Each chapter will include real-world stories plus questions and answers that relate to that chapter's topic. I'll share the same scenarios, strategies, and resources I would recommend to you if we were talking about your situation in person or over the phone.

We'll consider important topics like identity, personhood, behavioral health, grieving well, sex education for minors, boundaries with adult children, best practices for parents, and talking points to help you engage in reasonable and loving conversations.

As we sort through these topics, I'll help you learn how to respond to a loved one who might identify or has already told you that he or she identifies as same-sex attracted. We'll consider how *transgender* and *trans* are umbrella words that can mean many things to different people. For the sake of brevity I'll often use the expression *gay and trans* for my general comments, but I'll be more specific when addressing other LGBT-related expressions. And when I mention children, you can usually assume I'm referring to minors. I'll specify when I'm referencing adult children.

You'll see that I distinguish between what is gay- or LGBT-affirming and what is Christ-affirming. When one is gay-affirming, the concept of an inherent gay identity is being affirmed or approved. When I say I am Christ-affirming, I am affirming Jesus and the way He has taught us to live. In other words, I am affirming the life, teachings, and person of Jesus Christ—not merely a religious standard, cultural norm, or tradition.



If you don't identify as a Christian, I understand that you might not be interested in a Christian counselor's perspective. Maybe you picked up this book to see how someone like me thinks. (I don't enjoy mentioning how polarizing this topic can be, and when I do, it's not with hostility toward anyone in the LGBT community.) Perhaps you or someone you know has had negative or even hurtful experiences with some Christians, churches, or parachurch organizations. I hope not, but I know it does happen—and I'm sorry. Nevertheless, I offer you my heartiest welcome and sincerely hope that you give me and this book a chance.

PART 1

Caring for You and Your Concerns

How Can We Talk When the Words Keep Changing?

“I’m overwhelmed with so many questions,” Becky told me. “I’m beating myself up with the *woulda, coulda, shoulda* stuff.”

Becky’s heart was breaking, and like so many other parents in crisis, she thought of Focus on the Family and called us for help and counsel.

Becky and her husband had a blended family. Recently they’d learned that Becky’s twenty-one-year-old daughter, Emily, was in a same-sex relationship with a woman named Suzanne. Becky explained that Emily had recently broken up with her boyfriend and dropped out of college, telling her parents that she needed some time to think.

Emily, Becky said, felt torn between wanting to return to school and staying at home, and she had seemed depressed lately. “She’d come home from work and go straight to her room. She refused to talk to us about her relationship with Suzanne.”

Becky told me that everyone in their family, including Emily, had been raised in the Christian faith. “In fact,” she said, “Emily has been leading a preschool class at church on Sundays since returning home.”

While the love Becky and her ex-husband—Emily’s biological father—have for their daughter has brought them together as co-parents, they don’t necessarily agree on how to address this latest development in Emily’s life. Becky said that her ex wanted to confront Emily and get it out in the open, but Becky acknowledged that she wasn’t sure how to handle it.

“Until six weeks ago,” she said, “Emily was talking about how much she loved her boyfriend and that she wanted to marry him. Two weeks later, it flipped. She’s blocked him from communicating with her.”

Becky had assumed that Emily was coming home to stay, but within days, Emily moved in with Suzanne instead.

“This woman has engulfed Emily’s life, and it’s thrown me,” Becky said. “I have been on my knees praying—first, for how to love my child through this, and second, not only for Emily but also for the other young lady and this whole situation. Honestly, I just don’t know where to turn. Emily doesn’t have anybody in her life but Suzanne. Emily doesn’t want me in her business and says I’ve been trying to control her. I need to know how to walk through this with her. We’ve kind of danced around the issue and not asked, ‘Are you gay?’ because we believe she will probably deny it.”

I could tell Becky was in anguish. Her words were rapid and pressured. She reminded me of a diver who was swimming frantically for the surface. For air.

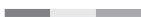
In moments like these, I find that words are not enough, no matter how hard I try. The hurting parent speaks rapidly, and I just try to keep up. Occasionally I ask the caller to slow down only for the process to begin again.

Two days before speaking with me, Becky had met Emily for lunch in a public place. Becky was relieved that things had gone fairly well.

“She was kind of getting back to her old self. But yesterday it took a turn. . . . She pulls us in, then she pushes us away.”

As the call wrapped up, Becky’s voice became softer. Calmer. Her pace slowed, and she ended her comments with one last entreaty: “The last six months have been the most difficult in Emily’s relationship with us, and Suzanne is a common denominator in everything.

“I just want my daughter back.”



Can you relate to Becky’s experience—or even to Emily’s? Maybe some aspect of this situation struck a nerve with you. Perhaps you’re thinking about your own child and what comes next.

Let’s get started.

1. How do I talk with a child who comes out to me?

Before overthinking *what* you want to say, think first about *how* you want to say it.

Experience has taught me that you and your child have at least one thing in common—the very thought of this conversation makes both of you uncomfortable! Neither of you wants to lose the other, and you know the stakes are high. There’s a decent chance that both of you fear being canceled by the other!

From the very first conversation, keep in mind that your child has likely been dreading sharing this news with you for longer than you might imagine. Perhaps she wondered if you might cut her off financially or kick her out of your home. Maybe she thought her same-sex attraction would eventually go away.

It’s also possible that some in the LGBT community told her what to expect from conservative parents or coached her on what to say. Your child might expect the worst from you, but let me be clear on this:

Showing empathy for your child's anxiety won't violate any of the principles and precepts you hold dear as a follower of Christ. In fact, you'll emulate Christ even more if you show up with a heart that's willing to listen and lean into her pain or confusion.

You and your child are navigating a culture that accepts, adopts, and affirms sexual expressions that deny the lordship of Christ. What your child sees and hears in society at large would likely shock your forebears. The prevailing culture—including social media, many public schools and universities, the neighbor next door, other family members, and even some Christian leaders and churches—is like a collection of tributaries that flow into the larger ocean of popular LGBT terminology and thought.

As parents learn what their kids are thinking about sexuality, faith, and family, they frequently tell me it's like someone has brainwashed their children. In many ways, popular culture is influencing our youth on issues of sexuality more than parents are.

As you pray and prepare for this conversation, commit to being transparent. Do you feel unsure? Awkward? Acknowledge that. Are you afraid of messing up? Admit it. Love your child with your best efforts to be respectful, kind, and humble. Reflect what you hope to receive in kind from your child.

The conversation you start with your son or daughter is another opportunity to love them well. You want your child to know that you love them unconditionally and always will. Place your confidence in God and ask for the Holy Spirit to help you.

2. What can I do if I accidentally find out my child identifies as LGBT?

If you've discovered that your child is attracted to someone of the same sex, I suspect you might have questions or concerns.

First, stop to consider your child's point of view. Your discovery—however innocent—might feel like a betrayal. Perhaps he has been waiting for the right time to tell you. Maybe he's passive and hopes to avoid an uncomfortable, gut-wrenching conversation. Or—and this one might hurt the most—he's been hiding these feelings and had no plans to tell you. It can be especially tough when you consider the emotions he's been facing without your knowledge.

Second, as I encourage other parents, ask permission before you initiate a hard conversation: "Son, do you have a minute? I'd like to talk with you." Incorporate humility from the start and pray for the strength to remain meek.

If the idea of requesting your child's permission bothers you, or if the word *meek* puts you off, please reconsider the true nature of meekness. A spiritually meek person makes room for others and is not self-willed.¹ The alternative is to have a harsh, stubborn, or authoritative disposition that could confirm your child's worst suspicions and encourage a critical response toward you.

Let your love earn you the right to be heard and exercise self-control so that nothing in your delivery intentionally offends. Keep in mind, however, that God's truth, even when shared with tender humility, can still offend those who don't want to hear it.

Third, begin by engaging your child in bite-size conversations. Save your lectures; manage your time and his attention. You want what you say—and how you say it—to engage your child's heart. The spirit of Romans 2:4 comes to mind: "Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" There might come a time when you have to warn your child about sinful behavior, but try to remain humble while doing so.

Your loved ones need you to be open and honest about what you've learned and how you've learned it. (See the story of Jane and her son in chapter 2.)

Finally, don't hesitate to call a therapeutic time-out if your first conversations don't go well. Be patient—there will be other times to talk. Don't sabotage your chance at future conversations, even if that means taking things slower than you might prefer in the moment.

3. How can I approach the situation if it seems like my child is questioning her sexual identity?

If you're not sure what your child is dealing with, try to take a step back. Keep your emotions in check. You don't want to project something onto your child that might not be true. *Never dabble in trying to read her mind.* Parents can't be sure what a child is thinking or feeling unless the child shares that information voluntarily.

Keep your heart, mind, and arms open to your child. Reach out intentionally and relationally. Pay attention to any feedback. Does she welcome your interactions? If so, lean in. If she seems reluctant, try giving her more space. Demonstrate interest and goodwill without being pushy, clingy, or stubborn.

Sort out what you actually *know* versus what you *think* or *feel*. What exactly do you know about your child's sexual history? Her peer groups? Her value system? Her devotion to God's Word? Her attachment to you? Consider what you really know about your child's words and behaviors. Avoid reading between the lines—and when you are tempted to do so, make note of your thoughts and whether you should save them for a future conversation.

Even when you are sure of some information, be careful about making inaccurate assumptions based on that information. Even facts can have different interpretations or meanings.

Be genuine in your interactions. Avoid sarcasm and misplaced humor. Pay attention by listening attentively and asking open-ended questions. Ask your child about her thoughts, experiences, and opinions.

Communicate the same respect you'd want to receive. If you want to share a particular aspect of your relationship with Christ, do so with a friendly, positive attitude. Good news that's combined with a bad delivery can undermine your best intentions and could provoke your child.

If you're hoping for the right time to talk to your child about her sexual attraction, ask yourself if what you truly *know* is weighty enough to have that conversation now. If you still think it is the right time, then pray before you act. Pray for yourself and your child, seek the wisdom of God's Word, and perhaps even write down some of the questions you plan to address. Finally, consider consulting a wise, trusted individual who can help you move past the echo chamber of your own thoughts and direct you toward calm, unhurried actions.

If you're sure that a conversation is advisable and necessary, a final step is to choose a reasonable time for a tough conversation. Try to avoid combining such a discussion with a birthday, holiday, or vacation. If at all possible, don't initiate the conversation over the phone, and never over text messaging. Do everything you can to have it in person with your child. You want him or her to both see and sense your unconditional love.

If your child says she is gay, your first response should be to thank her for telling you. Remember, kindness is *not* the same thing as condoning, and there will be other opportunities to remind her that unconditional love doesn't automatically equal unconditional celebration of her choices or behaviors. After all, just the word *gay* can mean many different things today. Don't assume you know what the person using a term intends. You can always ask for clarity by saying something such as "I want to understand better. Tell me more about what that term means."

Looking back, I wish I had asked my cousin about his feelings or experiences. I mentioned earlier that I don't think either of us knew how to start the conversation. Perhaps if we had discussed the subject when we were younger, we'd have been able to maintain a better relationship over the years. I hope and pray this can be the case for you and your loved ones.

4. What are signs that my child might be experiencing same-sex attraction, and how can I be sure?

You might think you can tell if someone identifies as gay, but don't count on it. Just because a person wears a gay Pride shirt or supports the LGBT community in some way, that doesn't mean he or she is gay. And stereotypes are *not* evidence. Simply put, you can't always tell. Furthermore, making or acting on assumptions is not helpful to either you or the other person and can be quite harmful to your relationship.

As a parent, you want to believe that you know your child well. You might also hate being surprised. Yet you can't know every detail of your child's life—especially if he is off at college or has moved out of your house. If your child is still at home, here are some things to consider:

- **Socially**, peers, social media, and a school setting can have a significant influence on your child. Gay-affirming social settings can be very appealing to a child who longs to fit in with the crowd. You might not notice these influences right away, but if you find your child asking leading questions about your thoughts on specific topics or if he promotes or defends certain causes or relationships, these may be early indications that he is testing your viewpoints in order to gauge his emotional safety in terms of your reactions.
- **Behaviorally**, as adolescents develop independence, they typically begin to separate from home and family. You're likely to see some frustration, impulsivity, and rebellion; these are common traits in adolescent development. At some point your son or daughter might experiment with LGBT-affirming behaviors. On these occasions, make a mental note to yourself. You might need to take a wait-and-see posture, or—if you notice a significant pattern of behavior—you might ask a question like “Do

you have many friends who say they're gay or trans? I know that's becoming pretty common."

- **Psychologically**, your child might not reveal any symptoms that suggest a major change in sexual identity. However, you might notice an emerging pattern of expressions related to anxiety and depression. I've consulted with many parents who have taken their children to a secular counselor for help with moodiness only to hear later that these children now identify as gay or transgender. Just because a child is experiencing depression or anxiety doesn't mean he's confused about his gender identity.
- **Spiritually**, you might see your child lose interest in your family's faith practice and community. While some of this is often an unfortunate norm in child development, it can quickly move from the subtle to the cynical. Your child might speak against your faith, the Bible, the church, or even God. Or your child might embrace a gay-affirming church or faith practice that contradicts the teachings of Scripture. As hurtful as this might feel, ask God to help you not take it as a personal affront. What your child is going through is not automatically an attack on you and your family.

When you notice significant changes in one or more of these four areas of your child's life, it's time to have an honest conversation: "Joe, as you're growing up, I also want to grow alongside you as your parent. I've noticed some behaviors that I'd like to ask about, but I want to begin by reminding you that I love you unconditionally and that I am a safe person for you."

5. What factors might be contributing to my child's changes in sexual attraction or gender identity?

Historically, the word *gender* has referred to the two biological sexes—male and female. In the 1960s, the term *gender identity* was introduced.

Referring to the concept of gender as a social construct, many in the modern LGBT community (particularly trans activists) have replaced objective biology with subjective feelings about one's body. This ideology suggests that one can be born a biological male or female only to adopt and express behaviors, attitudes, and appearances that are inconsistent with or even opposed to their innate male or female biology.² According to this view, genetics and chromosomes are less important than feelings and self-perception when it comes to determining one's gender.

Beginning at creation,³ however, the Bible, anthropology, and biology all reveal a binary—male or female—sexual design that continues to produce male or female offspring.

The Bible also teaches us that humans are fallen. Genesis 3 explains that Adam and Eve broke a covenant with God when they disobeyed Him. Their rebellion resulted in the fall of all humankind, and we, as their offspring, subsequently experience the consequences of the fall: sickness, hardship, violence, disease, and eventual death.

No longer in perfect union with God, Adam and Eve experienced a disintegration of spirit, mind, and body that damaged their relationships with God, self, and each other.

Sexual sins are an example of the fallen urge to place our desires, affections, and inclinations above God's. Thus, any sexual activity that violates God's design, whether same-sex or opposite-sex in nature, cannot reflect the will or plan of our Creator. Beginning in Eden, God designed the two biological sexes to complement each other. Since the fall, however, humankind is no longer at peace with God, and sexual sin is one of the results.

Academic conversations about human sexuality historically took place within the disciplines of theology, anthropology, and biology, but the modern narrative about sexual orientation and gender identity is a mix of psychology, sociology, culture, politics, social media, and legislation. And these fields increasingly discount the role of God in society and culture.

For example, same-sex attraction and transgender identity are multifaceted issues that affect the whole person—spirit, mind, and body. These issues also affect our relationships with others. We can explore how factors like unhealthy emotional attachments, broken family systems, bullying, sexual abuse, and trauma all correlate (correlation is *not* causation) in certain ways with an increase in LGBT experiences—and I believe we should. But I, as a follower of Christ, view these negative dynamics as outcomes of the fall of man from our original union with God.

These factors help explain a great deal about the origins of sexual confusion and where we find ourselves today.

Our culture has cut and pasted a new, modern understanding of humankind over the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding, and this new understanding now dominates the narrative. In many arenas, especially in academia, we've lost the theological foundation that tells us that humans were created male and female, that man and woman rebelled against God, and that human sexuality no longer mirrors God's creation ordinance.

While sexual brokenness is the norm in a fallen world, the gospel reveals how union with Christ also unites spirit, mind, and body with the Holy Spirit for God's glory. Biblically aligned counseling can help individuals pursue the peace and wholeness that God offers concerning sexual struggles—even the enduring struggles that might never change fully in a person's lifetime.

6. Is being LGBT a choice?

Parents frequently ask me whether homosexuality and other aspects of the LGBT experience are matters of choice. While a yes or no response might seem appealing, the reality is more nuanced. Human beings are quite complex in design, and we adapt—or even maladapt—to countless

life experiences. Consider, for example, how you or someone you know might have maladapted to texting and driving simultaneously.

Even LGBT advocates and members of the American Psychiatric Association can't seem to agree on whether one is born gay or trans. For some of these folks, the born-this-way approach implies something negative. Instead, they simply choose to celebrate diversity.

Back in 2017 (which feels like eons ago), *USA Today* ran an article saying, "Studies on identical twins show that while there is a genetic 'contribution' to sexuality, there is not genetic 'determination.' Despite the fact that identical twins share 100% of their genes, research shows gay/gay twin pairs are less common than gay/straight twin pairs."⁴ By referencing scientific findings, this mainstream news outlet acknowledged the shortcomings of the born-this-way perspective.

As for the question of same-sex desires being a choice, it's important to consider the differences between attraction, behavior, and identity:

- **Attraction.** Many individuals who deal with same-sex attraction or identity confusion mention that they first experienced these feelings during their childhood or teenage years. They frequently say things like "I simply knew I liked guys and not girls." Some express attraction to both sexes. The number of terms used to describe the various types of sexual attraction has expanded dramatically, as has the variety of factors that can lead to certain kinds of attraction. While no two individuals are the same, we've learned that some factors are more common than others among LGBT-identifying individuals, such as early exposure to pornography and experiences of sexual victimization or trauma during childhood.

Some people have undesired attraction that contradicts their biological sex, expectations, or values. A physical or sexual attraction, at least in its initial development, is largely involuntary.

Maybe something is attractive to you but you can't explain why. While this discovery is simply a product of self-awareness, it can also be a source of emotional suffering for those who see it as a contradiction of their deeply held values or beliefs. Like any other attraction that falls outside God's design, we typically refer to such a pull as a *temptation*.

When someone nurtures such an illicit desire by engaging in persistent sexual fantasies or actually acting on them, attraction can grow into something unwise, unhealthy, and unbiblical. That's how, in many cases, temptation moves from *potential* to *active and persistent*. Remember, an attraction by itself is not necessarily a willful, conscious decision. Yet attraction *can* become a pathway to recurring sin if one cultivates and reinforces the temptation through his or her thoughts, emotions, actions, and interactions with others. Examples of such actions and interactions include activities like pornography, sexting, and hookups.

Renouncing our weaknesses, repenting before our gracious and loving God, *and* better understanding our negative thoughts or actions are all important responses for anyone seeking to align with God's intent for human sexuality. The Lord is faithful to meet us when we turn toward Him in our hearts and minds.

- **Behavior.** Except for in cases where traumatic incidents disrupt or reshape sexual attraction, our behaviors typically involve conscious, willful decisions. Acting upon an attraction isn't obligatory; if someone does act, it's a deliberate choice. If a chosen action doesn't align with God's design for sexuality, then that choice becomes a wrongdoing. Furthermore, once certain behavioral doors are opened, the associated desires and actions often become self-reinforcing and more difficult to change.

Actions that are repeated become habits, and habits can easily become compulsions. If left unchecked, compulsions have the potential to develop into full-blown addictions. The decisions we make are powerful.

Thankfully, God wants to forgive our sins and reform our actions. It's His desire that we will seek Him, confess our wrongs, and turn away from sinful thoughts, intents, and behaviors. But when sexual sin occurs—and even more so, when it *continues*—let's remember the words of 1 Corinthians 6:18: "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body." The Word of God is gracious to give the reader these words of warning.

- **Identity.** Christians believe that God gives us identity—identity in Him. We are image bearers who reflect His glory, and He created us male and female (Genesis 1:27).

Among those who don't recognize God's role in our design or creation, however, the leading school of thought says that identity is primarily derived from feelings, thoughts, experiences, sexuality, and even community. Much like behavior, identity is often driven by choice, and our choices are an outgrowth of how we perceive ourselves. Do we see ourselves as God sees us, or is our identity simply a result of our circumstances and environment?

As you relate to loved ones who are questioning their sexuality, especially minors, it helps to consider that attraction is involuntary and sometimes even unwanted, whereas we tend to intentionally choose our behaviors and identity. The process of selecting our sexual behaviors and identity can become a self-reinforcing loop to the point that once-foreign-seeming behaviors and identities can eventually seem quite natural.

Before we move on from this question of choice, it's important to ponder the levels of responsibility individuals bear for their actions and

the way they identify. For example, let's look at the following circumstances to understand the variables that might affect someone's choices:

- Is the individual a child, an adolescent, or an adult?
- What is the extent of the person's sexual education?
- Did the individual have healthy role models?
- Has the person experienced trauma?
- Does the individual have a relationship with God?

These circumstances, and others, can all influence an individual's choices in their response to sexual temptation.

7. Could I be responsible for my child's LGBT identity?

The natural disposition of most parents ranges somewhere between caring and codependency. We care about our children, but we can also feel overly responsible for them. What our children do or don't do at home, at school, with peers, and even in adulthood can become an unhealthy obsession for otherwise healthy parents. We can even derive our identities from parenting (rather than from God) and end up making idols out of our children. If that shift occurs, parents will find it harder to entrust their children to the Lord.

I want to make this very clear: We control very little when it comes to our children, and what control we *can* exert only decreases the older they get. The sooner we abandon the fallacy of control, the better.

Let's consider a related question: *Should I hold myself accountable for my child's LGBT behavior?* Remember what we covered earlier and steer clear of thinking in extremes. (Also keep in mind the age of your child.) Not only can you not control your child, but your *responsibility* for your child lessens as he or she becomes a young man or woman. And while you remain responsible *to* your adult children, you're not responsible *for* them.

Through my experience counseling families, I've learned that it's not productive to assign feelings of shame and blame. And if you feel anxious or insecure about your parenting, it's probably a good idea to seek guidance from a dependable friend, pastor, coach, or therapist who can provide impartial support.

In my practice working with parents, I've often seen them experience guilt over things I never even would've imagined. However, a family system can have some culpability. Parents rarely cause children to question their identity, yet our culture often turns up the temperature just enough to bake the cake.

In short, the last thing I want is for you to experience guilt for past decisions. After all, we can't change the past; we can only learn from it. Instead, I hope you will meditate on two well-known passages of Scripture: The first is Genesis 3, which describes how Adam and Eve disobeyed God and forever changed humankind's relationship with our Creator. Then I want you to read the parable of the prodigal son and his father (Luke 15:11-32). Was the father—or Father—somehow to blame for the other party's unwise choices? Certainly not.

If you discover that certain aspects of your family's dynamics or your interactions with your child seem to align with the emergence of LGBT feelings, LGBT actions, or an LGBT identity, keep in mind that just because there's a connection doesn't mean one caused the other. As you read this book, you'll gain insights on how to have conversations with your child, address any actions that might require an apology, and find ways to make amends as much as you can.

Humbly taking ownership for any hurt you've caused or shortcomings you've had as a parent is *not* the same as assuming responsibility for any feelings of sexual confusion in your child. You cannot and should not blame yourself for the feelings and behaviors of others—people who make their own choices just like you do. You can, however, continue to love them unconditionally.