



**How to Talk  
with Gen Z About  
Gender & Sexuality**



JUDE 3 PROJECT

**axis**

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# Welcome!

Welcome to **How to Talk with Gen Z About Gender and Sexuality**. Over the next five movements, our goal is to equip parents and other caring adults to have compassionate, courageous, and biblically-based conversations about gender and sexuality.

This material is meant to equip you with the tools you need to have healthy and ongoing discussions on these complicated subjects. These tools include:

- ✓ Definitions of important terminology, including the LGBTQQIAAP acronym
- ✓ Verses and examples from the Bible that frame the purpose of sex and a biblical sexual ethic
- ✓ A self-check in to help you process your own emotions surrounding gender and sexuality
- ✓ Research-backed advice for how and when to approach these conversations in your household
- ✓ Practical recommendations for how to talk with your teen if they have come out to you or expressed confusion over their gender or sexual identity

But before we go into any of that, in Movement I, we want to give a broad overview of how Gen Z thinks about gender and sexuality, as well as provide a framework for how to have the kinds of conversations Jesus did while He walked the Earth.

To access the videos associated with each of the 5 movements, [click here](#), or scan this QR code:



# Movement I: The Art of Conversation

Written by Evan Barber

## Understanding the LGBTQ+ Community

*“If the gospel is to be understood, if it is to be received as something which communicates truth about the real human situation, it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed, and has to be clothed in symbols which are meaningful to them.”* — **Lesslie Newbigin, British theologian and missionary to India**

As we seek to understand and communicate with the next generation about gender and sexuality, we need to understand contemporary terminology to meet them where they are. In this movement, we’ll define some of the most commonly used terms around this topic, and then look at some important principles for conversation based on Jesus’ life and ministry.

Something to keep in mind as we discuss these terms is that Gen Z tends to view gender as something on a spectrum, as opposed to a binary view of sexuality as either masculine or feminine. There are always exceptions, but Gen Z commonly views gender and sexuality as disconnected from each other. YouTuber Brendan Jordan explains it (somewhat crassly) [in this way](#): “Sexuality is who you go to bed *with*, and gender identity is who you go to bed *as*.”

Understanding sexuality as broad and varied creates endless ways to define it. For many younger people, hitting upon the “right” label or category for their sexuality doesn’t seem to be as important as feeling free to embrace any label, or no label at all. Each individual is seen as the highest authority when it comes to defining what their sexuality is.

**LGBTQ+** stands for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer,” but the full acronym can be about twice as long. Some people use **LGBTQQIAAP**, and the plus sign after “LGBTQ” alludes to these later categories. While most of these letters have to do with who someone is and isn’t sexually attracted to, a few of them—like **transgender**, **intersex**, and **androgynous**—have to do with one’s gender identity.

The first few letters in the LGBTQQIAAP initialism are the obvious ones—lesbian, gay, and bisexual. “**Lesbian**” refers to a woman who is attracted to other women. “**Gay**” refers to a man who is attracted to other men (or more broadly, to anyone attracted to the same sex). “**Bisexual**” refers to a person who is attracted to both men and women.

“**Transgender**,” or “**trans**,” refers to someone who identifies with a gender other than the one that corresponds to his or her biological sex—often called their “assigned at birth” sex. Although many people are used to the “T” by now, the idea of being trans totally upends the previously stable categories of manhood and womanhood that being gay, lesbian, or even bisexual relied upon. It was controversial when the “T” was added onto the end of [LGB](#).

The first “Q” in LGBTQ is often a stand-in for the word “**queer**.” While “queer” was a derogatory term not so long ago, it is now embraced by individuals who don’t want to identify themselves under a “binary” category (e.g. male or female, gay or straight.) (The word “**non-binary**,” though not technically part of the LGBTQ+ initialism, has a similar meaning.)

The second “Q” can refer to someone who is simply “**questioning**” their sexual identity. This person may not feel like they’ve arrived at an answer in terms of who they are attracted to and what gender feels right to them, and maybe they never will. This type of “Q” person is currently curious about or exploring their gender identity or sexual attraction.

The I refers to “**intersex**,” which is someone who has both male and female sexual organs, chromosomes, and/or hormones, etc. (This term has essentially replaced the word “hermaphrodite” both in medical and cultural contexts.) The A’s refer to “**asexual**” and “**ally**.” “**Asexual**” refers to someone who is not attracted in a sexual way to people of any gender. An “**ally**” is someone who identifies as straight but supports people in the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, the P stands for “**pansexual**,” which refers to someone for whom sexual attraction is not limited to any kind of gender or sexual identity.

To recap:

- ⊗ L: Lesbian
- ⊗ G: Gay
- ⊗ B: Bisexual
- ⊗ T: Transsexual, or trans
- ⊗ Q: Queer
- ⊗ Q: Questioning
- ⊗ I: Intersex
- ⊗ A: Asexual
- ⊗ A: Ally
- ⊗ P: Pansexual

This may already feel like a lot, but we're really only scratching the surface. (For a more comprehensive list of terms, [click here](#).) We encourage you to become as familiar as you can with these terms and their various meanings. Consider also that the number of people self-identifying with one or more of these terms is ticking up rather quickly. As of April 2023, the CDC reports that [25.8%](#) of Gen Z identifies as gay, bisexual, or as currently questioning their sexuality.

## Love and Listening

One of our primary goals is to give you enough knowledge that you're able to ask informed questions in these conversations—and in that way, to be like Jesus. In his book *Jesus is the Question*, Martin Copenhaver records Jesus asking 307 different questions throughout the gospels, about a whole range of issues. He is asked 183 questions by different people—but he only answers 3 of them directly.

Now, if anyone was in the position to offer definitive answers to people's questions, it would've been Jesus. But He often saw it as more important to turn others' questions back around. By answering a question with a question, Jesus identified the rationale behind the question, which was often more indicative of the heart of the issue—and the asker.

Ironically, the person who asks good questions is often more effective at persuasion than the person who only makes declarative statements. As Drs. Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen point out in their book [Difficult Conversations](#),

*Changes in attitudes and behavior rarely come about because of arguments, facts, and attempts to persuade. How often do you change your values and beliefs—or whom you love or what you want in life—based on something someone tells you? And how likely are you to do so when the person who is trying to change you doesn't seem to be aware of the reasons you see things differently in the first place?*

When we believe that others are trying to understand *our* point of view, our defenses usually go down, and we're more willing to listen to *their* point of view. So as you enter into conversation with the next generation, we encourage you to do so with a posture of curiosity. These conversations can be incredibly difficult and delicate, and can perpetuate one of the biggest generational divides in the modern world.

But that divide isn't always for the reasons one might think. In a conversation with Justin Lee, Dr. Preston Sprinkle [reported](#) that only 3% of LGBTQ+ people who leave church cite disagreement about marriage and sexuality as their primary reason for doing so. A much greater percentage

mention issues like not feeling safe in church, not having anyone who will listen to their story, and the hypocrisy of other Christians.

Not only that, but the Marin Foundation [recently found](#) that 76% of LGBTQ+ people who have left the church are actually open to returning to their faith community, and when asked what would encourage them to do so, only 8% responded that a change in theology would be their requirement. The rest [mentioned](#) “feeling loved,” being “given time,” experiencing “no attempts to [change](#) their sexual orientation,” and experiencing an “authentic” and “supportive” community. In short, Marin writes, “the LGBT community is asking that faith communities be what they say they are: loving, patient, realistic, authentic, and supportive.”

David Augsburger [once said](#) that, “Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are nearly indistinguishable.” No matter where we are in this conversation, we can recognize that every human being desires to be heard, loved, and understood. So as you enter into these conversations, we encourage you to live into Jesus’ “golden rule”—to listen, and to try to understand, just as you want to be understood.

Here are some questions for your own reflection:

- ① Were you surprised at the statistics from Dr. Preston Sprinkle and the Marin Foundation? Why or why not?
- ① Why do you think Jesus spent so much time asking questions?
- ① What challenged you in this movement? What encouraged you?

# Movement II: Uncovering Our Own Expectations

**Written by Lisa Fields**

Conversations about gender and sexuality can bring up a lot of different emotions. Anger can be one of them. But it's important to remember that anger is not a primary emotion, but a secondary one. If you feel anger when you talk about these subjects, it can sometimes be the result of unmet expectations.

When our expectations go unmet, we may experience anger. Of course, we are not limited to that emotion; we can experience sadness, disappointment, betrayal, etc. All these are part of the human experience.

If we are going to have conversations with our children about sexuality and gender, it's important to understand the emotions that stem from our own expectations of our children. Knowing ourselves and our own expectations before we enter into difficult conversations will set us up to interact more productively. If we are unaware of our expectations, we will be unaware of how, or when, our own disappointment can trigger us. This may produce unfruitful conversations that could cause lasting emotional and/or spiritual damage to our children.

Every parent has hopes and dreams for their children. You may hope for a better life for your children than you've had. You may hope they have an easier road. You may hope they have a healthy marriage that lasts. You may hope they graduate from college. You may want them to have children, and that you can have grandchildren. You may hope that they become productive citizens in the world.

You may want them to be fit and healthy. You may want them to love God and follow him. You may want them to attend church. You may want them to become the model student or star athlete you always wanted to be. You may see them as your second chance, an opportunity to right all your wrongs.

You may also want them to identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. You may want them to identify as heterosexual.



Take a moment to honestly reflect on your hopes and dreams for your children, and then answer:

➤ **What hopes and dreams (or expectations) do you have for your kids?**

As you think about your expectations for your own children, it may also be helpful to think about the expectations your parents had for you.

➤ **What hopes and dreams did your parents have for you? How did those expectations make you feel as a child?**

Being aware of our own expectations and the impact of our parents' expectations on us will allow us to enter into conversations with more self-awareness and empathy. To be clear, expectations are normal; every relationship has expectations. However, not all expectations are helpful. We cannot fully love who our children are if we are too attached to who we expect them to be. What's more, our children are not the sum total of our expectations—they were created by God with steps that He has ordered for them. The plans God has for them may be very different from the expectations we have for them, but God's plan for them is always best.

Part of the reason we need to be able to honestly name our expectations is so that we can grieve them when they are not met. Part of being able to love who our children are is grieving who we wanted them to be. Allowing ourselves to go through the process of grief will better position us to have better conversations with our children.

➤ **What does grief over unmet expectations look like for you?**

One of the emotions that may rise up during conversations about gender and sexuality is fear. Sometimes our fears can be rooted in our own shortcomings around gender and sexuality. *What if my child is struggling like I struggled as a child? What if they are experimenting like I experimented? What if they are just like me?* These questions can grip the heart of a parent and paralyze them.

If you want your child to be better than you, the idea that your child may be just like you may haunt you. If you are still battling your own shame and guilt, it may be difficult to navigate a conversation about these things with your child. Before you enter into the conversation, take some time to reflect on your own journey around gender and sexuality.

➤ **What was your journey with your gender identity and sexuality? Did you ever have questions about it, or was it easy for you to fit the role that was culturally expected of you?**

➤ **How did your parents respond to your journey?**

- ② What do you wish your parents had done differently?
- ② How do you think God viewed you in the midst of your questions, desires, or early sexual behavior?

Answering these questions honestly should help you create a game plan around your approach when engaging with your children.

Many parents experience a lot of anxiety around the gender and sexuality of their children. They may wonder what it says about them if their child is gay or identifies with a different gender than the one they were assigned at birth. They may begin to wonder how their church will look at them. Their dreams of grandkids may start to feel unrealistic. Their dream of the wedding they wanted for their child may start to seem impossible. They begin to fear all their hopes for their child may never manifest.

Can you relate?

- ② What are your fears around your child's sexuality and gender identity?

Another challenge around children's gender and sexual identity is their relationship with God. Some parents may begin to question the salvation of their child based on their gender and sexual identity. They may begin to wonder whether their child is destined for heaven or hell. Panic may grip their heart at the idea of their child spending eternity in torment.

Has that thought ever crossed your mind?

- ② Are we concerned about our child's relationship with God because of their gender or sexual identity, or have we always had this concern?
- ② Are you more concerned with your child's sexuality or salvation?

As you answer these questions, we pray that they help you become more aware of your own emotions and expectations around your children, and that you are better able to engage this conversation with grace, empathy, love and truth.

# Movement III: This Is Challenging, But God's Got You

Written by George Moore

## Peace In the Storm

It was a scary moment in their journey, and one they would remember for the rest of their lives.

It was dark, the seas were raging, and it seemed like the disciples were about to die in their boat. Then, in a moment of grace and power, Jesus wakes up from his sleep and calms the storm by saying to it, simply, "Peace! Be still."

They were shocked; they were amazed; they were saved. Witnessing such an incredible moment, the disciples asked themselves, "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him (Matt. 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25)."

Parents, know that if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are called to be a disciple, and as a disciple, you will encounter scary and challenging moments in your faith journey. In fact, some things you see may shake you to the core. You may be seeing the storm rage—but it won't blow you down. Because like the disciples in our text, Jesus is in the boat with you.

Our reminder to you is that Jesus has the ability to say in this moment, "Peace, be still!" The situation with your child and their sexual identity may seem too big for you, but Jesus is with you and He has the power to calm the storm in your heart, in your mind, in your child, and your family.

- 🕒 In Movement II, we asked you to think about your own fears. Take a moment now to appreciate God's power in the midst of those fears.
- 🕒 Next, take a moment to think about your child. How might they be feeling, currently? Have you taken the time to hear their thoughts/fears regarding their sexual identity?
- 🕒 Think about Jesus calming the storm. What do you think He would say to you and your child in the midst of this storm?

## Historical Precedent for the Present Moment

Throughout Scripture, God's people have always been surrounded by a culture that doesn't share our sexual ethic. For example, think about all the texts in the New Testament that talk about sexual practices and sin (Romans 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 5-6; Galatians 5:19-26; Colossians 2:5-11; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-9; 1 Timothy 2:8-11; Titus 2:11-12; Jude 5-7). Each of these verses were written to churches who had new believers coming out of lifestyles that resemble things we see today. In Greco-Roman society, prostitution, homosexuality, adultery, and other sexual acts were permissible. Few things were left off the table in ancient Rome.

Paul knew this. The other apostles and leaders knew this. Yet, they all trusted in the God who has the power to save and sanctify a people who put their hope and trust in his son, Jesus Christ.

The New Testament church was a melting pot of people from all over the Roman Empire. Men, women, slaves, slave masters, rich people, poor people, Jews, Gentiles, noblemen, and commoners were all present in the assembly. Only a small percentage of them would have started with the sexual ethic that Paul and the other leaders had due to their Jewish background.

But by the power of the Holy Spirit and the law of love written on their hearts, these people united under God's call for holiness, purity, and self-sacrifice. In doing so, they were a witness to a pagan/unbelieving world of how people from all corners of the earth—with different attitudes about sex—were able to unite under the banner of the cross and follow after the esteemed Creator who made us to glorify Him. And as they followed Him, they became more like Him.

Most of us have had an experience in a city where we don't know our way around. We may have had to call on an Uber or a Lyft to help us get to our destination. We trusted these drivers to direct us in places we weren't familiar with. This gave us the freedom to focus on our activities and not worry about street signs and missed turns.

In the same way, God has been down this road before. He knows His way around your family's trial, your child's sexual identity questions & thoughts, and He gives us grace to make it through this journey. Believing this allows us to rest in God's love, be fully present to the needs of our child in this season, and to have confidence even when we feel like we don't have comforting or perfect answers.

- **Go back and read the verses listed in this section. How have these verses been used, historically, in the LGBTQ+ conversation? Have they helped or hurt our engagement with this community?**

- ⤵ How can you lovingly engage in conversations with people who have a different sexual ethic than you?
- ⤵ God's people have always been placed in the middle of a culture that doesn't share our sexual ethic, but God's Spirit has still been able to save, sanctify, and sustain His children in the midst of it. How can this truth help you to rest in God's sovereign care when it comes to your child's current situation?

## The Story is Still Being Written

God knows the story of your child. The Author of Life (Acts 3:15) has seen their life from eternity past and He is unfolding every layer before your eyes. Some things you will enjoy seeing and others might make you anxious. Yet, through it all, know that God is the perfect and loving author.

As a parent it's impossible to know every path God will take our children down, but God knows. Trust Him with the story of your child. God loves them more than you ever could, and His love has the power to change any heart and life.

In Genesis, Joseph had all kinds of seemingly random and hurtful things happen to him, and if you were on the outside looking in, you wouldn't imagine any great outcome for him. He was sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape, and placed in prison. Yet God had a plan for Joseph and his family that was already written (Gen. 15:12-20; Psalms 105:16-22). Joseph went from the prison to the palace because God was with him. Sometimes, what can be hard, scary, and even unfair, God uses for our good, his glory, and the good of others (Gen. 50:19-20).

Know that there are other parents and families navigating the same conversations with their child as you are. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:9 (NLT), "...remember that your family of believers all over the world are going through the same kind of suffering you are." Draw strength from the testimonies of other parents who have/are navigating this season. Let their words give you strength, life and hope in Jesus Christ. For not only do we overcome because of Christ's work, but also by the testimonies of the saints (Rev. 12:11).

Be encouraged. Stay faithful. Trust Him and be the faithful parent He has called you to be.

In Isaiah 46:10 and 13, God says, "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please... I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendor to Israel." What God was saying to his people was this: "I see it all. I see

your trials. Though they will be hard, my salvation, my favor, my righteousness is coming, and it will arrive on time.”

- ④ Think about these verses and God’s relationship with Israel. How can these encourage you during this time?
- ④ Look back at other trials and difficulties you faced. List a few of them and then write how God met you in those trials. How can seeing God’s faithfulness back then strengthen your faith for the current season?
- ④ Read Revelation 12:11. How can seeing other parents and families navigating these times with their children give you hope and endurance?

# Movement IV: A Theology of Sex

Written by Yana Conner

## Are We Asking the Right Questions About Sex?

In Christian circles, questions like these often become primary in conversations about sex:

- ② Who can we have sex with? Can it be with someone of the same sex, or does it have to be heterosexual?
- ② When can we have it? Isn't waiting until marriage kind of barbaric, patriarchal, and outdated?
- ② Also, what is sex? When do I know that I've gone too far? Does oral sex or sexting count?

While these are all questions worth answering, are they the best starting point for a conversation with your kid about sex, or is there a better one?

For a Christian who believes that God is the creator of all things, including sex, it seems like a better question would be: *Why did God create sex? What was His creational intent behind its beautiful creation?* The Christian's interest needs to move beyond the "who, what, and when" questions to ask questions that seek to discern God's design and desire for sex. He could've created a world without it. So, why did He choose to create one with it?

## Why Did God Create Sex?

At the beginning of the greatest story ever told, we are informed that God created the heavens, the earth, and everything in it (Gen. 1:1): light (1:3), sky (1:6-7), land and sea (1:9-10), vegetation (1:11-12), stars (1:14-18), fish and livestock (1:20-25), humankind (1:26-27). With each addition to His living and breathing mosaic, God declared over His creation these three words: "It is good." And upon its completion, He proclaimed it to be very good.

However, as Albert Wolters points out in his book [Creation Regained](#), when God proclaims the goodness of His creation, He isn't merely speaking about the aesthetics of its material parts, but also about the way in which those material parts are ordered.

For example, on each day of creation we observe God *making* and *ordering* His creation. On the first day, He *makes* light. Then, He *orders* it, separating it from darkness and referring to it with

the title “day” and the darkness “night” (1:5). He *orders* day and night further on the fourth day. He *makes* lights to govern over the sky, but he doesn’t leave them to figure out how to function on their own. He *orders* them, commanding the sun to rule over the day and the moon the night, making known to us how these two lights bring order to what we have come to understand as days, seasons, and years (1:14-18). As we continue to read through the creation narrative, we observe that God takes this same approach of making and ordering with all of creation. After *making* trees, God embeds within them (*or orders*) a way of growing and multiplying. They are to bear fruit after their own kind (1:12). After making humanity in His image, He orders them by giving them the role of serving as cultivating rulers over the earth.

When we acknowledge that the scope of God’s creational activity involves both making and ordering, it reveals to us that God not only created with power, but also with a great deal of wisdom. In His call for light’s existence, He demonstrates His power. In His call for light to govern the day, He demonstrates His wisdom. (Can you imagine if we had to work, play, run errands, and rear children in the dark?)

God exercises this same kind of power and wisdom when He created sex. And just as we gaze upon the stars with wonder and humility, trying to understand the creative mind of God, we would do well to consider sex and sexuality with the same sense of awe and humility, asking, “God, why did You create sex?”

When asking questions related to God’s creational intent, it is always best to return to Genesis 1-2 for answers. Let’s return to two key passages that give us insight on God’s creational intent for sex and human sexuality:

*Genesis 1:26-28:*

*Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”*



Genesis 2:23-24:

*The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

From these verses, we can discern the following three reasons why God created sex:

## **Procreation**

God's first command to the first male and female was to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. As Sam Allberry explains in his book, [Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?](#)

This command is not arbitrary. If people are made in His image, God wants his image to fill the earth—for the whole world to perfectly reflect who he is. His image-bearers are therefore told to reproduce his image so that it can be spread across the globe and God's presence and loving rule perfectly represented through His people.

## **Oneness**

God desires for the first male and female not only to utilize sex to propagate the human race, but also to cultivate a bond that resulted in them becoming one flesh. "In other words," as Allberry explains, "sex is part of the process by which the two become one. It is intended to have a profoundly unifying effect on two people." However, this physical oneness is not merely for their enjoyment. It is to mirror the oneness of the triune God, who called them to be a reflection of His image, saying, "Let us make humanity in our image" (1:28).

## **Intimacy**

Additionally, God desired this physical oneness between the first male and female to be filled with the kind of intimacy and love that allowed them to safely stand in each other's presence without feelings of fear or shame. This kind of safety requires the development of emotional and mental intimacy in addition to physical intimacy.

When we consider these three reasons for why God created sex, it becomes easier to answer the "who, what, and when" questions proposed earlier. Let's revisit them:

1 *Who can we have sex with? Can it be with someone of the same sex, or must it only be heterosexual?*

As Rachel Joy Welcher explains in her book, [Talking Back to Purity Culture](#), “the possibility of procreation...is unique to heterosexual sex.” If one of God’s primary goals for sex is procreation, then this clarifies that He purposed for sex to be between a man and a woman. Any other kind of sex is a deviation from God’s creational intent.

For example, consider Genesis 6:1-7. At the conclusion of these verses we read that God was so grieved by the sins of humanity that He was filled with regret for creating them. In the verses prior, we find that the source of God’s grief was that the sons of God had taken the daughters of humanity as wives and were procreating. Although the gender (male and female) and the context (marriage) is right, God is still displeased because His command was for humanity to fill the earth and multiply, not for the sons of God and the daughters of humanity to do so. It was the sons and daughters of humanity He called to fill the earth. The union between the sons of God and the daughters of humanity was a deviation from God’s plan for both sex and marriage.

2 *When can we have it? Isn’t waiting until marriage kind of barbaric, patriarchal, and outdated?*

God designed sex to be a unifying act between two people that cultivates intimacy and oneness.

If intimacy and oneness is a part of God’s design for sex, then casual non-committal sex is a deviation from God’s creational intent. If the goal of sex is to cultivate intimacy and oneness, then it necessitates the kind of fidelity and commitment that is expressed through marriage. The author of Genesis affirms marriage as God’s desired context for sex by explaining, in Genesis 2:23-24, that a man leaves his father and mother to bond and become one with his wife through sex. In Moses’ understanding, this bonding is only appropriate through marriage.

Many have deemed God’s design for marriage as unreasonable, outdated, or unnecessary, concluding that monogamy is not humanly possible or that marriage is an oppressive patriarchal construct from which humanity needs to be liberated. Some have even looked at the divorce rate as a reason not to get married, saying it’s what’s in our hearts that matters most. While we can agree that marriage does not always work out the way God intended, this does not affect His original intention.

God is eternal. He sits outside of time. When He set the world in motion, making and ordering His creation, He knew the multiplicity of ways humans would deviate from His

design and disorder His creation. However, He still set His commands for sex and all of life forth in the best interest of all of humanity. While these commands may create hardship and call for us to deny ourselves, His commands are still qualitatively good and for our good. A lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, formalized through the vows of marriage, is not unreasonable, barbaric, or outdated.

*What counts as sex? When do I know that I've gone too far? Does oral sex or sexting count?*

There can be a lot of confusion around these questions. However, what generally lies behind these questions for someone concerned with sin is, "How far can I go without being in sin?" But as previously stated, God created sex for the purpose of reproducing His image in the world, which is another way of saying that God created sex for His glory.

If this is true, sex is less about our pleasure and more about God's glory. And, we glorify Him most when we use His good gift of sex in the way that He intended. For the Christian, the question should not be "How close can I get to the darkness of sin without being in the dark?" but rather "How can I live more fully in God's light?" When the latter question guides the Christian's heart, their desire will be to heed Paul's word to not let there be even a hint of sexual immorality among them (Ephesians 5:3). Any activity or thought process that doesn't contribute to God's glory is outside of God's original plan for sex.

## What is Good?

Regarding sex, the "why" question is the most important, even if this question opens up further, deeper questions: "What is good? Who gets to define it? Is it God, or is it me?" Even though we can look at Scripture and conclude that God designed sex to be enjoyed within the context of a heterosexual marriage, we still have to decide whether or not we agree that God's design is good.

This question—what is good?—is at the forefront of the war in our hearts, and it has been from the beginning. In Genesis 3, the serpent tempts Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. While God had given Adam and Eve the freedom to eat from every other tree in the garden, including the tree of life, God instructed Adam and Eve to not eat from "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Satan tempts Eve by convincing her that God is withholding something good from her. Eve considers Satan's argument, looks at the tree and determines in her mind and heart that it is "good for food" (Genesis 3:6). She, in essence, rejects God's definition of good and creates her own.

For many in the rising generation, this question—what is good?—is where the battle starts and ends. In your conversations with your children, you must move from the who, what, and when questions—to the question, “Why did God create sex?”—and to the questions about what makes something good. Even if they can understand why God created sex, the answer will matter very little to them if they haven’t concluded that ultimately God is the definer of what is good, and not us.

Here are some questions for your own reflection:

- ④ What do you think about the answers to the “who, what, and when” questions here? Do you agree or disagree? Why?
- ④ Do your teens ever wrestle with whether God’s design is good?
- ④ Do you ever wrestle with whether God’s design is good?

# Movement V: Having the Conversation

**Written by Brandon Cleaver**

The Christian life is grounded in the need for balance. Faith in Christ compels us to be uncompromising in our Christian convictions, while presenting our message in a posture of compassion. In sensitive conversations, though, finding the right balance can be difficult.

Conversations about sexuality and gender with your child are about as sensitive as conversations can get. There is a natural internal struggle that many parents feel, wanting to tread lightly so as to not unnecessarily offend, but also recognizing the need for honesty. If you're feeling this tension, be encouraged that you are not alone. Thankfully, examples from Jesus' life and teachings can help provide some important ways to have a healthy and productive conversation with your child.

## A Foundation of Compassion and Conviction

Jesus is the personification of balance. The apostle John describes the incarnation this way: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of *grace* and *truth*" (John 1:14, emphasis added).

In other words, Jesus didn't come only to give grace, or unmerited favor. He also didn't come to only bestow truth. Without truth, grace is moral indifference. Truth without grace is unloving. Within the context of Christianity, these two are inextricably woven together.

A similar relationship exists between compassion and conviction. Conviction conveys confidence in our beliefs about a matter. As parents, we often hold a unique place of trust in our children's lives, and expressing our beliefs with conviction can help to communicate that we have genuinely thought through a subject.

But conviction without compassion breeds callousness. The late Catholic priest and spiritual guide Henri Nouwen [says this](#) about compassion: "Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears... Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human." Many of

the emotions Nouwen names can emerge during conversations about sexuality and gender—but compassion can help assuage them.

## Love Through Listening

Compassion is derived from the Latin words *pati* (to suffer) and *com* (with or together), and literally means “to suffer with.” Our contemporary application is synonymous with simply caring for someone else’s feelings, but as we see, its real meaning is weightier.

John 11 tells the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. This is the story that carries the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). But Jesus wasn’t just weeping over Lazarus’ death. Verse 33 says, “When Jesus saw her (Mary) weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” Jesus wept when He witnessed the suffering of Lazarus’ sister Mary. His tears of compassion showed how He suffered with her.

The art of compassionate listening is an important element of conversations around gender and sexuality. Your child, like any adult, wants to be heard. They want you to intently listen in a way that shows you’re “suffering with” them. Notre Dame University professor John Paul Lederach [framed](#) listening as “...a spiritual discipline if, like a spring, it bubbles up from genuine love.” And at the heart of a parent’s desire for these conversations is a love of their child. Listening is an act of love when we demonstrate it in a way that shows we’re “with” them.

## The Disarming Power of Questions

As we pointed out in Movement I, it has been estimated that Jesus asked over 300 questions in the Gospels, but only answered 3 directly. While some debate the specific numbers, it is undoubtedly true that His normal practice was asking questions. Jesus certainly could have provided answers to all those questions, so why didn’t He?

Questions can be disarming in three ways:

- 1 They open people up to their assumptions.
- 2 They can help clarify others’ points.
- 3 They can help people organically find answers through self-reflection.

There will obviously be times during these conversations that you provide answers or reply with a statement to your child. But it’s also important to be discerning about when to ask authentic

and compassionate questions, which may help your child re-examine some of the thoughts they've communicated.

## **Incarnational Space**

Choosing the right environment is critical for fostering healthy conversation. The location we choose can either add discomfort and anxiety or help to reduce it. A place where your child can feel secure in talking with you and bearing their hearts is an incarnational space.

Deuteronomy 6:7 talks about incorporating conversation into the midst of our daily lives. Regarding God's precepts, it says, "Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." In other words, when you have down time, talk; when you're on the go, talk. Whatever else you're doing, *build conversation into it*.

One of the best ways to diffuse tension in these conversations can often be converse side-by-side instead of face-to-face. Sitting down across a table from your son or daughter and saying "we need to talk" can lead to awkwardness and defensiveness. Having a partial distraction, like a car ride, a sports game, or a campfire can work wonders for conversation.

Also, don't feel like you have to have the ultimate, 100% complete conversation in one sitting. As Dr. Tina Schermer Sellers puts it in her book [Sex, God, and the Conservative Church](#), "Children and adolescents do not need *one* 100-minute (awkward and painful) sexual health conversation; they need *100* one-minute conversations. They need sexual and relational education delivered in many, many sound bites, *weekly*, across their entire childhood and teen years."

As you think about these things, think also about where your child feels safe. Where is a place where they might feel happy and secure, but which would still be private enough for you both to have a genuine interaction? Be intentional about prioritizing their peace in a place where they can feel free to be vulnerable and honest.

## **Developmental Markers**

One of the hardest things about these conversations is knowing when your child is ready to have them. The truth is that the moment often comes for our kids before we, ourselves, feel like we are ready.

The average age for pornography exposure in 2023 is 11 years old or younger, according to some [sources](#). Adult content is one of the ways that children may first encounter the possibility of same-sex attraction. In these cases, a child may show another child this type of content, or they may stumble across it as a complete accident. You can do a lot to keep your child protected from pornography, but you cannot account for every circumstance to ensure that it absolutely isn't going to happen. And even if you could, any kid who is paying an ounce of attention to the world around them is likely to recognize that same-sex couples exist, as do gender non-conforming people.

If your child is already coming to you with questions about sexuality and gender, delaying the conversation until a time when you feel fully prepared won't help them get biblical answers in their moment of need. If you are hesitant to talk about sexuality with them, they will ask their questions elsewhere, and you may not be happy with the answers they come home with. Instead of talking around it, try to address it directly in an age-appropriate way.

Again, you can aim for micro-conversations that address one question at a time, and you don't have to reach a firm conclusion at the end of every one. You may struggle and utter a prayer or two during these moments, but after **they're** over, you'll be so glad that these truths came from you and not from somebody who isn't interested in your child's salvation.

Children who might be ready for a conversation about these ideas include:

- ⦿ Kids who have developed the physical signs of puberty (8 to 13 for girls, 9 to 14 for boys)
- ⦿ Kids who are asking questions about dating relationships, including who they might be "allowed" to date and when
- ⦿ Kids who are broaching the subject or testing the waters by bringing up friends who have different gender or sexual identities
- ⦿ Kids who are having sexual identity and gender discussions as part of their school curriculum
- ⦿ Kids who have expressed sexual or gender identity confusion or who have come out to you already

## Starting the Conversation

We want to provide you with a few questions to help start these conversations, whenever you and your child are ready. But first, we want to remind you that God is with you, and God is in you. The Apostle Paul rhetorically asks, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Finding spiritual rest in this fact can



make the difference between a conversation brimming with anxiety or one where the Holy Spirit's role is truly valued.

Information can help change the mind, but only the Holy Spirit can move the heart. As parents we desperately desire for our children to flourish abundantly. We want them to live incarnational lives that abide by Jesus' teachings. But life is a journey full of hills and valleys. This is why Jesus comforted His disciples with news of the coming Helper: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept Him, because it neither sees Him nor knows him. But you know Him, for He lives with you and will be in you." (John 14:16-17)

The Holy Spirit is with you always. Lean on Him to help you. Stay prayerful and patient with your child. Know that however much you love your child, God loved them first. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a message to you, your child, and the world. It was his way of saying, "I love you." While His love doesn't promise that things will be easy or go exactly as you hoped, we can find peace through the power of His presence.

In order to help you talk with your teens about gender and sexuality, here is a list of questions that you might consider asking:

## **About Sexuality:**

- ⊗ Is there much pressure at your school to be in a romantic relationship?
- ⊗ What kinds of things are your friends saying about boys, or girls?
- ⊗ What do you think about that?
- ⊗ Have you ever felt like you were attracted to someone of the opposite sex?
- ⊗ Have you ever felt like you were attracted to someone of the same sex?
- ⊗ What do you do with those feelings?
- ⊗ Why do you think God created relationships?
- ⊗ Why do you think God created sexuality?

## About Gender:

- ④ Would you say that you feel comfortable in your own body?
- ④ What do you think it takes to feel truly comfortable in our own bodies?
- ④ Why do you think God gave us bodies?
- ④ What do you think it means to be a man, or a woman?
- ④ Do you know anyone who has experienced gender dysphoria?
- ④ Have you ever experienced gender dysphoria?

## If Things Go Sideways

We don't want to pretend like having these conversations is easy. It's possible that you'll receive answers you weren't prepared for, or your child might say something that you don't want to hear. You may rehearse the conversation in your mind to be prepared for all possible outcomes—a strategy we recommend—but even doing that isn't guaranteed to make the conversation smooth or easy.

Your child might not want to acknowledge the conversation, or might simply state, "I'm not comfortable talking about this with you." Your child might come out to you as having a different gender identity or sexuality while you are discussing these things. Maybe your child will say that they are having gender dysphoric thoughts and ask to see a mental health professional. If they have come out to you as questioning or queer in the past, your child may double down when you try to discuss a biblical sexual ethic or ask them questions about what sex is for.

In these moments, too, we'd like to offer you encouragement. You may choose to let them know you hear their desire for a better time or place to talk and drop the subject. You may choose to maintain a posture of questioning and try to find out more about where your child is coming from when they express a different point of view from yours. You may feel your emotions rising and choose to disengage completely until you can be calm.

No matter what happens, the key here is to demonstrate that you love your child and are committed to seeing them where they are, no matter their response. Letting your child know that you are on their team unconditionally will give you many more opportunities to continue this discussion and keep the conversation line open.

# Epilogue

When it comes to conversations about gender and sexuality, they will almost always feel scary. We want our kids to have a biblical approach to their own sexuality or gender. But it is important to realize that this conversation is extremely personal, even intimate to our kids—so it's important to ease into it.

To think that anything major is going to shift because of a single conversation is misguided. Deep issues like gender and sexuality will require many, many conversations to fully address. The great news is that as a parent, you have years and years over which you can have these conversations. Your influence can extend far beyond the years that your child has in your home. In fact, many parents report that conversations became more meaningful after their kids left the house.

It can be easy to put pressure on yourself to influence or change a way that your child is thinking or behaving. In fact, for many parents there will be sleepless nights and anxious days as our kids walk down paths that we don't want to see them tread. This is the time to give whatever the issue is up to the Lord. As parents sometimes we try to play the role of the Holy Spirit, but when we do, we're trying to affect a change that only He is capable of.

Our encouragement to you is this: if and when your kids decide to adopt a new identity, be it LGBTQ+ or anything else, it is not time to panic. It is time to love that child more deeply, and more fully. It is time to take long drives or go out to dinner and share life together. It is time to affirm the good in them. And God is faithful. When the time comes, you will have a chance to share your true heart, and your child will be more likely to receive it because the relationship, the bond, will be strong enough to handle it.

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