

HUMAN SEXUALITY: UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL IDENTITY

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

Identity can be described as the answer a person gives to the question, “Who am I?” To answer this question, we need to know things like, “What do I stand for?”, “What’s important to me?” and, “Who (or what) do I love?”

In the last few decades, the language of sexual identity has taken centre stage. Our culture promotes the idea that our sexuality tells us something important about who we are. Speaking about sexual identity has become so pervasive that few people question whether it is an effective descriptor or even what the phrase “sexual identity” means.

If asked, a common answer might be that sexual identity is whether a person sees themselves as gay, straight, bisexual or something else. When asked what these categories signify, most people would say that it’s about who a person finds romantically or sexually attractive. But does sexuality tell us any more about a person than other ways of self-identifying? At times, society and Christians have prioritized our ethnicities, occupations, social status or relationships over Christ; presently, our cultural focus is on sexual preferences.

For example, does being gay or straight tell us anything about a person’s ethical or moral values? Most people would say we can’t know about a person’s morals from their sexual orientation.

The reality is, sexual identity has very limited significance as a descriptor of who we are, since it is only about our romantic and sexual interests. Yet our culture insists that sexual orientation needs to be a significant part of our personal identity and that it identifies different kinds of people. This means that people who are gay, straight, bisexual, etc. are meaningfully different from each other.

This emphasis comes from the cultural trend that sex and romance are essential to our well-being. In our post-Christian society, the quest for the perfect partner or experience is often seen as one of the highest goals in life, so sexual identity becomes wrapped up with a successful life.

Sexual identity is a recent invention. No one thought of people being divided into categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” until the mid-nineteenth century. The idea of sexual identity is reinforced by the popular belief that sexual orientation is rooted in biology, though science has yet to support that idea.

The core issue for Christians is about people finding their identity in something other than their relationship to God.

Sexual identity has very limited significance as a descriptor of who we are.



WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

The Bible clearly teaches that all these other “identities” are secondary to being made in the image of God and how he reveals his love for us.

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...” 1 Peter 2:9 (NIV)

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 1 Corinthians 5:17 (ESV)

Christians should be deeply suspicious of categories based on sexual identity as it is not nearly as important as we are being led to believe and is nowhere to be found in the Scriptures.

The Bible does not tell us that God divides people into “straight”, “gay” or “bisexual”.

These labels almost suggest there is a purpose in dividing people into different categories based on who they find attractive. The truth is, this is not how God sees us. Christians all share the same identity and it is complicated and nuanced. On the one hand, our identity is “sinner”. Everyone’s sexuality is broken in some sense. Everyone is subject to lust, to using physical pleasure as a substitute for real love. Everyone is in need of Jesus’ healing and restoration which He freely provides.

Christians all share the same identity and it is complicated and nuanced.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans

3:23 (ESV)

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” 1 John 1:9 (ESV)

And at the same time, and much more importantly, a Christian identity means God sees us as His unique and special creations and that we are all loved as His children.

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God.” 1 John 3:1 (ESV)

Of course, how we use our sexuality is important. Our longing for love and intimacy does not exempt us from our accountability to God as we act out our sexual desires. The temptation of sexual desire, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is to indulge it in fantasy or reality. We all grapple with the desires that pull us away from God’s plan for marriage and sex.

“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” James 1:14 (ESV)

“So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Galatians 5:16 (NIV)

The Bible unravels cultural assumptions about sexual identity and the importance of sex in our lives. God’s design for holy sexuality consists of two paths: chastity in singleness and faithfulness in a marriage between one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24). These paths, although difficult, are neither cruel nor unfair. The Bible makes it clear that controlling our sexual behaviour is good for us. And, contrary to what much of our culture believes, God’s way is always the most loving.



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Wesley W. Hill, *Washed and waiting: Reflections on Christian faithfulness and homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017.

Preston Sprinkle, *People to be loved: Why homosexuality is not just an issue*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.

Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*. Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2018.

<https://www.centerforfaith.com>
<https://www.cschurch.ca/bydesign>

HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND?

Christ followers are challenged to combine the truth of God’s Word and the example of Jesus’ love towards all people. Fear of cultural changes can cause us to swing to social and political reactions rather than reaching out in love. Within the church, the discussions around same-sex behaviour and same-sex marriage have involved theology, politics and science, but sometimes it has felt like they were missing a key element – people. Often lost in the discussion, is that beyond the LGBTQ+ labels are people who have gifts to offer, needs to be met and are deserving of love.

Here are some suggestions for combining truth and love as we respond to the question of identity:

1

Be Connected

Christ-followers need to be deeply connected to Christian community, engaging beyond Sundays, through committed and intimate friendships. It’s more than shared interests – it’s about being a family for one another. All people, regardless of marriage status, self-identity or sexual orientation, should be able to turn to the church. As part of God’s family, we should be filling the gap.

2

Be Authentic

As Christ-followers who uphold God’s vision for holy sexuality, we must be prepared to open our hearts to those with broken identities. Lead by example, share your struggles around identity. Be real about where you have succeeded or failed at finding your primary identity in Christ.

3

Be a Student

Seek first to understand the other person’s reality. Ask gentle questions to learn their perspectives and what they may be questioning. Study these topics to be confident in what Scripture says so you will be able to discern truth from even subtle deception. Be a student before you try to be a teacher.

4

Be a Relationship Builder

Aim to develop relationships that are strong enough to hold the weight of truth. Encourage one another in truth and love. Embrace God’s grace in your own life and lavishly pass grace on to others.

Every Christ-follower has a primary identity as a beloved child of God and a brother or sister of Jesus. This is true even in moments we find it hard to believe. When we encourage each other in this truth and remain open to receiving this truth in prayer, the Lord will deepen its significance in us. It is a simple reality that will sustain us for a lifetime and an eternity.

Aim to develop relationships that are strong enough to hold the weight of truth.



**Evangelical Missionary
Church of Canada**
Following Jesus Together

emcc.ca/conversations

Conversations is a publication of
EMCC’s SALT Commission
(Social Awareness, Living Truth)