



The Language of Sexuality and Gender

The church needs to speak with a biblically faithful and deeply empathetic voice as we engage in nuanced conversations about the complex topic of sexuality and gender. Consider this a starting guide to the terminology that's rapidly developing within our culture regarding the body, desire, and identity.

L-G-B-T-Q-I-A

- **Lesbian** = women who are attracted to women
- **Gay** = attracted to the same sex; used of both men and women
- **Bisexual** = a person who is attracted to both men and women
- **Transgender** = kind of an umbrella term capturing many different ways in which someone does not identify with their biological sex. Typically, a biological man who identifies as a woman, or vice versa
 - o Important to understand that Trans is different from LGB. LGB deals with one's sexuality (meaning attraction/desire/orientation), while T deals with the gender one identifies with.
 - o LGB = who you go to bed *with*. T = who you get to bed *as*
- **Queer or Questioning** = Queer means different and it's used as a sort of catch all term for other experiences and identities that aren't straight or cisgender (cisgender is the opposite of transgender, meaning you identify with your biological sex). This term (queer) used to be a derogatory term (and depending who uses it and how it still could be) but is now commonly used positively by younger people in particular, who sometimes prefer to identify by the word queer.
- **Intersex** = a condition where someone is born with some abnormality in their sexual anatomy, reproductive system, endocrine system, and/or sex chromosomes. We will talk about this more later, but intersex is not the same as transgender.
- **Asexual** = not sexually attracted to anyone

The acronym LGBT first appeared in the 90's and continues to lengthen. LGBTQQIP2SAA is the most inclusive in scope to-date. The remaining letters stand for terms such as: Androgynous (A), Pansexual (P), Two-Spirited (2S: for indigenous people that identify with some aspect of this acronym), and sometimes Ally (A: someone who is not LGBT but supports the those who are).

Sex and Gender used to be synonymous in the vernacular, and in many ways, people still use them to mean the exact same thing. But their meaning and usage has changed over time to develop new specificity and nuance.

- Sex refers to the physical/biological dimensions of being male or female

- Gender is used in numerous ways. Generally, it means the psychological, social, and cultural aspects of being male and female.
 - o Gender Identity = Who you identify and experience life as (male or female or nonbinary, regardless of biological sex)
 - o Gender Expression = The masculine or feminine (picture a spectrum not a binary here) ways in which you express yourself (clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms... things that express and manifest gender identity)
 - o Gender Role = How you relate to and adopt cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity (women are supposed to do ‘this’, men are supposed to do ‘this’—the unwritten rules of how men and women are expected to present and act in a society)

Final gender-related term is Gender Dysphoria. Gender Dysphoria is a mental health term that’s described in the most recent edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5)*. This term was formerly known as “Gender Identity Disorder”. This is the experience of distress associated with the incongruence between one’s psychological gender identity and one’s biological sex. Often, it’s feeling like you’ve been born in the wrong body. Couple things to note about gender dysphoria:

- First, not everyone who is transgender experiences gender dysphoria all the time, or to the same level of distress.
- Second, not everyone who is transgender is transsexual (transsexual would mean someone who has undergone or will undergo social and physical transition from one gender identity to another.

Transsexual is also kind of a technical term that many trans people wouldn’t use as a self-descriptor)

So, a person can identify as trans, without being transsexual or experiencing constant or severe dysphoria.

Now the term intersex. Remember, intersex is not the same as trans—it’s a medical term. Often, intersex people reject being associated with the LGBTQIA acronym. Intersex people lack the social and psychological components associated with transgender identity. There are a variety of conditions that fall under the heading of intersex. The vast majority are hardly noticeable (people may live their whole life not knowing they are intersex), while a few conditions are obvious at birth. There are many estimates, but a moderate consensus is that 1 in 4,500 people could be classified as intersex.

What about the term non-binary? This is the catch-all category for any identity that rejects the male-female binary. This includes gender queer, gender fluid, and gender nonconforming. May be similar to transgender but it emphasizes that gender is an infinite spectrum rather than a binary.

One of the things that people in helping professions are beginning to notice is how rapidly the perception of trans identities are changing in culture, and thus, the accelerating pace at which adolescents are developing gender awareness and drawing conclusions about their gender identity. There’s actually a phrase that’s been coined to describe this: **Trans-Trending**. In mental health professions, the phenomenon is more technically known as **Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria**. This is when adolescents identify as a gender minority out of social pressure or peer influence. The movement within some subcultures of society to celebrate sexual minorities as unique, interesting, brave, and revolutionary has an understandably attractive draw to younger people who are

more familiar with the terminology, have more LGBT relationships, and are in the process of identity formation. In fact, 27% of Californians ages 13-18 identify as gender-nonconforming, dramatically higher than national averages (where 0.6% of all adults identify as trans or gender non-conforming). If an adolescent truly does experience gender dysphoria, there is very likely tangible evidences of that dysphoria going back into early childhood. If the decision to identify as trans is sudden and without prior build-up, it's unlikely the person would be diagnosed with gender dysphoria. So, what this means is we must be careful to not immediately accept a young person's self-designation before they have had wisdom and time to process their gender with maturity (60-80% of children who experience gender dysphoria end up identifying with their biological sex). That said, most people do realize they are a gender or sexual minority during adolescence, so we cannot dismiss them or write them off as too young to know. When a young person is identifying as trans or gay, or questioning their sexuality and gender, what's needed is discernment, compassion, and time.

Drew Harper, the coauthor of the book *Space at the Table* and the gay son of an evangelical pastor wrote that, "To be gay in the American evangelical church is to be dead. You are an outcast, an orphan, a refugee. A diseased person". When straight, cisgender Christians are talking with or about LGBT people, words and tone matter a great deal. Don't use stereotypes, caricatures, and certainly don't participate in any gay jokes or use the term 'gay' as a slur meaning 'not manly'. Too many gay people have stood in a circle of guys mocking gay people, trying to play it cool without drawing attention to themselves, while they are experiencing deep trauma and a total sense of rejection. This keeps LGBT people from feeling safe, and it contributes to the widening gap between the church and LGBT people. 83% of LGBT adults were raised in a faith community, and 54% of them left when they turned 18. LGBT people aren't part of an outside anti-Christian movement, they are often hurting people that experienced first-hand the trauma of being LGBT in the church.

Here are some things NOT to say:

- **First, don't say, "is that guy a gay?"**
 - o Someone is not a gay—they might be gay, but they are not "a gay" as if being gay were a club or an occupation to belong to. The same rule applies to trans people. Someone is not "a trans."
- **Second, avoid the phrase "the gay agenda"**
 - o LGBT people don't know what you're talking about—they assume you think there is a liberal conspiracy intent on burning down family-Christian values, but the movement for equality and protection for sexual and gender minorities is not an "agenda" as in an ulterior and subversive intention. Just because there are people who think a traditional (or historic) view of marriage/sexuality is repressive, outdated, or harmful doesn't mean they have an "agenda" or seek to intentionally persecute the church. Most LGBT people don't live with any awareness of an 'agenda'.
- **Third, "the gay lifestyle"**
 - o Don't assume that because someone is gay that they are having gay sex, or that their lifestyle is entirely shaped by their orientation. To gay people, being gay isn't a lifestyle any more than

whiteness, middle-classness, or straightness. It's part of their human experience and shapes how they see themselves and engage with their world, but it isn't a set of uniform behaviors and beliefs that they opt in to.

- **Next, don't use the word "pervert"**
 - o All sin is perversion in the sense that sin represents disordered and misdirected desire. And in that way, there are many perverse expressions of sexuality and gender. But this is a really unhelpful term. It connotes criminals and abusers, creepy predatory activity that is miles different from same-sex attraction. Straight people experience perversion when they lust or view porn or have an affair—but we don't categorize them "perverts". We can likewise expel that label as a reference to gay people.

- **Lastly, be careful with the term "homosexual"**
 - o This one isn't universally bad, but it has increasingly picked up a negative connotation as the sanitized term that religious or conservative people use to bludgeon gay people. It can feel to some LGBT people like distancing language—using the technical vocabulary out of discomfort with the vernacular. As such, it can come across cold, academic, and distant rather than warm and personal.

A good rule of thumb: Am I talking about LGBTQIA people with the same familiarity, intimacy, dignity, individuality that I speak of non-LGBT people with?

What about the term 'gay Christian'? Often the question is asked, "Is it a sin to be gay?" Or similarly, "Can a person be gay and be a Christian?" If you're ever asked that question, should you say 'yes', or 'no'? Actually, neither. You need more information before you can answer that question!

Here are some ways to think through this question:

When someone says they are gay as a way of just naming that they experience a same-sex attraction, that's not sin (this is called phenomenological identity—naming a phenomenon of human experience). Naming our desires is never sin. If just being attracted to someone of the same sex is a sin, then what is temptation? Gay and straight people experience unwanted desires and unbiblical longings—that is not sin. To call oneself gay as reference to attraction, orientation, or a feature of one's identity is not sinful. As with any self-descriptor, we can show others hospitality by giving them space to tell us what they mean by the term they are using and giving them the benefit of the doubt—choosing trust over suspicion—when we don't have the opportunity to ask.

So, yes, followers of Jesus can refer to themselves as gay or same-sex attracted without sin. In fact, there are numerous gay people committed to a historic definition of marriage and biblical vision for sexuality that do identify as 'gay' in the phenomenological sense, notably Christian leaders like Nate Collins and Wesley Hill. Christians, gay or straight, sin when we lust or when we engage in sexual behavior outside the context of one

man and one woman covenanted for life in marriage. And while all Christians fall into temptation, one cannot be true follower of Jesus while knowingly and intentionally enslaving oneself to sin.

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| Gay as Identity (phenomenological) | | Not Sin |
| Gay as Attraction/Orientation | | Not Sin |
| Gay as Lust | | Sin |
| Gay as Sexual Behavior | | Sin |

Lastly, hope for a gay Christian is not necessarily a change in their sexual orientation, as that rarely ever happens. Hope for a gay Christian is in the loving family of the local church that laments with and shepherds one another as we all long for the redemption of our bodies. As you navigate a changing cultural terrain, we hope your speech is seasoned with salt, and your presence is a fragrance to those outside the church.