Part 1 of 2: Engaging with LGBT Persons
with Darrell Bock, Gary Barnes, Mark Yarhouse
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I’m Darrell Bock, Executive Director of Cultural Engagement at the Hendricks Center at Dallas Theological Seminary. In the podcast you’re about to listen to deals with a very difficult topic of sexual identity. The motto of Dallas Theological Seminary is “Teach Truth, and Love Well.” We’re trying to combine these two by the way we are addressing this topic. On the side of “Truth,” we have in previous podcasts examined the biblical position as it relates to marriage and sexuality, defining marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman in a monogamous relationship. This we think comes from Genesis 2 and from Jesus’ own teaching in texts like Matthew 19. On the other side of the problem, is how to engage a culture that is going in a different direction and how to do that with grace and yet with clarity. This podcast is about that side of the equation. In some of the podcasts that we do on this topic, we’ll concentrate on the biblical side of the discussion, while others will deal with the practical issues of how to relate to a culture that views these matters differently.

Welcome to the Podcast where we discuss issues of God and culture, and today our topic is a simple one, sexual identity. [Laughter] Our guests are Mark Yarhouse and Gary Barnes, and I’m going to let them introduce themselves. But our goal today is to walk through an area that certainly has vexed the church in terms of how to balance grace on the one hand and moral commitments and personal relational dimensions, keep all those balls going all at once has been a trick for the church. So Mark, why don’t you tell them about your ministry and background, and then we’ll follow with Gary, and we’ll dive in.

Sure, yeah. Thanks for having me. So I’m a professor of psychology. I teach psychology at Regent University in Virginia Beach. I also direct the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity. So I’ve been at the university now for 15 years and running this institute for 10. And then we conduct original research on sexual identity questions and concerns people have and how to interact with the church and the gay community around those things.

And Gary, what about your background?

So I am a licensed psychologist and an ordained minister, so I consider myself a strong churchman as well. And I’ve been here at DTS as a professor for 17 years now and also keep a part-time private practice in marriage and family, of which sexual issues tends to be quite a common –
Darrell Bock: Just every now and again –


Darrell Bock: Yeah, very good. Well, let’s just dive right in. You say you do research. I think I’m going to start there. What are some of the more interesting research findings you think are out there that help us begin to get our hands around the issue of sexual identity? Are there studies that have helped us rethink or shape the way we should think about the topic?

Mark Yarhouse: Well, I know the study that shaped – had an impact on me personally was I did – participated in a long seven-year longitudinal study of attempted change by Christians who dealt with same-sex attraction in their life and were involved in Christian ministries. And it was set up from the standpoint of the culture saying, “Nobody has ever experienced change,” or “Change can’t happen. Orientation’s immutable.” So we were trying to answer that question: can orientation change?

And we tracked the people over a seven-year span. So that’s an example of a study that for me I think shaped a lot of how I think about these issues.

Darrell Bock: And how did that study turn out? I mean, what was the gist of what you found?

Mark Yarhouse: Well, the findings didn’t please anybody. [Laughter] You have to understand, the findings are presented in a culture steeped in cultural wars right now around sexuality. So politically, socially, there were people on the one side saying, “This is an immutable characteristic and it cannot change, like eye color, hair color.” And our data suggested that wasn’t true, that there was some movement along a continuum for some people. But then there were other people in the church saying anybody who tries hard enough or just has enough faith can expect a 180-degree change.
And the data didn’t show that either. In fact, I think most people didn’t experience as much change as they had hoped to. And I think so to me, I left the study with a more sober view of what is the likely outcome for people over time, and then how do we as Christians respond to brothers and sisters who are trying to navigate that terrain. How do we demonstrate compassion and love to them when they may not experience the kind of movement the rest of us are kind of expecting to see happen?

**Darrell Bock**

Mm-hmm. And this is the area I think as I’ve worked and talked about this in relationship to these podcasts that is where I have probably learned the most, and that is my previous view was, well, you just have to change. Change is what is – this is all about a choice that a person makes and they’ve made bad choices, period. But what I’ve seen and what the data that I’ve seen also suggests to me is this is not that simple, that it’s not that straight-forward, that there’s more to it.

And so when we hear in the conversation some people saying, “You don’t appreciate this is the way I seem to be oriented. This is the way I am. This is not at one level about a choice. It’s more profound than that.” Is that one of the areas that the church has struggled to get its hands around and come to appreciate in terms of how to think about sexual identity?

Mark Yarhouse: Yeah. I mean, it reminds me of a meeting I had once with a teenager who was just about to go off to college and his parents, and they were consulting with me for a couple days. And we were sitting down talking, and I said at one point in the interview, “I don’t think that you chose to experience your same-sex attractions.” And he stopped and said, “Dr. Yarhouse, you’ve got to tell my parents because they believe I chose this to make their life miserable.”

And I said, “Look, I’d be happy to talk with your parents about theories of causation and things like that, but no, I don’t think you chose this. Now, I do think you have choices to make, choices about behavior and identity.” And he said, “Oh, Dr. Yarhouse, don’t tell my parents that.” [Laughter] You know, there was this sense of it’s not really a good question, like –is this a choice or isn’t it? That’s not the best question because then you do move into those debates about causation in that way.
I think the better question is what is volitional here. What is volitional? And I have really haven’t met anybody who chose to experience same-sex attractions. The question now is: what do I do with the feelings that I have? How am I going to live my life? And all of us are answering that question: what am I going to do with the impulses that I have? How am I going to order them and live in light of them? And that’s really the making of how God does sanctification in our lives anyway.

Darrell Bock

Mm-hmm. And so the stress and the focus that you’re pushing people towards is to think about something kind of beyond or that transcends the debates that they have about sexual identity, their identity with Christ and what that means. Is that the other category that needs to come into the conversation in terms of how we engage in terms of helping people wrestle with who they are?

Mark Yarhouse: I think so. Otherwise, your debate is limited to—is this a foregone conclusion or willful disobedience? And nobody in their right mind is going to say, “Yes, it’s just willful disobedience.” And so you end up speaking past one another. It fuels the cultural wars. It doesn’t lend anything pastoral or anything substantive to a discussion that actually affects the lives of real people when you talk past one another.

So yeah, I think being able to move towards, “How do I live in light of what I feel? What does it mean to follow Christ in light of these feelings that I didn’t choose and that I’m not sure are going to go away, maybe unlikely to go away, maybe movement along a continuum? What’s my life going to look like in light of that?” is a much better starting point for a healthy discussion.

Darrell Bock

So that means that the church runs the risk, if it forces kind of the choice category as the conversation, being very tone-deaf in terms of where the person is and where they’re coming from, what they’re actually struggling with. Is that right?

Mark Yarhouse: I think we end up talking to ourselves and people who are dealing with this issue in our own pews will leave the church, and people on the outside would just I think wonder why we think we’re relevant to them. It’s just that kind of distancing.
Okay. So that’s kind of an overview to think through this. Let’s talk about the distinction between sexual identity and sexual orientation. How does that help us in relationship to the conversation that we’re having?

Mark Yarhouse: Yeah, I mean part of my observation, even if the data that we had from that longitudinal study was that a lot of what I think we captured that was changing was sexual identity. I mean, people were changing their behavior. People were changing their identity label. Like if your label was gay or bisexual, you can change that to no label or straight or gay to bisexual. I mean, those are just identity labels.

I think that was where we saw more shifts than we did the underlying overall pattern of attraction, although I think there was some movement for some people there as well. So if the debate’s all about orientation, then it’s all about this pattern of attraction that’s sustained and durable in a person’s life. Identity, though, opens up a larger discussion about personhood, about who I am before God, about my relationship with Christ, about who I am in the church, about what it means to be part of a family, part of a community. Identity, to me, seems like a much more robust and more helpful pastorally helpful direction to take people.

Darrell Bock: Now, Gary, you’ve been working in this area as well and giving it a lot of thought recently. In fact, you’re in the midst of a sabbatical in which you’re giving a lot of time to this. What have you found in terms of the engagement of the Church with this area in terms of kind of the tripping points and that kind of thing?

Gary Barnes: Yes. And it’s really been striking to me over the last several years as I’ve gotten more involved how the conversation, the nature of the conversation, needs to change within the Church and also with the Church to those who are unchurched or those who are not heterosexual in the Church. And it needs to be a far more nuanced conversation. It’s way more involved than what most of us are thinking as we’re having the conversation, both at a psychological level, but also at a theological level.
And so there’s first of all a most important need to become a listener, to become a learner, and to get out of my automatic way of thinking about things. And so there’s really great new information from both a theological and psychological point of view that Mark and others are making available for us now. For instance, on the longitudinal study that Mark was talking about, and you look at the change that does occur, well, it’s too simple of an answer to say, “Does it change or does it not change?” It’s more, “Well, what can change?”

Like he’s making a distinction between identity and orientation. Or the three-tier model, you know, of same-sex attraction.

**Darrell Bock**

We’ll come to that. Uh-huh.

**Gary Barnes**

So those things are really helpful to have as your point of reference before you’re having these conversations.

**Darrell Bock**

Yeah. And it seems to me that the part of what has made this conversation difficult is that it has dropped into the cultural wars bucket – probably a bad metaphor. And so it’s like your position in relationship to how you’re interacting on this topic is defined, and you need to take the side that has established itself as the way to do this and you need to do it to nuance the discussion in some ways is to give in, that kind of thing. And in the process of doing that, it seems to me we set ourselves up to not relate well to people who are in this circumstance. Is that a fair summary and characterization what’s going on?

**Gary Barnes**

That’s the automatic pilot plan right there. That’s how that’s going to go.

**Darrell Bock**

So how do we break out of that? If the Church struggles with this area and you’re really trying to keep two things in place simultaneously that are intentioned, one is – are the moral commitments that are a part of Scripture, and we’re not just talking about how you respond to particular acts or behaviors; we’re talking about how we relate to people.

**Gary Barnes**

Exactly.
We’re talking about the great commandment. We’re talking about loving God and loving your neighbor and what does that look like in the midst of this kind of a conversation, which is important. And on the other hand, keep that hand extended that says God is gracious and God can – God works in all our lives. And if God can work in all our lives, then we can benefit from what God can do if we give him the opportunity to work. How do we balance all that?

Mark Yarhouse: Well, I mean, what I’ve chosen to do in my professional and personal life is I’ve adopted a brand that I try to live out called convicted civility. I’ve talked about that in a few places. It comes from Richard Mao. I met him recently and he acknowledged that it came from Martin Marty and [laughter] and maybe it comes from other sources, I don’t know. But it’s the idea that –

We’ll get it to Calvin or Augustine [crosstalk] [laughter] –

Mark Yarhouse: So yeah, the idea is that we have far too many Christians who are strong on convictions, but you wouldn’t really want them to represent you in any public way because of how they do it is just so – it’s just not very civil in its engagement and loving and caring for the other person. Then you have Christians who are so civil, so loving, so caring, that you have no idea what they stand for. So there’s this tension that you want to live out.

And so in my own life, I try to do that, in professional engagements with others, I’ve been in frequent dialogues with people in the gay community who are psychologists or psychiatrists or just I’ve had activists like one – I was making a presentation on my own research at my own university one time and a local activist who would identify himself as a gay activist contacted our university and said I’m going to – he did a YouTube video and he called for all of his gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and other friends to come and just sit in the front couple rows and stare this “son of a gun” down.

And it was a pretty colorful YouTube video. [Laughter] So what is convicted civility do in those moments, like if it’s your brand, if it’s the lens through which you see things, you know, I talked with a friend of mine that I work with and we decided, “Let’s call them. Let’s just,” so I invited them to come. He’s coming anyway protesting me. [Laughter] So I invited him to come and meet me and meet my students, and sure enough, they sat down in the front rows and stared at me as I was presenting.
Yeah, but I talked with him afterwards. He made a video afterwards and said, “You know, I didn’t agree with everything this guy said, but it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was.” And I’ve got to tell you, he was just eviscerated by people within the gay community who felt like he should’ve been tougher on me.

Mark Yarhouse: You know, so he got more heat from them than he got from the Christian community that embraced him. And that gave him pause. What does that mean for my community, for interacting with these guys? One of the guys who came to protest me, I went out for coffee with him a few times, and he shared, you know, he was raised in a Christian home. He talked about his upbringing.

He said, “Look, I thought when I met you that you were going to have smoke coming out of your nostrils and horns on your head. That’s the way you were depicted to me, and yet here we are having coffee and talking about this.” And you know, those are – I think that’s what – part of what convicted civility does. It’s really relational. But it’s not like I changed my theological position in interacting with these folks.

So the idea of sitting down and having a conversation and engaging with people who are in a different place is an important part of actually relating well to people and talking about the topic because I tend to think what we do in the churches, we take our position. We build our fort. We stand forth for the truth and issue our call and trumpet our view.

But the personal interaction of actually relating to someone who thinks differently and engaging them in terms of where they are and why they’re there, and then getting down in the nitty-gritty of having that hard conversation ‘cause it isn’t an easy conversation is something we tend to shy away from. Why do you think that is? Why are we slow to engage?
Mark Yarhouse: Well, let me say this about that. I mean, I think there is an us-them mentality, that they’re all out there and we’re sort of hunkered down within our churches, and it lets us have an in-group and an out-group, a community we can talk to and sort of we kind of know we all agree on the same thing. And then it sort of serves the culture war because they are taking strides to damage things that are sacred to us, and so whether that’s around marriage or other issues. And so it has a tendency to bring us a false sense of intimacy and closeness at their expense.

But even worse than that is that that whole dynamic assumes that there are no people within our own churches who are dealing with this issue because they sit in our pews quietly and they say, “Well, when you talk about us and them, I’m – I have more – I have a lot in common with them.”

Darrell Bock: I’m one of them, yeah. Yeah.

Mark Yarhouse: Yeah. And when you say, “Homosexuality is a sin or this is an abomination”, use language like that, it’s not the theologically it’s incorrect to talk about homosexual behavior is sin, but when you use language that we often use from the pulpit, it actually intensifies and increases the shame the person in the pew feels, and it’s more likely to drive them away from the church towards the gay community outside that is willing to embrace them. That’s the whole point is that why would they stay with the church when the church doesn’t even know how to engage and talk with them and love them well? Why wouldn’t they go to a community that says, “We love you as you are.”?

Darrell Bock: So the alternative within the church then would be what? If you – on the one hand, you’re trying to engage the topic, but you’re also trying to personally engage and connect with the person and relate to them given where they are. So how do we do that balance? How do we dance that dance?
So see, I think this is where we need to get more nuanced, both theologically and psychologically, even on the concept of identity, see. But the one thing that I think is a strong motor for this us-them mentality is we take a concept of identity, and we develop it by how am I distinct from someone else. And then if I’m going to be in a religious group with a religious identity, I’m highlighting the ways I’m different from you in a moral way or a so-called Christian behavioral standard. And if you’re not matching up to my standard, then I’m going to bolster my identity by highlighting that difference.

And in it actually, I can promote a moralistic, self-righteous faith in the process, which makes me less inclined to move towards you in your difference because it serves a purpose for me –

Right.

– in an unhealthy religious kind of a way. And so a good theological distinction of identity is that’s really not who I am. Theologically speaking, my identity is not rooted in my religious behaviors or even my religious beliefs.

Or my performance superiority.

Certainly that.

Yeah, yeah. And I actually think that the cross is a great leveler, that what it does is it – we all have the same needs before God. We may have different areas, but we all have the same core needs. We all stand in the same position of needing God’s grace. And I think –

That’s right.

– that sometimes we forget that in the midst of this conversation.

And that changes how I’m going to have conversation with someone if I’m saying, “There’s no one else that I’m ever going to have conversation with that is more in need of God’s grace than I am.”
So we’ve come back, I think just to put it in theological terms just to justify why this is broadcast from the seminary, [laughter] we’re all stuck in Romans 3 to a certain degree. You know, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. What we gain in our relationship with God, we gain because he gives us and supplies us with what we need that we can’t garner for ourselves, that we don’t earn it, those kinds of things. But it’s something that we’re gifted with.

And that, I think that – that’s why I say the cross is a leveler.

Gary Barnes: Yes.

That levels out the playing field. That’s not us and them. That’s all of us together sharing the same need for God and what he has to provide.

Gary Barnes: Yeah.

Is that a good starting point? Are there other elements that make for a good starting point?

Mark Yarhouse: No, I think that’s a good starting point. I think – you know, when I hear people in the church community who are dealing with this issue, I don’t think they feel that we believe that. I think they feel like we kind of rank things and order things. And they’ll just never measure up. I don’t think a lot of that’s really coming from them. I think it really is coming from how we interact as a church. I mean, Christians in the West are not known to be – from a global perspective – the most spiritually mature and tested sort of Christian in terms of our faith commitments, our love for one another.

We’re very materialistic. We have sort of this American dream Christianity that we need to wonder how much is that really biblical? And then you have a young person in the church saying they’re dealing with this issue saying, “You know, you get to go home to your spouse. You get to live this out. You’re with your best friend.” And I don’t even think most of us appreciate what they’re giving up or what they’re saying no to to be faithful to God. And most of us kind of get a pass in our churches for the things that we deal with.
Like it’s not that our church teaches that what we struggle with is not sin, but we really get kind of a pass when we struggle with our own stuff because we kind of do it privately or we say, “Well, guys are guys.” Or whatever – we kind of talk about it in a way that [laughter] makes it sound like we are really different than the person in the pew [crosstalk] –

We’re certainly act differently towards it. We certainly have seemed to have created a ranking of there are the “super sins,” you know, the sins on steroids, and then there’s the other stuff. And as long as you’re in the other stuff category, you’re okay. But if you commit one of the super sins, then you’re –

Mark Yarhouse: Right.

Then, you know, then you’re marked out. So that’s a huge sociological mentality that you’re dealing with that’s actually in need of some change. And it’s very, very difficult to do when it’s that engrained.

Mark Yarhouse: Right.

But see, Darrell, I’d like to go back to your cross starting point.

Mm-hmm.

It is a good leveler, but if you really have great theology and go deeper with that, what the cross is also as a model and a motivator. If you think about Romans 15:7, receive others as you have been received by Christ. So how was I received by Christ? When I was different from him, even alienated from him, he took the initiative at extreme cost of himself to move towards me. It wasn’t me moving towards him. It wasn’t me getting to a place where he could move towards me.

Mm-hmm. He took the initiative.

At his cost.

Yeah, right.
Gary Barnes: And that’s how I’m to – if I understand, that’s the depth of the love and the grace that I received. That becomes motivating for me to say, “I don’t have any basis not to do that with somebody else.”

Darrell Bock: Mm-hmm.

Gary Barnes: I have the model, and I have the motivation in Christ to, as he was, be full of grace and truth together. These aren’t one or the other. And that I would be intentionally trying not to move away from somebody different from me, and I would intentionally try not to be moving against somebody different from me.

Darrell Bock: Mm-hmm. But you really are attempting to engage them and listen and hear and interact and come alongside –

Gary Barnes: Yes.

Darrell Bock: – and be – the analogy I like to use for these kinds of conversations is you’re like the friend who cares about someone who comes alongside and says, “What is the best way for us to live life together and to function in life together and to interact?” And no matter what the area is, put whatever you want in the X area, you know, what’s the best way to do this? And if there’s a sense that I care about the person I’m having that interaction with, if they’ve sensed that from me, I get permission to engage them in ways that otherwise it would be impossible for me to engage them in, particularly if I’m going to be challenging in part of that conversation. So –

Gary Barnes: And I think that’s what being gripped by grace does for us. It positions us to do that.

Darrell Bock: Yeah, but it has to come with a really genuine engagement with the person that we’re interacting with, and that means – that means listening and hearing and engaging in a way that communicates in the midst of this conversation which we’re discussing very serious things, and we may not be in total agreement, the one thing you know is that I care about you.

Gary Barnes: Right.
In the midst of that, that’s coming through loud and clear in the midst of that conversation. And the –

[Crosstalk] You know, I heard a sermon from Tim Keller that he entitled Receptive Grace, which is about this whole thing we’re talking about. He says it’s going to boil down to four points for us if we’re actually demonstrating receptive grace. Number one is we enter in as a listener, a learner. Number two is we approach it to where I’m going to possibly change through this engagement, that there’s blind spots that I have that this will highlight and give me this option to respond and change myself personally.

Mm-hmm.

Number three is I’m open to being misunderstood by engaging in this process itself.

So it’s risky.

Mark Yarhouse: And I can’t avoid the engagement just to avoid the misunderstanding.

Right.

But then number four, and I’ve really liked this point, is as we’re dealing with these differences, I allow for God’s timing and pace and change within me and in the person who’s different from me. And I’m not working to have to change the other person to be like me so we can be one. It’s not oneness based on sameness. And I entrust that to God, that process. And I’m not the personal agent for that change to have to happen.

Yeah, that’s something God’s got to do –

Gary Barnes: That’s right.

– in someone’s heart apart from me in many ways. He might use me in the midst of it, but –

That’s right.
Darrell Bock – it’s apart from me. Well, there’s one technical part of this conversation I want to be sure we don’t miss, and we alluded to it already, that’s what’s called the three-tier model.

Gary Barnes Yes.

Darrell Bock I don’t want to drop that, and so let’s talk about that. What is – you know, most of the people listening to this are not technically oriented to this conversation at all. It’s the moment you say three tiers, you’re thinking of the engineers getting ready to design something. [Laughter] So what are the three tiers? What are we talking about, Mark?

Mark Yarhouse: Yeah. I mean, this – it’s a three-tier distinction that I’ve made now for a few years, and it was just an observation from research that had been conducted on national studies of sexuality that when you ask people, “Do you experience same-sex attraction?” a certain percentage of people would say yes. And that’s higher percentage than if you asked the same group of people, “Do you have a homosexual orientation?” So a smaller percentage, maybe you know, two to three percent of the population would say that they’re orientated towards the same sex, but higher like five to six percent or even higher would say, “I have experienced same-sex attraction.”

So there’s a difference between experience same-sex attraction and having a homosexual orientation. And then of course, we all know that there’s also a third possibility, which is saying, “This is my identity.” So gay identity was the third of the three tiers. And so I was just showing from research that the percentages are different, and then the experience is different. So sometimes, I use this in my counseling practice. This is more of a helpful resource for counseling or pastoral care to just make this three-tier distinction and see if it’s helpful to the person.

I don’t use it as an apologetic. I don’t use it engage in a battle. I don’t argue with people. But I’ve had plenty of people sit in my office and say, “Thank you for that three-tier distinction. I’m gay.” [Laughter] And I’m not debating.

Darrell Bock Yeah, yeah.
Mark Yarhouse: But I’ve had many people—one young man said to me, “Dr. Yarhouse, I don’t think I would take that three-tier distinction to the gay bar and talk with my friends about it because to them, it would feel like I was splitting hairs. But for me, you’re giving me the intellectual space I need to make sense of what I feel and to make decisions about my identity.” So that’s really what it’s used for. Now, what’s the difference between attraction and orientation? You know, it’s the strength of the attractions, how persistent and durable they are over time.

If they’re strong attractions to the same sex that persist, they’re durable, then someone might say, “That’s my orientation. I’m oriented towards the same sex.” And then gay identity is usually, you know, that’s more of a modern socio-cultural label for explaining sexual preferences. It usually carries a connotation of a sexual ethic that’s more permissive than a traditional Christian sexual ethic. But I’ve also been noticing lately that you have a younger group of Christians who deal with this issue who are more comfortable using gay just as an adjective, not as a noun, but to say in the common vernacular, “I’m telling the world that I do experience same-sex attraction, so I call myself gay. I may be a celibate gay Christian, but I’m using the common language that most people would recognize.”

So I want to recognize there’s those three-tier distinction, but even there, there are differences in how people are using gay today that are important for people in the church to understand.