Engaging with Sexual Identity Issues

Part 2 of 2: Ministering to People Wrestling with Sexual Identity
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.

This might be a difficult question, but it just comes up, so I figure I have got to ask it, and that is with the fact that our culture has shifted on this question, and there’s no doubt that there’s been move in terms of the acceptability of same-sex experience in our culture, does that impact the three tiers? In other words, are people, as they respond to questions, more open about saying where they are on those three tiers? Or is there an influence as it opens up that those numbers are going to change versus what they have been?

Or have there been studies that are looking at that? The reason I’m asking you this is that with the permission and the space sometimes there comes a more openness. And so the numbers have tended to be relatively speaking fairly low in terms of the answer to these questions. But should we anticipate that perhaps those numbers are going to inflate a little bit because there’s not the stigma that there was?

Well, I mean, that’s certainly been an argument that in the past when the – I remember one study that was done years ago and it was one percent reported homosexual orientation or a gay identity. And so a lot of people said, “It’s a lot higher than that. People are just – there’s a stigma. People will not tell someone in a survey.” And so that’s been sort of the assumption, and it certainly could be that way.
But the numbers are remarkably, you know, kind of where I would expect them to be and pretty low, you know, two to four percent maybe around orientation. You might have higher percentages with attraction, and I think with younger people where their sexuality is a little more fluid, little less stable, adolescents and so on, I think you’re going to have some higher percentages there. But when you think of where do they fall 10 years out, where does it kind of stabilize, it still seems to be in that percentage.

I mean, yeah, I mean you could see it go higher, but I’m not sitting around expecting it to go dramatically higher. You know, I haven’t seen that yet.

Okay. So let’s talk a little bit about development because this obviously is important. How – when we think about the development process and the factors of sexual identity, what’s in play here? And perhaps the way I want to frame this question is thinking that there are a lot of ministers who will be listening to this as well as parents, what should ministers and parents be aware of as they think about sexual identity and its development with this kind of area in the background?

Yeah, most of what I study are the milestone events in sexual identity development, so how does somebody come to the point where they adopt the label “gay” as their identity label, and if they’re a Christian, what are the milestone events that are part of that experience. So I have not really studied as much of the causation of same-sex attractions. In fact, just as an aside, I say I don’t think we know what causes homosexuality. But we also don’t know what causes heterosexual orientation as well.

I mean, so I think there’s a lot there we just don’t know about the development of sexual orientation. But when you survey adults looking back on their lives, they’ll tell you, “Here were critical milestone events in the formation of my identity.” So obviously the first of those is the emergence of same-sex attractions, which is typically at puberty. So this is, you know, 11, 12 years old, 13, you find yourself with these attractions.
Now, they might describe even earlier that they felt different from their peers for what are called gender-related reasons. So their peers were interested in certain things, boys, and this boy felt different from his peers because of those interests. He didn’t have those same interests. So you do see that as a pretty common part of childhood. But I don’t want parents and pastors to overreact to that, to have very rigid gender norms that a boy or girl has to fall into or everyone’s panicking. I just think that’s a mistake.

There’s great latitude in what that experience is like as a child. I mean, I’ve had parents come to me and say, “Is it okay that my son is interested in art,” or I mean, and I – of course it’s – I mean, I was an art major. I – not to – my experiences matters in that discussion, but I think it’s just that kind of overreaction actually does capture that feeling like the church is so fearful of this that we can’t raise our children and see the range of what people – you know, that kind of thing. So anyway, milestone event would be this first experiences of attraction.

Next, you typically have same-sex behavior of some kind. And then you attribute that to something. Is that because I’m gay? I may be gay. Is it something else? Is it the Fall? Is it – what is this? So they go on this kind of what I call an attributional search, a sense of, “What do I attribute this to? How do I make meaning out of this?” Then they might have disclosure experiences, maybe an ongoing same-sex relationship.

And eventually, they adopt a gay identity label as this label for themselves. But what’s been interesting in studying Christians at Christian colleges and universities is that most of them don’t do the milestone events that most gay people say are so critical in the formation of their gay identity. I mean, most Christians we’ve surveyed don’t engage in same-sex behavior. Most don’t label themselves as gay. Many may attribute it to a possible being gay, but others attribute it to the Fall, to a thorn in their flesh, to some other sense of their experience.
Most don’t have ongoing same-sex relationships. And so it’s almost like there’s this group of Christians who are carving out this other trajectory, this other way of living their life, with same-sex sexuality, but they’re not doing the hallmark milestone events that everybody else does who does form a gay identity. Now, I think the church would do well to recognize that. These are young people in our churches navigating this terrain with very little support from the very community that says that they love them, like the body of Christ.

And the support that they will get will be from the gay community that says, “You’re like us. You’re one of us. We can help you make sense of this experience. Here’s the answer to your identity.” Because the gay community offers them a sense of identity and a sense of community. Those are two things that the local church often fails to offer.

*Darrell Bock*  
Acceptance is important in all this I take it in terms of –

*Mark Yarhouse*  
Yeah, I mean, I – of course, acceptance ends up being the word that conveys it’s all wide open, you can do whatever you want. If acceptance means we love you and we can give you a sense of your identity and community, and we’ll walk with you, there’s no shame in us walking with you in this, that’s what young people would benefit from hearing.

*Darrell Bock*  
So –

Gary Barnes: Or if they’re – if the young person in the church is hearing acceptance based on not having same-sex attraction, then what do you do with that, see.

*Darrell Bock*  
Yeah, ‘cause there in a split world.

*Gary Barnes*  
Yeah.
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**Darrell Bock**  
Very much in a split world. Well, let’s continue down this track because I think this is a good track to talk about because one of the things that I wanted to be sure we did in the hour was to talk about, alright, we’ve talked about kind of how the church struggles with this. We’ve talked about kind of the nomenclature and language and how to think about it. But the last step probably is to think about, alright, what does the church do? I mean, what does that – what does this look like?

If we’re going to engage and engage in a healthy way, what does this look like? So let me paint a scenario for you and just have you walk us through it. We’ve talked about kids in our churches who have same-sex attractions and who have decided, “I’m still in here. I’m in the church. That’s part of what I’m doing. But I have this other thing that’s going on, and man, I feel conflicted.”

So how does the church minister the person in that place?

**Mark Yarhouse**  
One thing I do talk about is training what are called critical proximal agents. So a proximal agent is someone who’s in close proximity, right –

**Darrell Bock**  
[Laughter] That’s an engineering term.

**Mark Yarhouse**  
Close – I know, I’m sorry. That’s more than you asked for here, but okay. So you’ve got to find who are the people who are in closest proximity to young people. So youth pastors, right, volunteers, people who are in the trenches in a relationship with people. You’ve got to train them with this more nuanced vision that we’re talking about around sexual identity. Most youth pastors, and I’ve just did two youth conferences this fall, I mean, they’re working hard. They’re putting out their best.

But they feel ill-equipped to deal with this issue, and they just don’t know what to say. They don’t know how to teach around sexuality, yet our surveys say that young people want to talk about sexuality in church. They don’t know what to say about this topic, homosexuality, gay and lesbian issues, yet young people who deal with this issue would like to be able to talk about it in their church community. When they do talk about it, it can fall back into that us versus them because we’re still in this culture war.
So one thing I do is I when I train youth pastors, there are these critical folks who are close to the people we’re talking about in this nuanced vision. I also want to urge the church as much as possible to rise above the culture war whenever possible. Now, sometimes, the culture war comes right to your doorstep and you have to respond to it. But in most cases, we also contribute to that culture war. And pastoral care is lost when young people see us battling the culture war, and we don’t even realize that there are genuine casualties in our church community.

These are young people trying to navigate this terrain.

**Darrell Bock**  
What they’re hearing sometimes is you really hate me and don’t want anything to do with me. It’s by some of the ways that we communicate?

**Mark Yarhouse**  
Well, imagine a 14-year-old sitting in church hearing from the pulpit or from other respected people in their church, “Gays are ruining this country.” “Why are – why are gays – why do I see them on every sitcom and every show that I watch?” It’s this us versus them, and them is to blame. And there’s a 14-year-old in your pew in your church saying, “I must be one of them, and where am I to go to make sense of all this?” I mean, can I now go to that person and say, “Hey, that thing that we’ve been talking about that’s ruining that country, I happen to be dealing with that in my life.”

I mean, no person’s going to come up, and I’ve had plenty of youth pastors say – I’m sorry – young people tell me that they told their youth pastor or they told someone in the church, and that person said, “Don’t tell anybody.”

**Darrell Bock**  
Yeah.

**Mark Yarhouse**  
Well, where is a young person who’s 15, 16, go with that, don’t tell anybody. You know who I can tell? My friends at school, my peer group, who would embrace me and love me and say, “I don’t care if you’re gay.” I mean, we have a whole generation of young people today saying, “That doesn’t even matter to them.” But they’re reared in a church where it says, “No, it doesn’t matter, but you’re on the them part of this equation.”
Darrell Bock

Yeah, we’re building a wall. So okay, so what’s the alternative? What’s the alternative to that? If you could construction the ideal church response to that scenario when this comes up, how do you talk about the area on the one hand, and then how do you draw that 15-year-old into the conversation? What do you do to get there?

Mark Yarhouse

Yeah. Well, I share a number – when I do train youth pastors, I share a number of illustrations that just visually show them the challenge that a young person would face between navigating their sexual identity and their religious identity as a person of faith, that developmentally all your teenagers are asking fundamental questions about who they are. It’s the time of identity versus what’s called role confusion. But like who am I as a teenager, that trying on different roles, who am I in church, who am I in my peer group, who am I at my home, who am I in front of my – at school.

So this trying on different sense of identity is a normal developmental process. But it’s complicated by this issue. So have greater compassion for a young person who’s trying to figure this out in your youth group. Everybody’s trying to figure out identity. But if you deal with same-sex attractions, you are having that much more of a complicated way of navigating this. So at least understand and have greater compassion and empathy for someone in your youth group.

Now, talk about sexuality. I think it’s fine to be talking about sexuality. They want to. But when you talk about this issue, you don’t want to only talk about homosexuality. It should really rarely be just the topic in a church. You should be talking about sexuality quite broadly, a very positive view of sexuality, where does this fall in those discussions, how do we have compassion. Assume that there’s people within your church community who are navigating these issues.

I mean, it’s been really helpful for me to know people who are gay or lesbian, to invite them into those discussions, to let their voices be heard too. Here’s a gay person who’s faithful and living obediently before God, and I’d like for people to understand what their life is like, like have that. See, too many times, our church testimonies are people who say, “I used to be gay and now I’m straight. Here’s my spouse. Here’s my children.”
Okay, I’m not detracting from that testimony. But that’s not a likely outcome for most people.

And that’s not the only place to land.

It’s not the only place to land.

Yeah.

So what about even just playing the numbers and showing somebody where that didn’t happen, but they’re living faithfully before God and they’re finding fulfillment. Now, that’s hard because the church also needs to be family to that person, to be community to that person. Our local churches rarely function like family to single people. So this is a group of single people who are dealing with same-sex sexuality, but we don’t do single people – we don’t pastor single people really well.

Yeah, there’s almost like four walls of separation for this group because they’ve got so many hurdles that they’re having to get through to get to the community dimension. So this really does involve a shifting at a whole series of levels when we’re talking about our nuancing in terms of how we’re interacting with people. How do we function as community? How do we talk about this area? How do we take it out of the cultural war situation?

I’m hearing lots of different adjustments, if I can use that word, in terms of how we respond and behave, all of which have less to do with the person I’m interacting with and have everything to do with how I’m interacting with the topic. Is that – I mean, it’s almost like – it’s like plate tectonics. We’re rearranging the deck here.

It’s a great point. And I think if we can begin the whole process by saying, “As I engage in this in a more real and honest way, the first line of transformation that’s going to happen is within me.” Because this engagement is going to take me out of my little boxes that I’ve been working with, which will be actually evidence of personal growth for me. And so that is going to be an ongoing process where that happens. It’s not a presto-chango thing. And an essential first step in the process is me being open to learning.
Now, although Mark’s widely published academically, there’s also some really useful tools for the church.

**Darrell Bock** That’s actually going to be my next question. What are the resources that we can encourage people to connect with that can help them as they wrestle with these areas?

**Gary Barnes** Yeah, so I didn’t know if he was going to mention his own work, so I wanted to be sure to get that in there [laughter] because they’re so useful for us.

**Darrell Bock** Yeah, we’re tracking down the same road here, [laughter] so just keep going. [Laughter] Yeah, so what are some of the resources that people can use? Go ahead and tell them about Mark’s work?

**Mark Yarhouse** Okay, so I would say [laughter] the first –

**Darrell Bock** Since we have you here. [Laughter]

**Gary Barnes** First, that book that Mark wrote that’s useful for parents, as well as church leaders, is Homosexuality and the Christian. And it’s talking about all the things that we’re talking about today. And it’s a great ongoing resource for people. And then most recently, he has a book specifically targeted for youth pastors called Understanding Sexual Identity. And so this is a real tire-hits-the-road kind of a book on how a church can really begin to be a church community to those who have same-sex attraction.

**Darrell Bock** And so some of what we’ve been talking about in the podcast really is related to that second book, is that right, Mark, of some of the themes that we’re talking about?

**Mark Yarhouse** Yeah, actually both books I think have been covered here with some of our ways of discussing this. But yeah, I think that book would – and I’ve been told by many people who’ve read it that it’s more than just for youth pastors, although that was my target, you know, reader. But I think a lot – because I go in the developmental issues, what to think about adolescents, how to be community, all those pieces. You know, I don’t know that I have the answer for how to do this, but I’m intrigued by church models that try to be more missional as we see our church changing.
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So I mean, our culture changing so dramatically. But in models like that, you really focus on someone feeling like they belong in your community first. And then they – a person comes to know and trust in a loving Savior and a Father who loves them and has a plan that’s better for their life. And then you get to the discussion of kind of how someone becomes more Christ-like. But the church usually functions in just the opposite. We want people to become and behave certain ways, and then you’re welcome to be in.

And that’s really I think our churches are going to be just dramatically challenged as our culture changes for how we think about being engaged in this culture. So I’m excited to see what that future’s going to look like. I hope that these resources will be part of that discussion, helpful to local pastors and to families. But it’s going to be an interesting challenge in the years ahead.

Darrell Bock

Well, I want to close by turning the attention to another audience that I think is important in this conversation, and that’s parents because the church can maneuver itself and kind of stiff-arm the topic if they don’t – if they aren’t sensitive to it. But if you’re a parent in the midst of this conversation, you’re in it. So what would you say to parents who find themselves with a child who is wrestling with these issues? What advice would you give to them?

Mark Yarhouse

You know, the overarching approach is that you’ve got to love your child. You’ve got to demonstrate this tremendous love for your child the way Christ loves you, loves all of us. I think many times, parents feel ambivalence when their child says to them, “I’m gay.” And often, young people have known this for many months or years. They’ve even shared with their peers typically. Parents are usually the last to hear this information. So usually it’s peers, more peers, maybe a youth pastor, maybe a sibling, then maybe the mother then the father.

And that’s on average typically how disclosure takes place. Now, if it’s happening differently in the home of someone listening to this, then that’s – certainly that can be different. But – so what I often talk to parents is your young person has been dealing with this for quite a while. Your response to them can bring you in as a resource, or it can cut you off as a resource at this moment. You can do things that keep them at arms’ length, or you can – what are disarming things that open up a discussion? Tell me more. Help me understand. I’d like to listen.
But many parents are dealing with so much emotion at that point, and usually it’s positive and negative. “I love my son or my daughter, and this is either confusing to me or it’s making me angry or feeling ashamed.” There’s a lot of evangelical subculture shame around this issue, so. And part of it is one of the common pet theories within Christian circles about the causation is that the parents are causing a child’s homosexuality.

So I don’t agree with that position, but if parents feel like that’s what they’re been told –

*Darrell Bock* They take responsibility for the choice.

Gary Barnes: That’s with their support system they’re supporting them with.

*Mark Yarhouse* And most parents are willing to do anything for their kids, and so they’re willing to take the blame because it at least gives them an answer, regardless of whether it’s accurate.

*Darrell Bock* Right.

*Mark Yarhouse* So I don’t think – I don’t tend to think that’s accurate. But the parent’s dealing with this ambivalence, right, this positive feeling of love and this negative feeling of confusion, which is often channeled into anger and frustration and disappointment, shame. And then often, parents get into it with each other. One parent expresses that love towards their child. The other parent expresses the confusion, disappointment, anger. And the parents get polarized with each other and they get into this –

*Darrell Bock* Oh, that’s an interesting dynamic, yeah.
– battle, yeah. So I talk with parents about recognizing that, not allowing that to take place within their marriage, giving space for both mom and dad to feel love and confusion, and to find a place to talk about that with me or with somebody else, that puts them in a much better position to interact with their son or daughter who’s a teenager navigating this terrain. And parents think about it that way. Your young person is navigating this terrain. They are going to need trail guides, people who’ve gone before them, people to support them. We want you to be on that trail with them, to not relate right now in a way that keeps you off the trail or says you’re not safe for me to be on a trial with.

You need to be on the trail with them, and you need to find other people who can be on the trail with them. Now, those people have to – you have to be careful with that. Is that going to be people on the trail who say, “You can become straight and marry if you just do these things or if you just resolve this issue.” I think we have to be careful with that ‘cause then it says the message, we love you if you’re straight. We love you if you work hard enough, if you have enough faith, if you pray hard enough.

Well, my experience even working with older teens is that most of them have prayed that God would take this away, that they’d be in a different place. And it hasn’t happened. So let’s be careful what kind of – that advice almost helps us manage our anxiety in the church.

Exactly.

It doesn’t help the young person navigating the terrain.

Yeah, I think that the thing that I’m getting as I’m listening to you is, is that you’ve got two people who are lost in different places trying to help one another. You know? [Laughter]

It’s a great point.

Yeah, I mean you’ve got –

And to be able to see that is a great starting point.
That’s right. So I’m going to be on – this is an uncomfortable place. I know it’s an – I know I don’t have all the answers. I’m going to have to dig in, and I have to recognize there are things going on with me that have to be sorted out on the one hand while I’m coming alongside my child and hopefully helping them also. [Laughter] As my arm is going around them saying, “I love you and here’s – I care about you and so,” at the same time, I’m sitting here recognizing and I may not know what’s on the other end of the sow yet.

And so very, very important place to be.

Yeah, I primarily work with this with families in private practice, and the huge opportunity here is both for parents and church, their support network, so say this is a transformation opportunity for me and for my support network, not to simply look at this as my kid is the project to be changed to be heterosexual, and then that will be the only basis of progress or success. And so to help the parent not be controlled or managed by their own issues as they’re trying to be a guide to their teenager in this, to help them have that awareness of, “Wow, I’m being driven by something else here that is not going to drive in a good way.”

That’s a really important support to offer to the parent and to hopefully have the church be supporting the parent likewise in that same effort.

Yeah. What I’m hearing as I put kind of our hour together alongside is that to really love people well in difficult situations is to authentically, relationally engage them with an openness to the fact that this uncomfortable place – I don’t know how else to describe it – this uncomfortable place in which we find ourselves is not gonna be – is not pursuing a fix as much as I’m going to pursue a relationship. And in that relationship, hopefully we can – if we all come before God, we can mutually encourage one another and learn through the experience how to negotiate this space well or better.
And that’s actually harder. That’s harder work than simply saying, “Okay, here’s the box of where we need to get to. Let’s check the box and make sure that we’ve checked the boxes, and if you’re doing that, then we can engage, and if not, then I’m going to leave you to yourself.” It is a very different kind of way of thinking about it. And I hope that part of what has been communicated here is there isn’t a – this doesn’t represent a backing off of commitments as to what we think God is asking of people.

It’s actually an engagement with where people are as those commitments live themselves out in the life. It’s not artificial. It’s real. And this nuancing that we’re talking about is an attempt to engage in a real authentic kind of way with sensitivity to where the person that you’re interacting with is as well as the certainties about where you are and being honest about that in the midst of all this. It’s an uncomfortable and awkward place on the one hand, and yet the most assuring thing is that in the midst of it, God, I deeply believe God honors genuine love, that genuine love is something that God supports.

And sometimes genuine love is hard. I mean, no one loved better and experienced love in a harder way than Jesus.

**Gary Barnes**

That’s exactly right.

**Darrell Bock**

And what he went through. So being able to wrap this around in an appropriate relational way so that the great commandment lives itself out in the hard areas of life is what I’m hearing. And it does seem to me to be a better way. It may not be clean, but it seems to be clean in the sense that we think about it from our – sometimes from what our expectations are. But it certainly is effective and what God calls us to. Fair?

**Mark Yarhouse**

Yes, I think that’s fair, and I – if I were just to offer one last thought, it has to do with the kind of communities we need to be for Christians who are navigating this issue to be able to do it with integrity and to do it with community. Like we cannot just go back to our own homes and sort of live out the “American Dream Christianity” if we’re not willing to also live sacrificially into the lives of the people we’re talking about. When we say to them, “Good luck with that traditional Christian sexual ethic and you’re going to do it in isolation,” how do we hold that standard and not be a part of the very solution that would make them family to us, to the body of Christ, that allows them to do the very thing that that ethic suggests?
I mean, that’s – it’s – the answer to this is not just helping those people out there –

*Darrell Bock*  
Right, right.

*Mark Yarhouse*  
– do it right, ‘cause now we’re not going to focus as much on becoming straight but this other sort of Christ-likeness. Wait a minute, we have to be part of that community, that family that makes it even possible. How many of us are willing to do that in the actual lives of young people and adults who are navigating this terrain? That’s going to be the challenge for the church moving forward.

*Darrell Bock*  
Well, I think obviously we’ve only just barely scratched the surface on this and gotten started, but I do appreciate, Mark and Gary, your coming in and talking to us about this. This is a topic we plan on Table Podcast to come to again and again and again ‘cause I just think it – when you’re talking about this much of a reorientation, it just takes time and repetition and learning and looking back over it and making mistakes and learning from them and that kind of thing. And so I just appreciate really the spirit that this represents and the attempt to really help the church work its way through what is very difficult terrain.

And the interesting thing is, is that actually the model that’s being talked about doesn’t just touch this area. It’s actually the core model for how to do community in any area.

*Gary Barnes*  
That’s – yeah. Whenever we’re bumping into any difference.

*Darrell Bock*  
Exactly right. And I think that that’s another important lesson here is that rather than having a special category over here where this is treated in kind of the other column, what we recognize by what we’re talking about is a core way of engaging that touches on all areas of life and that we can apply in a wide variety of areas at the same time. So I think y’all very much for coming in. And we thank you for joining us on the Table where we discuss issues of God and culture.
If you’re interested in the podcast, The Table Podcast, you can find us at www.dts.edu/thetable and you can get a look at all the topics that we cover here on the podcast. Thank you for being with us today.