

Same-Sex Attraction: A pastoral guide

Theology

- Know the key biblical texts that speak of homosexual sexual activity and develop a robust biblical theology of sex, gender and marriage, based on the wide sweep of biblical teaching and not just 'proof texts'.
- Know the arguments around the interpretations about the specific passages that refer to homosexual sexual activity.
- Differentiate theologically between same-sex orientation/attraction and same-sex sexual activity.
- How do you think theologically about same-sex 'orientation'? Are you consistent in the way you consider what is and isn't sin in this area compared to others?

Maturity

- Be patient with each person as you listen to their struggles and gently guide towards maturity in Christ.
- Remember sexual attraction is only one facet of a person's life. Don't treat same-sex attracted (SSA) people as 'single issue Christians', encourage holistic maturity and sanctification.
- Each SSA person will approach their struggle differently. We need to help people think through God's guidance, singleness and marriage, celibacy, loneliness and more.
- Remind the SSA person that the gospel holds out both the hope of future glory, and the joys of life in Christ now.
- Many SSA Christians will have previously encountered "affirming theology" and may have found it emotionally engaging. How can you equip yourself well to respond to theologies like this?

History

- The pastoral needs of a person who has grown up as a Christian and hasn't engaged in regular sexual activity, are very different to that of a person who has turned to Christ from previous sinful practice.
- A person's cultural background will likely affect how these issues are seen by their primary support network. For example, eastern and western cultures often view same-sex attraction differently.
- Where family dysfunction, abuse in formative years, or mental health struggles are present, there will need to be extra pastoral support.
- Be aware of the way SSA Christians have been treated in the past, and how that affects their perception of the present. This may mean some topics are of particular sensitivity, and understandably so. When might it be appropriate to apologise for past hurts the church has caused people?

Emphasis

- Remember same-sex attraction and same-sex sexual activity are different. Struggling with a temptation towards a certain sin is not the same as engaging in the sin.
- Bear in mind in today's cultural climate SSA Christians (and those close to them) may feel a higher level of guilt and shame when compared with other Christians.
- Treat an SSA person and their issues of temptation and sin as you would a heterosexual person who is tempted to sin sexually or in other areas. For example some pastoral responses can feel heavy handed even if they are wise and well meant.
- When might you consider seeking advice or referring people to others?

Holiness

- The key to holiness is pursuing identity, joy and satisfaction in Christ, along with the other benefits of the Christian life including church family and Christian friendships.

- Like all Christians, the fight for holiness is real. The SSA Christian ought to be encouraged to resist sin and temptation. Many SSA Christians will often have a deep awareness of these issues.
- Create a culture of strong friendships within the church, especially ones where people can be open, accountable and vulnerable about temptation struggles.
- While acknowledging that sexual orientation can be fluid for some, don't endorse so-called 'conversion therapies'. Holiness is the goal of the Christian life, not heterosexuality.
- Pornography is deeply unhelpful for any progress in Christian holiness. Accountability structures can be extremely helpful. Don't allow awkwardness to prevent you from recommending good practice. Computer software that restricts or reports pornographic material strengthens defences further. What other steps might someone take to help them guard against seeking satisfaction in anything or anyone other than Christ?

Sin

- When a person sins, every attempt should be made to restore them gently, holding out that the Christian life is one of repentance and faith.
- Be aware of the greater level of shame the person caught in same-sex sin may feel.
- Facing up to sin is an opportunity for spiritual growth but which also involves complexity and pain. This is particularly the case if the sin involves a romantic/emotional relationship.
- Going through church discipline and restoration is potentially a time when someone will be most vulnerable to falling away. Make sure the person is linked with another Christian (perhaps yourself) for help and support.
- When would it be appropriate to withdraw someone from serving or leadership in ministry? Where have you seen pastoral responses to sin modelled well?

Language

- Be quick to listen and slow to speak. Never use language that you know could be offensive.
- Assume and speak as though SSA people are in the room (church, Bible study, youth group etc). Be especially aware of your use of personal pronouns like 'they' and 'them.'
- Be careful in your use of terminology, because some terms in this area mean different things to different people.
- Make sure that you don't speak as if the goal of the Christian life is marriage. Consider the impact this way of speaking has on the celibate Christian.
- What words can helpfully be used to describe large church events, services? Would the SSA Christian who is committed to a life of singleness and celibacy feel included?

Culture

- Make it clear that being same-sex attracted in itself is not an impediment to leadership within the church.
- Highlight illustrations, testimonies and examples of celibate SSA Christians active in church life. Their stories can be powerful examples of living for Christ. Foster a culture of listening to one another's stories, particularly to those who feel least heard.
- Promote hospitality, where life is lived and shared with others outside the modern western notion of a nuclear family.
- Think through the life of a celibate SSA person from age 20 to 80. What pastoral, relational and spiritual help would that person need at different points for which you could possibly establish structures in your church?
- Does your church have a written policy on leadership? Does it include a note on the need for holiness among leaders – and what holiness is like?