HOMOSEXUALITY: KNOW THE TRUTH AND SPEAK IT WITH COMPASSION

by Alan Shlemon

It’s not surprising people think Christians hate homosexuals. They see the way we often treat them.

Kyle’s sad story was similar to others I’d heard. After 25 years of immersion in the gay lifestyle, he wanted out. His choice to follow Jesus meant a day-to-day struggle to stay celibate because simply becoming a Christian didn’t change his same-sex desires. With God’s help, though, he was winning the battle.

Kyle thought his church would be a safe harbor during the storm. But when he “came out” to his pastor and a counselor, both told him to never speak of his plight again. His church forced him back into the closet.

Fifteen years of celibacy later, Kyle came out a second time. Surely things have changed, he thought. It must be safe now. After all, everyone has struggles and temptations. This time he hoped his new church would come alongside and pray for him. But he was mistaken. They turned a blind eye to his struggle, discouraged him from serving, and relegated him to attending and tithing.

Back into the Closet

Our formula for gays is predictable: Condemn and convert. Rebuke their behavior, blast them with the Bible, and then try to win them over with a cliché.

“Sodomy is sin,” we proclaim. Then we quote our “clobber passage,” a verse that condemns homosexuals or even commands their execution. “But there’s hope,” we reassure them. “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.” That’s not what they hear, though. They hear one word: “hate.”
Armed with Bible verses for bullets, we’re locked and loaded, ready to fire at the first sign of a homosexual. But there’s no grace in a gunshot. Instead of offering hope and healing, we inflict more injury.

We shouldn’t be surprised when gays go back into the closet after they try to come out in the church. Worse, many go back into the lifestyle, sometimes through a “gay church” that shows them the love, grace, and respect they had hoped to get from us.

Predictably, younger people often perceive Christianity negatively. The Barna Group found that young people think Christians are not only opposed to homosexuality but also show “excessive contempt and unloving attitudes towards gays and lesbians.” Ninety-one percent of young non-Christians and 80 percent of young churchgoers perceive Christianity as “anti-homosexual.”

More tragically, the Barna study found that younger Christians complained their church failed to help them apply biblical principles to their friendships with gays. Young people lack arguments and tactics needed to maneuver in conversation and navigate moral dilemmas in a thoughtful but loving way. Consequently, young people think they must choose between their faith and their friends who are gay. If their friendships mean more to them than their theology, they will choose their friends over their faith every time.

Something is wrong here. Clearly, we need a new approach. Our young people think they’re faced with a difficult moral dilemma. But they don’t have to abandon their gay friends just because homosexuality is wrong. There is a third option, but it’s something that’s rarely taught or modeled in church.

Know the Truth
Our new approach incorporates two key elements: truth and compassion. Truth speaks to the content of our message. Compassion addresses the manner in which it’s conveyed. It’s a winning combination based on principles found in 1 Peter 3:15—defend the truth with gentleness and respect.

Truth starts with a biblical understanding of homosexuality. Although there are six main passages on the subject, for strategic reasons I recommend using Romans 1:26-27 as your primary text. It’s in the New Testament, so you sidestep the challenge that the Old Testament verses don’t apply to us today. Romans also addresses both male and female homosexuality and outlines the real problem: rebellion against God and rejection of His created order. This makes it difficult to argue that the behavior condemned in the passage is something other than homosexuality.

Knowing the biblical truth about homosexuality is important because many
people deny that God condemns homosexual behavior. Indeed, they go to great lengths to reinterpret those six passages. Although they’re not successful, their claims sound appealing to people who don’t carefully interpret the Bible. If we learn and understand these verses, clearing up this distortion is easy.

Religious arguments, however, are often immediately dismissed by non-Christians. So knowing the truth doesn’t mean we learn only biblical arguments. An effective strategy also incorporates secular arguments. This includes appeals to natural law, the common good, and public health. If you can base your views on evidence that make sense even to nonreligious people, you’ll be able to speak with anyone.

Getting them to consider your ideas can be difficult though. That’s why it’s critical to present our views in a conversational manner. We’re not typically trained to do that. Too often we try to persuade by making statements instead of asking questions. This immediately raises defenses. Suppose you’re discussing whether homosexuality is genetic and say, “Even if being gay is genetic, that doesn’t mean that it’s right.”

Your friend replies with, “Sure it does! I can’t deny how I’ve been created.” Now what? Another statement? Their defenses are up, and the conversation grinds to a halt.

Questions, on the other hand, are friendly and more engaging. They invite discussion. Rephrase your statement with a question: “I’m curious to know your thoughts on this. Can you tell me why you think if something is genetic, it must be right?” This is disarming. It doesn’t provoke the same knee-jerk reaction. Instead, there’s a give and take. People naturally respond to questions, and the discussion moves along.

Or you can gently challenge their belief with a question like this: “Do you think any behavior is morally appropriate simply because it has a genetic link?” Notice that even though you’re asking a question, you’re still making your point. Just because a behavior has a genetic component, that doesn’t make it right. Making your point with a question is friendlier.

Another way to incorporate questions into your conversation is to use the “burden of proof” rule. Applying this rule makes discussions about homosexuality less difficult and more engaging. The burden of proof is simply the responsibility to give proof—credible reasons—in favor of a point of view. The rule is simple: The people who offer an opinion bear the burden to give reasons for it. If they make a claim, it is their job to defend it, not yours to refute it.
Too often Christians ignore this rule. Someone says something like, “Christianity is a homophobic religion,” and off we go defending ourselves. This is unnecessary. Why should we do all the work, when they made the statement? They made the claim, so it’s their job to defend it.

Simply ask, “How did you come to that conclusion?” or “What reasons do you have for thinking that’s true?” Then sit back and quietly listen. The question gently shifts the burden back where it belongs—on the person who made the claim. It asks them to give reasons for their view, which is a legitimate request. It also makes our job easier by taking the pressure off us to respond.

Questions allow us to make our points and advance the discussion in disarming ways. When we incorporate questions, our discussions about homosexuality become less intimidating. We can make our points without pushing our views on others. And we spend less time in the hot seat, responding to claims we have no obligation to address.

**Speak It with Compassion**

We need to add one more critical element to temper our approach. If we know the truth and know how to help others see it, yet we don’t communicate it in a way that shows we care, we’ll botch the whole thing. We need to be moved with empathy and to express that clearly. It might be difficult for us to relate to having same-sex attractions, but we’ve all been in tough situations and struggled with things we knew were wrong. When we’re not compassionate, we come off as cold and harsh. We forget we’re talking to human beings who have feelings just like us.

The combination of truth and compassion works. It’s biblically consistent and cultivates healthy relationships with gays and lesbians. This is a delicate balance though. If you come on too strong with your religious views, you’ll be labeled homophobic. If you get too friendly with the gay community, you’ll be tagged a compromiser by someone in the church. It doesn’t have to be that way. You can hold that homosexual behavior is wrong but still have a Jesus-like influence on gays and lesbians by nurturing positive relationships with them.

What does it look like to speak the truth with compassion? Three principles can help us live this out practically. One, treat homosexuals as you would anyone else. Two, don’t make the gospel more difficult than it is. And three, aim to make a long-term difference, not just a short-term statement.

**Treat Homosexuals as You Would Anyone Else**

This may seem like obvious advice, but many Christians act differently around homosexuals. They get uneasy. Their nonverbal communication, their behavior, and the direction of their conversation all change.
When gay men and women come to church, we create new rules. I remember teaching at a church that asked a lesbian to change seats because she was sitting next to another female. That’s strange. I doubt this church splits up people who gossip. It’s unlikely they ask unmarried couples living together to sit in different sections. Why treat a gay person any differently?

The simple answer is, we shouldn’t. We should treat homosexuals as we would any other person. Show them the same dignity, kindness, and respect you would show someone who isn’t gay. Here are two specific suggestions for doing this.

First, make friends with a gay man or woman. Get to know them personally, their dreams, their fears, and their challenges. Play tennis with them. Go to their social gatherings. Get to know their families and friends. Be vulnerable about your own struggles and failings. When you treat them like your other friends, they’re likely to reciprocate. They’ll be vulnerable too.

I know this may sound radical to some, but it’s very powerful. I remember one friendship I had with a gay man. Though he knew about my Christian beliefs, I was sensitive not to bring up homosexuality unless it came up naturally in conversation. I simply focused on our friendship as I would with any other person.

Then one day he brought up his own doubts about the gay lifestyle. He asked me about his options. He asked me about Christianity. That’s when knowing the truth—and how to defend it—really helped. We talked for hours about his lifestyle, the truth of Jesus, and where his life was headed. That kind of vulnerability and honesty is what you can expect from a real friendship. When we treat gays and lesbians like anyone else, we build relationships that create healthy intimacy. This increases our ability to make a difference in their lives.

A friend of mine made great friendships with two gay men he worked with, even though he was outspoken about his Christian convictions. He never tried to change them, confront their behavior, or hammer them about their lifestyle. Instead, he treated them like his other friends and waited patiently for an opportunity.

One day his gay friends approached him. “You’re different from other Christians we know. Most harass us about being gay, but you treat us like your other friends. We appreciate that.” From that point on, his relationship with them turned a corner. There was a new level of honesty in their conversation that allowed my friend to share the truth about this faith with them.

Second, don’t expect homosexuals to change their lifestyle before they come to
church. Several years ago, two gay men showed up to a church. They walked in, holding hands, and sat down. People next to them went ballistic. “That’s disgusting,” they snickered. I realize it’s difficult for some believers to tolerate homosexual affection, but they should be grateful those men even came to church. Besides, gay men and women don’t need to come to church after they’re gay, but because they’re gay. We’re all guilty; we all need transformation and forgiveness. Gays and lesbians are no less welcome than gossipers and gluttons.

By treating homosexuals like anyone else, you create opportunities to speak the truth. This first principle can be put another way: When it comes to homosexuals, our desire for them is not heterosexuality, but holiness. We’re not trying to make gays straight. We’re trying to lead them straight to Jesus, just as we would anyone else. Once they trust Him, He transforms their life from the inside out. So to know the truth isn’t merely about the truth of homosexuality—whether it’s right or wrong—but the truth of Jesus and His power to transform men and women.

Don’t Make the Gospel More Difficult Than It Is
“The gospel is offensive enough,” Gregory Koukl of Stand to Reason says. “Don’t add any more offense to it.” The basic gospel message is the bad news of sin and judgment before the good news of grace. We all need a pardon. That message doesn’t initially give people a warm, fuzzy feeling. In fact, it’s offensive to most people. That’s a big reason so many reject Jesus. We should never remove the offense that’s inherent to the gospel, but there’s no need to make it more difficult than it already is.

Here are a few ways we can apply this principle. First, let’s stop saying we’re “antihomosexual.” The Bible isn’t antihomosexual; it’s antihomosexual behavior. This is a critical difference. When asked, “Are you antihomosexual?” it’s better to be precise.

Answer that you have nothing against homosexuals—your concern is their behavior. Christians are not antidrunks. We’re against drunkenness. We’re not antiliars. We think lying is wrong. We’re not against the person who sins. Rather, we oppose the sinful behavior. Following Jesus’ example, we love and care for people regardless of their shortcomings. Saying we’re antihomosexual confuses the issue and compounds an already difficult situation.

Second, let’s avoid offensive ways of presenting our arguments. A common tactic to respond to the “since homosexuality is natural it must be moral” argument is to offer a counterexample. “Well, pedophilia is natural to some people, but that doesn’t make it moral.” Though this response might be technically sound, it is unnecessarily harsh and often misunderstood. People erroneously infer that you mean homosexuals are pedophiles. An alternative and less crass response might
be to ask, “If lying to keep yourself out of trouble were natural, would that make it right?” This counterexample makes the same point without the offensive content.

Third, don’t treat homosexual behavior as the most detestable crime against God. When we make it the supreme evil, we add unnecessary offense. Gays will conclude that we think all sin is bad, but their sin is the worst. And if their sin is the worst, they’ll conclude they are the worst. But the Bible doesn’t teach that homosexuality is the greatest evil. In fact, it’s listed right alongside stealing, coveting, getting drunk, and lying.

Next, don’t call homosexuality a choice. It’s not. This is hard to swallow for many Christians. Although homosexual behavior is a choice, homosexual attraction is not. I have no reason to think there’s a “gay gene,” but I don’t believe people choose to be attracted to the same sex. Homosexual attraction is a condition that often begins to develop at a very young age—too early to be a product of choice.

When you say homosexuality is a choice, this is a tip-off that you don’t understand homosexuality or homosexuals. It becomes obvious you have no idea what gays and lesbians experience.

“You think it’s a choice?” they ask. “Why would I ever choose to be gay? It’s painful to be gay in this world. I would never choose this for myself.” Not only are they offended, they’ll disqualify other things you say because you don’t understand them. You’ll lose your ability to be an influence.

Sometimes even saying homosexual behavior is a choice will not get you off the hook because it’s too easily misunderstood. The problem is, the word “choice,” in this context, carries with it the idea of choosing one’s sexual orientation. My suggestion is to avoid the word “choice” altogether when talking about homosexuality. It’s too confusing.

Finally, avoid the cliché, “God loves the sinner, but hates the sin.” It rarely gives hope to gay men and women. One former gay man confessed that he could never process this statement when Christians said it. Gays don’t see themselves as people who struggle with a homosexual problem. Being gay is who they are, not just what they do. Telling them that God hates their sin strikes at the core of who they perceive themselves to be. It’s unhelpful and produces the opposite effect you intend.

Now that we know what not to do, let’s talk about our strategy to move us forward.
**Make a Long-Term Difference, Not a Short-Term Statement**

I recently taught on apologetics at a university. My goal was to show how to make our message persuasive and yet gracious. After the event, I stopped at a local coffee shop for a dose of caffeine before the long drive home.

The barista served up my coffee and then asked about my day. I told her I gave a talk about how Christians can share biblical truth in a more friendly, relational, and winsome manner.

“Oh! You need to speak at my university,” she insisted. “We’re sick of ‘evangelistic alley.’ It’s a walkway in the center of campus where Christians hold signs and yell at students. Some of them shout that God is going to judge fags. There’s no discussion with them. They just want to be heard. You should teach them.”

Though my heart sank, I realized the barista was on to something. The Christians of “evangelistic alley” were settling for a short-term goal—declaring that homosexuality was sin that should be “repented” of—while squandering their long-term opportunities. Stopping sin can be worthwhile, but it isn’t the only goal. It certainly shouldn’t be pursued at the expense of making a more critical, long-term impact.

The long-term plan with homosexuals should be obvious: Help them to know Christ. It’s the same strategy we have with other non-Christians regardless of their sin. But it’s not a quick process. It rarely is with any non-Christian, but this is especially true with homosexuals. Yet we often act as if our most important goal is to change homosexual behavior in the short term rather than waiting patiently to make a more significant difference in the future.

God can give you opportunities to speak the truth with compassion anytime in a person’s life. Don’t try to make a moral statement today if it jeopardizes your chance of influencing people at a more opportune time tomorrow. Think long-term.

One time when I was teaching at a church on homosexuality, the parents of a 25-year-old gay man asked me for advice. “He wants to bring his boyfriend over for dinner,” they said, “but we told him that homosexuality is against God’s design. He can come over, but his boyfriend must wait somewhere else. They need to know where we stand.”

I’m sympathetic to their moral concern, but making a moral statement today might lessen their influence tomorrow. It’s also unnecessary. Their son already knows their view on homosexuality. Why hurt his feelings and alienate him? There may come a time when their son is disillusioned about his life and more
open to hearing the truth. If his parents have been careful not to judge and harass him unnecessarily, he’s more likely to turn to them for guidance. If, however, his parents have burned their bridges with him, he’s not likely to turn to them for advice.

Once, while I was teaching at a church on homosexuality, the parents of a lesbian woman approached me. They were pleasantly surprised by my emphasis on truth and compassion. As they told their story, it was clear to me they were living out this principle perfectly.

Their daughter lived at a substance-abuse group home with other gays and lesbians. Every weekend the parents invited their daughter and her gay friends to their home and treated them like family. Their daughter’s friends even called them Mom and Dad. Loving them was only the first step, though. These gays and lesbians needed both love and truth. So the parents invited them to church. After several months, the daughter and her friends accepted the offer because the parents showed them the kind of love and acceptance they’d expect from their own family. There wasn’t a misguided attempt to make a short-term statement, only the parents’ long-term plan to have an influence.

There may be times when you’re asked a direct question and you have no choice but to respond in a way that sounds offensive. Sometimes that’s unavoidable. But we don’t want to unnecessarily damage our relationship with gays and lesbians. Remember to focus on the influence you can have over the course of their life.

**The Value of the New Approach**

Homosexuality is here to stay. In fact, it’s becoming more a part of our culture every day. Each successive generation is more accepting of the gay lifestyle. Barna’s research found that “people 35 and younger are...substantially more likely to consider homosexuality an acceptable lifestyle; and notably more likely to approve of clergy conducting or blessing gay marriages.” The Barna report concluded that “over the long term, we expect to see a growing acceptance of...homosexuality as Baby Busters and Mosaics, the youngest generation, become more influential in public policy and business policy.”

As a result, we need to know the truth and speak it with compassion more than ever. Our youth will be our future leaders. They’ll be our doctors, teachers, and lawyers. In 30 to 40 years, one of today’s youth will be leading our country as president. The minds of young people today carry ideas that will affect our world tomorrow. Although the Barna Group’s findings paint a dim picture of our future, we can brighten our prospects by reaching out to young people in the right way. We’ll minimize the drastic changes that are expected in public policy as a result of the influence of pro-gay generations.
Young believers will also find this approach refreshing. Rather than being faced with the choice of keeping their faith or their gay friends, now they’ll keep both. Their lasting friendships will give them opportunities to graciously share their convictions about homosexuality and ultimately about Jesus.

The most important reason to use this new approach is this: We know it works. It’s been tried and tested. When we know the truth and speak it with compassion, we see the difference it makes. We build lasting friendships with gay men and women. We improve our chances to communicate our convictions on homosexuality. Gays and lesbians reconsider their lifestyle. And people who thought Christians only hate homosexuals now know we care.

We still have a long way to go, but our journey now has more direction. Though we’re still locked and loaded, we’ve exchanged our bullets for truth and our clichés for compassion. Once ill-equipped to meet the challenge of homosexuality, now we’re ready to answer the gay community’s need for truth and healing. And though we forced Kyle back into the closet, our new approach will reach in to draw him out.

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