

Shattered Dreams, New Hope

FIRST AID FOR PARENTS WHOSE SON OR
DAUGHTER HAS EMBRACED AN LGBTQ+ IDENTITY



Endorsements

“When addressing homosexuality, we sometimes turn secondary issues into core ones, but *Shattered Dreams, New Hope* does no such thing. This immensely helpful resource begins by laying a theological foundation with the Tree Model, explaining that the sinful heart is the seed and sinful desires the roots. Why is this so extraordinary? Because if sin is the problem, then Christ is the answer. If you are a parent of a child who identifies as LGBTQ+, this gospel-centric curriculum will encourage, equip, and empower you to be an ambassador for Christ as you point your prodigal to the only One who redeems and offers life in abundance!”

Christopher Yuan | DMin, Speaker and Author of *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God*, *A Broken Mother's Search for Hope*, and *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story*

“Harvest USA has given us a reliable guide to complex matters. Here you will find Scripture that touches down, at just the right time, into specific words you can speak and action steps you can take.”

Ed Welch | Counselor and Faculty Member, Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

“If you are turning to *Shattered Dreams, New Hope* for answers, then you seek more than mere information. You want real help, genuine empathy, relatable examples, biblical counsel, and solid gospel hope. This curriculum, along with good information, contains all of these to help you deal with your child's identity and to cope with the range of emotions that every loving parent in this situation experiences.”

Anonymous | Parent of a son who identifies as gay

“When our son came out, we were thrown into deep pain, fear, confusion, and anger. We were so thankful to find a biblical resource for parents like us. The study guided us as we processed our grief, challenged us to think about our son as God would have us to, and continually pointed us to the Lord and his Word as our source of help and hope.”

Kevin and Candice | Parents of a son who identifies as transgender

“As a parent, I would have loved to have this resource twelve years ago when our daughter came home and shared with us that she was gay. As a parent support group leader, I would have used it as a resource when I started the group ten years ago. *Shattered Dreams, New Hope* is very well written and in a format that is easy to read and understand, with well-researched information, compassion, and grace. I highly recommend it to all parents, group leaders, pastors, youth pastors, and anyone who is struggling with sexual identity or unwanted same-sex attraction.”

Judy Schoolfield | Parent of a daughter who identifies as gay

“With the knowledge that the battle for children’s hearts is spiritual, *Shattered Dreams New Hope* speaks solid biblical truth, balanced with grace, to many parents in the church today. Timely, wise, and pastoral, this curriculum provides comfort, hope, and encouragement while richly communicating what parental faith, Christ-likeness, and perseverance look like for those who, in the midst of struggle, heartache, and pain, seek to love both God and their children well.”

Cynthia Lewis | Mother of a child who has repented and is living faithfully, and Co-facilitator of a support group for moms

“This curriculum addresses not only our grief—allowing us to process the pain surrounding our child’s same-sex attraction in meaningful and in scripturally-sound ways—but points us to self-exploration that ultimately helps us to love our child well. We are better able to understand our child’s sinful heart, as well as our own, and learn to relate to our child from a posture of humility and compassion.”

Anonymous | Parents of a daughter who identifies as gay

“This thoughtful study magnified God’s invitation to experience his love, hope, and redemption in one of the most significant journeys of my life. Many of us ask, “How do we interact with our children in loving respect when they disagree on matters of sexuality?” With biblical truth, Harvest USA sensitively handles the questions of parents whose children identify as LGBTQ+, while encouraging us to repent humbly, like the Prodigal Son, and to love our children extravagantly like the Father.”

Cyndi McCallister | Parent and parents’ support group leader with Living Oaks Ministry

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Note to Readers

This resource is intended for general guidance only. It is not intended to be a definitive statement on how to manage relationships with family members dealing with gender dysphoria, same-sex attraction, or gay or transgender identities. Particular strategies are diverse and dynamic and should only be decided upon after prayer, reflection, and consultation with others.

The incidence of depression and suicidal ideation is significantly higher among those experiencing gender dysphoria and same-sex attraction than in the wider population. **If your loved one shows symptoms of depression or says that he or she is considering harming himself or herself, seek help from medical or law enforcement professionals immediately. Do not dismiss these signs or attempt to deal with them on your own.**

The language in this curriculum is inclusive to adolescent children and adults. While much of this content may apply to younger children (those under age 12), for obvious reasons, talking with younger children about sexual and gender identity and feelings is different from similar conversations with adolescents and adults. You may want to contact a pediatric counselor or Harvest USA for guidance in situations involving children under 12.

Acknowledgements

The development of this curriculum was a truly collaborative effort by both staff and friends of Harvest USA. In many ways this project is a direct overflow of our ministry to sexual strugglers and hurting family members over the years. Section One is entirely based on the Tree Model, created by several of our staff, and it has proven to be the most foundational tool in our direct ministry to strugglers. I am grateful for the collective wisdom of our staff, who have formed such rich biblical teaching principles that are applicable to all spheres of our ministry.

That said, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge a few individuals personally. Because this project was formed out of our Shattered Dreams, New Hope seminar, I would like to first acknowledge Tim Geiger, the former president of Harvest USA. Tim created the seminar from which the bones and content of this curriculum originate. Although he did not personally contribute to the development of this curriculum, Tim's teaching and influence have trickled down to every portion of this project. Thank you, Tim.

I would like to thank Brooke Delaney and Nicholas Black. Brooke did most of the heavy lifting, putting many of my thoughts into writing and penning the majority of this content with Nicholas Black's oversight. This curriculum would not be possible without the long hours Brooke devoted to writing these chapters. Thank you both so much. I would like to thank Joan McConnell for contributing the "Starting Points" section, and Lauren Berkhouse for managing our production schedule and marketing for this resource. I also want to acknowledge Katie Pinson, our copy editor for the entire curriculum. Thank you for your hard work and diligence to meet aggressive deadlines and bring this whole thing together. Your careful attention to detail and sensitivity of language used was vital to the final stages of this project.

Finally, this curriculum wouldn't be nearly as helpful without the numerous parents we have learned from over the years who have informed and guided our care for those who would follow them. I personally count it a tremendous privilege to witness such courage, faith, and love displayed by you as you navigate these difficult relational waters with your child. I am a different person having walked alongside you.

Chris Torchia

Parents and Family Ministry Coordinator
Harvest USA

Introduction

For over three decades, Harvest USA has ministered to individuals and families impacted by various kinds of sexual brokenness. In recent years, sexual and gender identity have been emphasized more than ever before in our culture and society. As a result, Harvest USA's Parent and Family Ministry has grown substantially as questions surrounding sexual and gender identity among Christian parents and families have increased. More and more children are exploring an alternative sexual and gender identity.

Sexual and gender struggles can happen in any family, regardless of whether a child was raised in the church, was given a private or public education, or actively participated in Christian fellowship and ministry. Likewise, having a child who identifies as gay or transgender is increasingly common among Christian families. These struggles impact not only the child but also the entire family structure. Christian parents of children who identify as gay or transgender are left struggling with how to love their child while holding onto the truths of Scripture. Parents feel that navigating these life-altering changes is daunting, and most have no place to turn to for solid help—help that is informed, practical, and trustworthy for sharing deep, personal stories of pain, suffering, and confusion.

Is this where you find yourself? If so, then this curriculum is for you.

Shattered Dreams, New Hope is a curriculum specifically geared toward any Christian parent or caregiver of a child who identifies as gay or transgender. The particular audience we have in mind is parents who are in distress over their son or daughter's choices to persist in wrongful belief and sin, yet desire to hold true to a biblical view of sexuality and gender. Although much of this content may apply to loving a child who desires to walk in repentance and holiness in the context of their sexual or gender struggle, this material is not primarily geared toward those parents; instead, it is directed towards parents whose child either rejects biblical sexuality or believes they can reconcile their newfound sexuality with a biblical worldview. Please contact Harvest USA for more resources and guidance in these situations.

Our hope is that you find this curriculum to be informative on key issues you face, rich with biblical perspectives to challenge your heart, full of wise and practical suggestions to handle confusing situations, and deeply encouraging to your soul. Whether you have known about your child's struggle for years or your child has just come out, whether your child has rejected God or is trying to incorporate him into a newfound identity, we want to meet you where you are!

We recognize these can be difficult and murky relational waters to navigate. Our goal is that you develop a strong foundation of truth and love as you set out for the long journey ahead.

HOW TO USE

Our *Shattered Dreams, New Hope* curriculum can be used individually, with a friend or mentor, or within a group setting. For the most effective use, we encourage you to make it personal, taking time to reflect on your child, your actions, your heart, and your relationship with God. We have intended that a parents' group discuss one chapter one week at a time, but each section can be drawn out to fit your needs and timing.

There are also many discussion questions interspersed throughout the curriculum. We encourage you to take the time to answer these questions, to reflect on them, and to discuss your responses with a group or someone close to you. Though some of these questions may be difficult to answer, they will better help you understand God, yourself, and your child.

Please note: We strongly encourage you to work through this curriculum at your own pace. Although the material in this book is structured in a sequential manner, please feel the freedom to work through the chapters that are most relevant to your respective situation. Each section will encourage you to look intently into both your life and that of your child. Some of this material will be challenging. If you are early on in this process or feel it may be too painful in this moment to look deeper into your child's life, consider starting with Section Two of this curriculum before diving into the rest of the material.

The curriculum is broken up into four sections:

STARTING POINTS – Our Theological Foundation

“Starting Points” begins with some fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith that are foundational to all the material that follows. Keeping first things first, we consider a few basic but essential teachings that will serve as reference points for informing your understanding of the situation and your relationship with your child.

SECTION ONE – Discovering Your Child

Section One explores the Harvest USA Tree Model. In light of the essential doctrines in “Starting Points,” you will now seek to understand your son or daughter in a more personal way. We will discuss significant factors that may provide insight about why and how their particular struggle has come about. This section will also allow you to consider your own struggles, sin, and brokenness. All this has the aim of revealing where Christ can meet you and your child in relevant and powerful ways.

SECTION TWO – Caring for Your Heart

Section Two focuses primarily on you and your experience since your child came out. Often for parents, your child's situation eclipses the acute need to care for your own heart. These chapters will help you look deeper at your emotions, your fears, and your doubts to give you a free place to mourn, grieve, and heal. As your own heart heals, you will be better able to minister to and pursue your child.

SECTION THREE – **Moving Toward Your Child**

Section Three helps you begin to pursue your child, understand them, compassionately and intelligently love them, and enter their world while inviting them into yours. This section gives you practical action points to better engage your child for the journey ahead.

We pray (and believe!) that the Lord will strengthen and equip you through this process. May the Lord meet you in surprising ways as you take intentional steps towards engaging with him and your child whom you dearly love!

Starting Points – Our Theological Foundation

Chances are good that you are far from “okay” with your child’s choices and lifestyle. Otherwise, you would not be reading this curriculum! At this critical point in both your life and the life of your child, you have two choices. You could move in the direction of acquiescence, acceptance, and approval of their new identity. This option would allow you to skip the pain of working to reconcile biblical truth and pursue your child’s heart, which will require huge amounts of your efforts, prayers, and emotion with possibly little tangible return. Your other option is to wrestle with what you know to be true in God’s Word while, in love, pressing into difficult conversations with your child and confronting your own sins and weaknesses. How do you choose? Where do you turn for answers to know you made the right decision? Where do you find comfort and relief from anxiety and confusion?

At some point along your journey, you will recognize that you, as well as your child, need a reliable and trustworthy reference point in order to make your way through these issues of gender and sexuality. We base all of our assumptions on these reference points and derive our interpretations of the world on them. Every time you think about or react to your child’s situation, you indicate what your reference point is. You may not realize how crucial such repeated choices are; however, your godly handling of the journey and your faithful ministry to your child depend upon them.

Think back to how you chose to discipline your children when they were little—the boundary lines you drew, your consistency in enforcing rules, how you asked for forgiveness when you were too harsh, the way in which you spoke about God’s mercy and grace for them. Over time, your godly (or ungodly) handling of these situations continually indicated to your child what your reference point was. The same is now true of how you choose to respond to your child’s identity.

Let’s consider some candidates for reference points and what the Bible has to say about them:

1. You can be your own source of truth.

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Proverbs 14:12).

2. Culture can be your source of truth.

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2).

3. Scripture can be your source of truth.

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

This study is based on the conviction that any real, true answers and guidance for our lives are sourced from Scripture—specifically, what Scripture tells us about God, about Jesus Christ, and about humanity.

Obviously, as followers of Christ, our reference points ought to be God and his inspired Word, though, functionally, our actions and beliefs sometimes suggest otherwise. Let's look at how and why we can dependably regard God as a creator and communicator.

God as Creator

As we know from Genesis and other portions of Scripture, God is the designer and maker of all creation. God maintains, sustains, and continually provides for his creation. He is intimately involved in each detail of his creation, constantly working out his plan—a plan that spans from eternity past, includes the present, and reaches into the future. God's sovereignty, though incomprehensible to human minds, constantly works through all things, including sin and evil, to show his grace and bring ultimate glory to himself. His holiness, justice, and purity are absolute and cannot have any connection with evil. God forbears with his fallen creation as he implements his plan of redemption (2 Peter 3:9).

God as Communicator

God has clearly communicated his plans and commands for mankind through creation, through his written Word, and through the life and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. These messages are authoritative and unchangeable. People remain in their lost condition if they do not respond to the witness of creation, the Scriptures, and the life and work of Christ.

Because mankind has turned its back on the Creator, we will regard the message of God as foolishness unless the Spirit of God gives spiritual life and the ability to understand and believe.

Humanity as Rebellious

As created beings, humankind has no role in the design, purpose, or plans of our own lives. Instead, the Creator fashions life and tells us how we are to live. Humanity exists at the pleasure of a transcendent God. Therefore, it is wise and logical to submit ourselves to his authoritative design.

On our behalf, Adam and Eve claimed the position of God and his right to decide good and evil. Our rebellion against the Creator permeates human nature, thinking, and intent. Mankind is described in Scripture as spiritually dead, unable to desire God or to approach him on our own (Romans 5:12). Our rebellion opens the way to pursue all forms of evil, disregard God's plans, and subvert God's Word. Nothing in creation or ourselves functions without the influence of this fallen-ness.

By his grace, God has intervened with the redemption found in Christ. However, God did not change the original blueprints for humanity. For example, we are still wired to desire relationship, even though, in our fallen world, all relationships are broken before they are established. Hence, we often seek relationships in patterns that do not map according to God's design. To some degree, all relationships clearly exemplify mankind's state of rebellion against the Creator (Romans 1:18–32).

Humanity as Redeemable

According to Scripture, our behavior springs from our hearts, so it is our hearts that must change for us to genuinely be transformed. Moreover, Scripture clarifies that we are dead in our fallen-ness, which means that we cannot change on our own. God has intervened on mankind's behalf, and Christ has paid the penalty for our rebellion. Through faith in Christ, we may find forgiveness, strength for heart change, and relationship with our God. Even the faith and the ability to respond to the gospel are gifts of grace from God (Ephesians 2:8–9). This is the gospel message; this is redemption.

We are redeemed when, by faith, we accept the work of Christ's death on our behalf as payment for the penalty of sin. Having become God's children, we can draw on his strength to grow in our understanding of truth and pursuit of Christ-likeness.

Though we have outlined our biblical framework for the work ahead in this study, certain questions may still trouble you: How could all this happen in my child's life? What did I do to cause my child's choices and beliefs? What can I do to change them? These questions are totally normal and appropriate to consider. Perhaps the answers—or the questions themselves—will take shape and become clearer as we walk through this curriculum together.

**For further clarification on Harvest USA's theological beliefs, including those pertaining to sexuality and gender, please see the Appendices.*

SECTION ONE

Discovering Your Child

INTRODUCTION

Bill stared at the screen. It glowed with an image of his daughter living her newfound identity. Years ago, she shared that she was bisexual, and he had weathered her initial disclosure. But now his daughter no longer wanted to be restricted by her sexuality or gender, stating that she could change both when and how she desired. Her Instagram posts demonstrated her delight in this so-called freedom. The pictures shocked him, giving him a glimpse into her world. He had no idea who his daughter was anymore.

How had all this happened? What had caused his daughter to behave in this way? She had struggled in school to make friends, but so did a lot of kids. He never saw this coming. He had several other children who were raised in the same home with the same loving parents and the same influences. Why did this daughter act so differently? He really wanted to blame someone, something, anything, for his daughter's sexual and gender confusion, but he never could quite make the connection as to why his daughter acted the way she did. Was it all just a choice? Or was there something to blame?

Can you relate to Bill's experience? How frustrating that you may never pin down exactly why your child has struggled with their sexuality or gender and arrived in the place they are today. If we are honest, we often ask these questions out of a desire to discover the root cause and fix it. It doesn't take long to realize that devoting yourself to this venture is futile and rarely aids you in loving your child well. But considering the "why" and "how" questions are essential when you have the intention of better understanding your child.

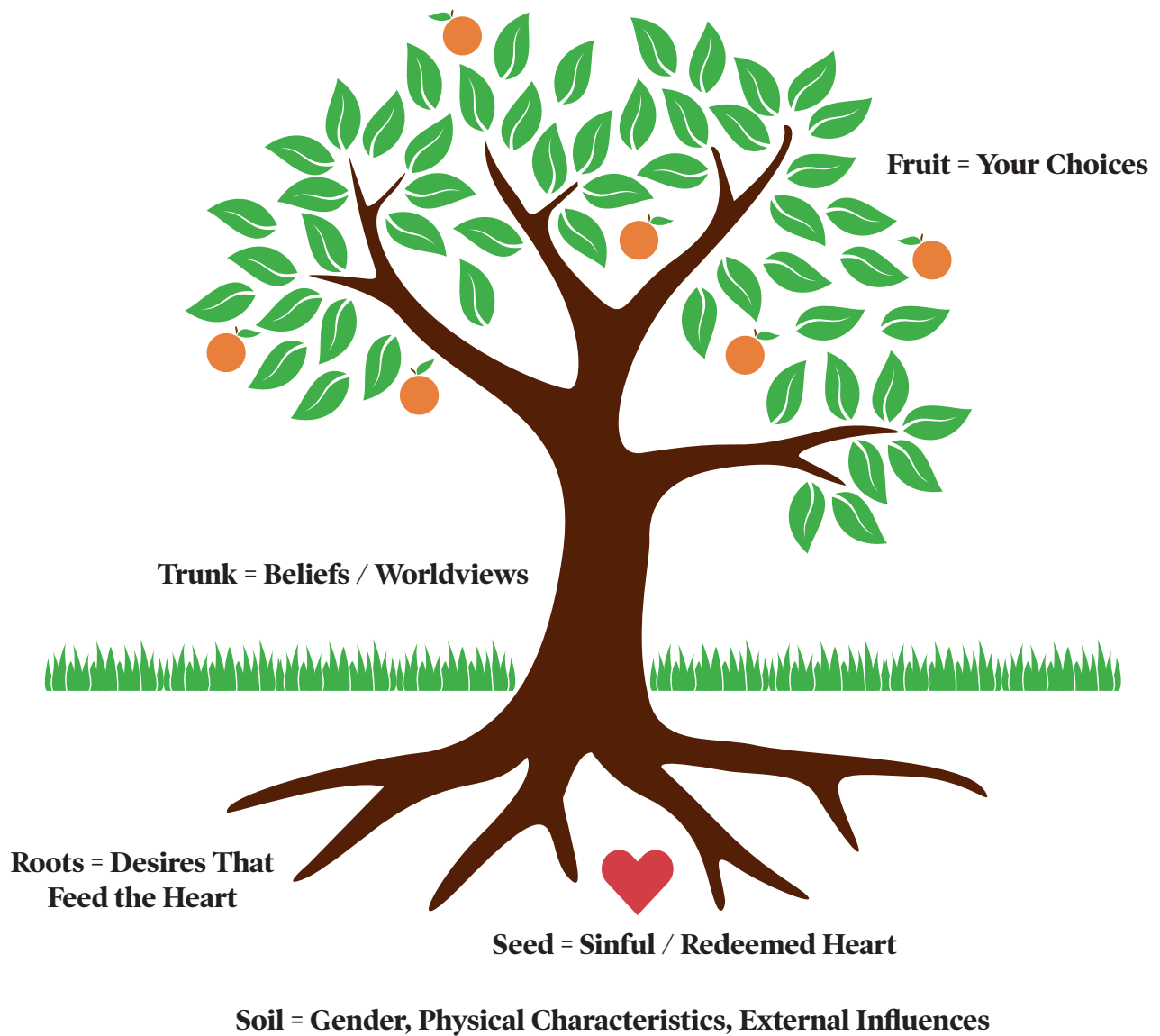
The Harvest USA Tree Model illustrates the development of human struggles, including those that are sexual and gender-oriented in nature. It is helpful for shedding light on God's larger plan of redemption that encompasses the entirety of our personhood. The Tree Model is based on a metaphor Jesus used to explain that human behavior flows from our hearts. The core commitments we make, whether conscious or not, determine the direction of our lives. Consider Jesus' words in Luke 6:43–45:

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.

Jesus communicates the truth that we each live, think, make decisions, and behave from our hearts. Scripture emphasizes the heart as the most important part of our being. This knowledge allows us to understand how and why we produce the particular fruit we see in our lives.

This section will explore the five categories of the Tree Model: fruit (behaviors), seed (heart), soil (environmental factors), roots (desires), and trunk (beliefs). You will apply these truths not only to your child's life but to yours as well, because the better you understand your own heart, the better you will be able to effectively live out your calling to love your child.

THE TREE MODEL



Chapter 1 – Seed and Fruit

Key Concept

True change is not found in simply altering one's behavior. True change begins within, in our hearts. Every one of us needs God's loving initiative to effect change in our hearts and our lives.

Intro: Our Heart and Behaviors

A seed is the beginning of any tree. Following along with this metaphor, the seed represents our hearts. The heart is the essence of a person, the volitional core of who we are, or the "inner man." As the originator of our actions and the driver of our behaviors, the heart encompasses our souls, minds, and wills. Examining the heart will help explain why you do what you do.

The fruit represents our behaviors, actions, words, feelings, and attitudes. Just as fruit stems from the seed, behaviors stem from our hearts. Seed and fruit are intimately connected.

Exploring the Key Issue

Matthew 15:18–20 says, "But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone."

Jesus emphasizes that in order for you to understand why your child may be acting immorally in their sexuality or gender, you must first seek to discover what is happening in his or her heart. Our actions stem from what resides in us. This simple truth is very profound! Consider some ways in which this occurs. If I believe in my heart that ultimate value lies in having a successful career, then this will be demonstrated in the fruit I produce or, in other words, in my behavior. My endeavors will be bent towards working hard, making lots of money, and moving up the ladder. I may be tempted to view others who are not successful with disdain because they do not aspire to my core value.

Or perhaps you can see these principles play out in your own parenting. You may have expected or even demanded right behavior in your children. Perhaps you prized the fact that they obeyed you, were not unruly, and basically lived in a way you approved of. Their behavior reflected your own good parenting choices. Secretly, you may have questioned parents whose children were wild or openly disobedient and inwardly disparaged their parenting skills. These thoughts and actions reveal what your heart values: What is most important is my child's outward behavior. Further, having children who lived rightly may have fed the core belief that you were a successful parent, which gave you a feeling of accomplishment.

Please note that wanting your child to live rightly is not inherently wrong, as all parents desire this. However, because God says that human hearts are deceitful—see Jeremiah 17:9—even wanting good things for your child can be warped in the direction of self-interest. In other words, being a “good parent” can become an idol that competes with honoring God and loving your child in the way the Lord intends.

Due to the Fall, our hearts are naturally sinful, self-focused, idolatrous, and deceptive, rather than obedient and faithful. They are not basically good or even neutral. As a result of sin, what is formed within our hearts is broken.

Often, we are not aware of why we do what we do and seek to blame our reactions on external factors, such as other people, pain, being sinned against, or difficult circumstances. We easily look beyond ourselves and incriminate others for causing our actions, but Jesus tells us that our actions arise from our hearts, not from secondary sources. We may indeed be sinned against, but our particular sinful reactions stem from our own sinful hearts.

Your child’s heart is broken, sinful, self-focused, and idolatrous, but some parents miss the fact that their child’s heart is also deceived. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it.” Often, more than simple rebelliousness is operating within a child as they choose a new sexual identity. They are listening to lies, concluding that a gay or transgender identity will give them what they have deemed missing from their life.

We all, including you and your child, have an ongoing tendency to turn away from God, either through our own sinfulness or through deception. In this you can find common ground with your child. The behavior might look different, but both of your hearts are in need of a Savior.

As someone who trusts in Christ for salvation, how have you observed your heart’s tendency to turn away from the God you love and go your own way? Do you tend to take responsibility for your failings or blame others?

Have you seen your own heart deceive you? Have you considered that your child's heart may be deceived? Does this thought change your view of your child as more than rebellious?

With the realization that all of our hearts are broken and prone to sin, what are some areas you can observe in your child's heart that move you to compassion? How can you find common ground within your own personal sin struggles?

Going Somewhere: Seed and Fruit

1. Look Deeper Than Behavior

Any parent with a gay or transgender child is strongly tempted to focus solely on their child's behaviors. It is alarming to hear the new ways in which your child talks about sexuality and gender with their friends, or to see how they now spend their time online or change how they dress and speak. Your desire to pluck this bad fruit off the tree and cause it to disappear makes sense, but this is tantamount to changing only outward actions and speech, which never actually gets to their hearts. It's like trying to fix a bad apple tree by removing the bad apples and tying up good ones in their place. While it is not amiss to address your child's wrong behaviors, to never move beyond them is superficial and incomplete.

Look at your own sin patterns. Have you found that altering your behavior halted your desires or temptations to continue that particular action? Have you been able to just stop doing what you know is not right? Or do you have sin struggles that you continue to commit over and over? While God's grace can instantaneously cease sinful actions and change hearts, more often, this process of overcoming our sin is a long one. God usually works within our hearts over time, giving us gradual freedom from temptations and desires as he sanctifies us. It's also likely that certain sin struggles may be with you—and your child—for the rest of your lives.

Experiencing and recognizing this process within yourself will give you compassion and understanding when looking at your child's life and actions.

Furthermore, Scripture tells us that God cares deeply about what resides within our hearts. He focuses on giving his children new hearts. Ezekiel 36:26 says, “And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.”

Knowing that, ultimately, the heart needs transformation can free you from focusing on and repeatedly reacting to your child’s behaviors. It is not their behavior that ultimately needs to change—it’s their hearts. Unless their hearts are redeemed, sinful behaviors will simply be hidden or morph into other wrong actions.

When you see your child behave in an ungodly way, look deeper into why they are choosing this particular action instead of focusing on the outward appearance. Pause to consider what they are they trusting in. What do they value? What is their functional savior in this situation, the thing that they believe will give them life and happiness? You may not be able to answer these questions now, but starting to consider them is a great foundation in knowing your child on a deeper level.

In what ways have you tried to address your child’s bad fruit by simply prohibiting their behavior, in hopes this would fix the problem? For example, taking their phone away, repeatedly telling them that what they are doing is wrong, etc.

Often, our behaviors, attitudes, words, and actions can be a poor reflection of God’s love for them. What are some areas of bad fruit in your own life where you can pray for change?

2. Pray for Heart Change

Notice from the Ezekiel passage that God alone can change and cleanse hearts, so your job is to pray for change within your heart, as well as within the heart of your son or daughter. Psalm 51:10 reads, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” David pleaded with God to transform his heart because he knew God desires to sanctify all of his children.

Pray for heart change within your child, and remember that you are praying for more than behavioral change; pray for the redemption of your child's entire heart. God has a plan and purpose for your son or daughter, so as you ask for heart change within your child, pray that God would conform your will to his.

Your child needs your prayers, and you have the privilege to pray for God to change their heart to follow and obey him. If your child is not a believer or has rejected God, pray for their salvation. Pray that they would first be saved and brought to a personal relationship with Christ. Knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior is the first step in living for God and turning from living outside of his design.

If your child declares that they are a believer and you see evidence of this in his or her life, you can begin to pray for the fruit of the Spirit to grow within them. This fruit includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Pray for more than just changed behavior; pray that the Spirit will work within your child, transforming his or her heart to see that truly following Christ means obeying him in all things. As Jesus says in John 14:15, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

How can you incorporate specific times during the day or evening to devote to praying for God to work within your child's heart? Are there times that you can pray together with your spouse, if you are married, or with a friend?

How might considering whether your child is a believer or not change the way you think about and pray for your child?

Study the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. What areas can you ask God to develop in your own heart?

What are some particular fruits from Galatians 5 that you could ask God to develop in your child's heart? Consider incorporating these into your prayers this week.

3. Identify Good Fruit Within Your Child

As a result of the Fall, our lives are characterized by bad fruit and wrong behavior—yet God, in his mercy, allows even sinners to practice good behavior. We all have good and bad fruit, including your son or daughter. Your child is more than their bad fruit, or, more pointedly, they are more than their sexuality and gender.

Disproportionately focusing on their bad fruit will harm your relationship and create barriers that hinder you from loving your child well. You cannot have a loving conversation with someone when all you see are their flaws. This perspective only reduces your child down to their bad behavior, making them feel as if they are a problem needing to be fixed instead of the son or daughter whom you love. Try to see them as a child of God who has good and bad fruit, yet is still loved by their Creator—much like yourself.

Despite their poor choices that may be hard to endure, your son or daughter certainly produces good fruit that cannot be overlooked. Identifying good behaviors, attitudes, words, and actions is important for your child's maturity and your relationship, so share with your child what you have observed, which can encourage them, strengthen them, and fortify your relationship with them.

What kinds of good fruit does your child demonstrate in their behavior, attitude, words, and actions? Do you have difficulty naming good fruit? If so, why do you think that is?

Taking It Home

In Proverbs 3:5–6, God calls us to trust in him with our whole heart and lean not on our own understanding, precisely because we often do, believing that we know a better way. In what ways do you want or have tried to work through difficulties in your family on your own understanding?

What would trusting in and leaning on God with your whole heart look like in these specific areas? What would need to change for this to happen?

How might your outward attitudes and actions transform if these changes took place in your heart? What behavior changes (fruit) may your child see as evidence of this heart change within you?

Chapter 2 – Soil

Key Concept

Our soil influences, both past and present, significantly impact our sins and struggles, but God can redeem and reframe these influences for his purposes, bringing healing and hope into our lives.

Intro: Our Environment and Influences

Now that we have looked at the seed and fruit, or heart and behavior, of the Harvest USA Tree Model, we will examine the soil. The soil represents the environmental factors and influences that shape our hearts, which play a significant role in what we do and how we live. Perhaps most importantly, these environmental factors greatly impact what we believe about God, self, others, and life in general, informing the particular behaviors we choose.

We need to note two important things as we explore these influences. First, because a tree is significantly shaped by the environment in which it grows, these factors are largely outside of the tree's control. We have little say about the components of our environment. We don't choose the particular family or culture we are born into, our genders, our body types, our personalities, or even the blessings, sufferings, and temptations that come at us as we live in this fallen world.

The second thing to note is that, while these soil influences exert a strong effect upon our hearts, they are not determinative. In and of themselves, these influences do not produce a particular action or behavior within you. Rather, our hearts drive our behaviors. Yet it remains that we each experience life on this earth through our bodies, families, culture, and so on. This tug-of-war sets the context in which our hearts are shaped and expressed.

Reflecting on these particular soil aspects of your son or daughter's life will give you a more comprehensive understanding of your child and what has prompted his or her decisions, in turn showing you other areas of your child's life that God desires to heal. If studying the seed sheds light on your child's sinful and deceived heart, studying the soil aims to focus your attention on your child as a sufferer, because he or she has been impacted by this fallen world. Considering these specific areas can foster a greater degree of compassion and empathy for your child and help you resist any temptation to reduce them merely to rebellious behavior.

Can you name one significant experience while growing up that shaped the way you think and live even today?

Can you name one significant experience from your child's past that may have shaped the way they think and live today?

Exploring the Key Issue

Let's explore a number of specific soil categories that have shaping influence in your son or daughter's life. As we consider these categories, please keep in mind that, much like other common propensities to temptation that people experience, we often do not know exactly what leads people to struggle with their sexuality and gender.

Physical Characteristics and Gender

Physical characteristics play a significant role in our lives. This includes whether we are male or female, attractive or plain, tall or short, skinny or heavy. In some ways, we conform to the cultural norms for men and women, and, in other ways, we do not. Some individuals grow up healthy and strong, while others struggle with significant health ailments or physical disabilities. Some fit the cultural norm of beauty and attractiveness, while others do not. We are not given much choice in the physical characteristics we have, yet this greatly impacts the way we view ourselves and how others perceive us.

Gender can mean many different things, depending on the context. To be clear on our meaning, we believe that one's biological sex at birth establishes one's gender identity throughout one's life as either a man or woman. This is God's intentional and good design. Our culture, though, believes gender can be determined apart from one's biological sex. Those who struggle with their assigned gender feel their physical body does not align with the gender they experience internally, resulting in great angst and confusion.

Concrete, universally agreed-upon definitions of masculinity and femininity elude our culture. Even Christians' beliefs about what it means to be a man or woman are very convoluted and, more often than not, significantly influenced by culture. We often find ourselves weighing other people against extra-biblical categories that Scripture does not necessarily prescribe, creating uncertainty and questions for many people, not only those who struggle with gender dysphoria.

Consider an example from the familiar Bible story of Jacob and Esau. A strong and rugged hunter, Esau represents the typical male figure that many would admire as a “man’s man.” Jacob, on the other hand, was quiet and spent more time in the tents—or, in other words, with the women. Esau was loved by his father, while Jacob was loved by his mother. From Genesis 25–27, we gather that Jacob did not fit in with Esau or with our typical expectations for a man, yet God chose Jacob to be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. This example is not intended to show which type of male God prefers, but rather that our definitions of what it means to be a man or woman are often cultural and not biblically informed.

How might your child perceive himself or herself based solely on their physical characteristics? How might this have influenced their view of themselves and their gender or sexuality?

What has been your experience with how the Church has defined what it means to be male and female? Did you fit in with this designation? Have you observed Christian-cultural standards to which your child did not conform?

Personality and Gifting

Our God-given personality characteristics and natural talents include whether we are extroverted or introverted, social or shy, and our interests, talents, intelligence, and even cognitive disabilities and mental illness.

Much like physical characteristics, people either accept our personalities and talents, or they do not. Are we part of the cool crowd, or are we outsiders? Are our talents esteemed or dismissed?

Consider a girl who, as a child, didn't gravitate towards the same activities as the girls around her. Instead of princesses, Barbie dolls, or playing dress up, she was more of a tomboy who enjoyed football, rough play, and hanging out with the boys. Observing the typical female stereotypes lived out around her led her to believe that being a girl simply didn't fit her make-up. As she grew older and her body began to mature, she became very uncomfortable with the new womanly figure that felt increasingly strange to her. These experiences could lead her to question her identity as a woman while finding comfort in a male identity.

Imagine a boy who is disinterested in sports, drawn to the arts and theatre, and more emotional in nature. If most boys around him express themselves in more masculine activities, like sports or coarse joking, then he will likely feel different. Over time, these differences may lead this boy to believe that he does not measure up. He may begin to question where he belongs and what this means for his gender or sexuality.

The way we are received or rejected by others profoundly impacts us, especially when we experience this in our adolescent years. Finding acceptance and love from another person or friend group is often of central importance to those who have struggled to blend in. Without realizing it, some people are drawn to adopt a gay or transgender identity in the pursuit of welcoming relationships, as the LGBTQ+ community often is a very inclusive place for individuals like this.

This is also the case for those who may struggle with things like a learning disability, developmental delays, or being on the autism spectrum. Parents should consider how their child may perceive themselves in light of the limitations they have and their relations to others.

Growing up, did you feel that you were accepted or rejected by your peers? What was this experience like for you?

How do you think your child's personality, gifts, and interests shape their sense of self and where they fit in the world?

As you consider your child's experience, are you moved to compassion? Why or why not?

Family

This category pertains to the many dynamics and factors of our immediate families that nurture and shape us. Whether our family is strict or permissive, conservative or liberal, Christian or agnostic, emotive or stoic, every family creates a distinctly unique soil environment that nurtures and grows us in particular ways. Within the context of family (or absence of), we develop our belief system on some of the most foundational areas of life: how relationships ought to function, how to show and receive love, what arguments and conflict resolution look like, gender roles and sexuality, who God is, and how we ought to live.

Families also are the context in which we experience some of the most difficult realities of a fallen world: the pain of a broken home, damaging and harsh relationships, life-long struggles with parents or siblings, and distressing family events that leave lasting impressions.

Consider the example of an innocent dynamic between siblings: A girl grows up with sisters who are constantly pursued by men and are praised for their beauty—yet she is not. This young girl compares herself with her sisters and judges herself by the rejection she feels. Desperately wanting to feel attractive and desired, she may eventually be tempted to explore her sexuality and cross boundaries that she had never thought possible. A seemingly small and unpreventable dynamic between siblings can balloon into a larger issue about gender and sexuality.

Consider a father whose primary concern is for his child's outward behavior and performance. His radar is set to track grades on the report cards, make sure the kid behaves respectfully in public, and focus much of his conversations on what his child is accomplishing rather than

how he is doing personally. Although these things may be part of parenting well, focusing solely on them may indirectly send a message to his son that his emotions are not important, while behavior and success are. His child may come to believe that his father is insensitive to matters of the heart. If the son also happens to wrestle with his sexuality or gender, he will likely process this for years in silence, afraid and ashamed to confess to his dad.

You may have guessed it by now, but parents are a significant soil factor in their children's lives. This is not to say that you are to blame for your child's actions! Our hope, rather, is that this chapter broadens your understanding of all the various and complex factors that can culminate in a child adopting a gay or transgender identity.

Can you identify what your family taught you about gender or sexuality when you were growing up? What were the family ethics that you were taught? Did you teach these to your child as well?

Reflect on the family environment in which you raised your child. What may have significantly impacted your son or daughter in negative ways? Be specific.

We encourage honest reflection on this point. If the questions above draw out ways in which you may have hurt your child or failed to love them well, wisdom can lead you to soberly reflect and pray about how you might make amends with your son or daughter.

Although family dynamics can certainly impact a child in negative ways, God's intent for families is to powerfully nurture children in his ways. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 says,

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (NIV).

The Lord calls parents to teach their children about everything pertaining to life and godliness and what it means to love the Lord our God with all one's heart, soul, and strength! In doing so, families can positively shape children's understanding of fearing God and obeying his commands, responding in a godly manner to conflict and pain, expressing and processing emotions constructively, and living and acting responsibly.

The efforts you have made to raise your child in the truth of God are not in vain! God has impressed his commands on your child's heart, and they will be with your child wherever they go, whether your child accepts or rejects them. Pray that the Holy Spirit would convict them of the truth they have been taught.

Reflect on the family environment in which you raised your child. How have you sought to raise your child in the fear of the Lord? Be specific.

As you consider your child's life, how has your parenting positively impacted your son or daughter?

Culture

Culture encompasses the social behavior and norms in the world around us, including the Internet, social media, books, news, TV shows, movies, music, workspaces, schools, friends and family, mentors, counselors, and even the government as it defines marriage and gender. Culture exerts a sometimes imperceptible influence on our societies, communicating ideas, priorities, desires, convictions, values, and beliefs. We constantly receive messages through these mediums about what is prized and despised, which shapes our outlook on life and impacts what we believe is true.

Like the air we breathe, we imbibe cultural dynamics without even noticing it, and often the messages about sexuality and gender are far from biblical. These imperceptibly work their way down into our hearts and minds and produce beliefs that become our own. Consider one underlying assumption that permeates our culture: "Sex equals life." Sex is expected and

assumed in all dating relationships, and those who do not participate are treated with derision or even pity. Idolizing sex as the ultimate experience renders life without it unfulfilling. Yet sex is not life, nor is it the only way to experience love and intimacy. God's definition of love as outlined in Scripture is found not only within a marriage relationship but also among family, friends, and community. God has a good and beautiful design for relationships, particularly within the body of Christ. He has created us to serve and love others with the unique gifts and personalities with which we were created. This contrasts with the self-focused belief that my sexuality, my gender, and how I want to express them is where true fulfillment lies. Yet understanding these cultural messages can create empathy for your child as you consider the many messages they are hearing.

We will go into greater detail on the cultural lies your children may adopt in Chapter 4.

Think about the cultural environment in which you lived until you turned 18. What was esteemed and despised? What were the messages you absorbed about sex, relationships, and being a man or woman?

Think about the cultural environment in which your son or daughter is growing up. How is this different from the cultural climate of your upbringing? How would today's cultural messages make it challenging for a young person who is trying to understand their sexuality or gender?

Peers

Peers are often the first to expose your child to distorted worldviews of sexuality, gender, and relationships. Because we crave acceptance and approval from our peers, their opinions frequently seem more important than the opinion of God. A child who wants to be part of a particular crowd can be enticed into sexual behavior even when he or she has reservations; a lot of kids fear “missing out” so much that they will compromise their convictions.

Even further, the trend towards embracing gay and transgender identity, especially among youth, communicates that assuming an alternative identity is cool and admirable. This is

especially evident through the rise of LGBTQ+ groups and organizations on school campuses across the country, allowing for exploration of sexual and gender distinctions during a formative time in a young person's life.

Peer relationships can be so influential that some parents are dumbfounded by how quickly their child is turned astray. Even if parents have a good relationship with their child and have no obvious “failures” in their parenting, peer relationships can still be the strongest influence in a person's life, especially in the adolescent years. If your child really struggles to be accepted by their peers, they may gravitate towards any person or group who will accept them.

If your child tends to withdraw from social events and situations and prefers to keep to themselves, they may search for an online community to meet their desire for relationship. This is especially true for children on the autism spectrum. The strong feeling of otherness can complicate forming real-life relationships outside of the home, so creating relationships through online gaming or chat groups seem like an avenue for finding connection without the work or fear of in-person relationships. In the right context, this could actually be a positive thing. Increasingly, however, the central piece that holds these relationships together is the commonality of being gay or transgender. Your child's online community may offer enough support and encouragement for him or her to eventually live out a new identity in real life.

In summary, your child's peer relationships are likely, to them, the most important part of their lives. As a parent, you need to be aware of your child's peer influences. This is not for you to strip them away from all negative influence or see their friends as the bad guys. Rather, this is a window into your son or daughter's world! Discovering the things that are most significant to them will allow you to better engage. We will discuss more about how to engage in your son or daughter's environment in Chapters 9 and 10.

Can you remember a time when you altered your beliefs or behavior due to the influence of others around you?

Can you remember a time when your child was positively influenced by his or her peers? What about negatively? In either case, what values were encouraged or compromised? What desires, such as acceptance or respect, do you think your child was ultimately pursuing?

How might you seek to learn about your child's friendships? Can you think of any way to better engage with the friends with whom your child has close relationships?

Trauma, Suffering, and Pain

Trauma takes the form of sexual, physical, psychological, verbal, and emotional abuse. This category can be broadened to other forms of suffering and pain, including divisive relational or family experiences, difficult divorces, the death of a parent or sibling, a break in a close friendship, a significant move or life transition, chronic pain, or illness.

Sexual abuse is a particular evil that impacts people in life-altering ways. Sexual abuse can profoundly contort one's beliefs about sex, gender, and sexuality by distorting power, authority, and value within relationships. Someone who has been sinned against sexually may find themselves pursuing sexual sin.

Even exposure to sexual sin at a young age—say, through pornography—can be viewed as a type of traumatic event. This is often a person's first education about sexuality, which forms their foundational beliefs about sex and relationships.

Emotional or psychological abuse is less obvious but can include abusive language, degrading or belittling words, and neglect. Words send powerful messages that either build us up or tear us down. The more you hear you have no value, the more you will come to believe these words to be true.

Consider the impact of verbal and emotional abuse: A father berates his son, calling him weak or soft, and disparages him for gravitating towards dance instead of sports. If this boy does not

conform to his father's image of masculinity or agree with how he treats other women, this boy may not only resonate and identify with other women in their mutual experience of derision, but he may also reject his gender and vow to distance himself from anything resembling his father.

While you should consider if your child has experienced trauma or abuse, not every significant struggle with sexuality and gender stems from abuse. Any of the previous soil factors could have played a significant role in your child's struggle. Likewise, if your child has suffered some form of abuse, don't assume this is the sole cause of their sexual issues.

Additionally, profound loss and the disappointment of living in a fallen, broken world are traumatic: the death of a parent, spouse, child, or friend; divorce, broken families, and estranged relationships; and job changes that occasion moving away from a supportive community. Each of these results in losing what was once familiar. What was secure is replaced by confusion and chaos, whether temporary or lifelong.

If you know your child has experienced significant trauma, as far as it depends on you, support them in getting the emotional and psychological help they need. Without any stipulations, strongly encourage professional help to address past trauma and their beliefs about sexual or gender identity.

Can you name a traumatic or significant event that has impacted you? How has this affected your decisions in life?

Do you know of a traumatic or significant event that has affected your child? How this shaped them?

Spiritual Warfare

While spiritual warfare can permeate all of the above soil influences, we want to direct our attention specifically on the work of Satan's devices, spiritual influences, doubt, and personally wrestling with God.

As we think about human sexuality, we don't want to over- or under-emphasize the role of the demonic and the very real unseen world around us. Ephesians 6:12 says, "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." A liar, destroyer, and deceiver, and one who seduces God's people away from their first love of Christ, the devil tempts us to believe lies to take our hearts from love of Christ and love of people.

Our culture abounds with spiritual deception, most strikingly in the areas of gender and sexuality. As more and more churches endorse same-sex attraction and transgender ideology, they also accept a reinterpretation of Scripture that makes room for views that are in direct opposition to God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender. Satan loves to distort the truths found within Scripture, evidenced in the Garden when Satan asks, "Did God really say?" He proclaims that Scripture does not actually mean what it says and is no longer relevant, and that God has lied, enticing those who desperately want to live out their sexuality and gender in a non-biblical way that feels right for them.

Reinterpreting Scripture may seem like an end to your child's struggle and anguish. Some of you have children who still claim to follow Christ, so accepting these reinterpretations allows them to believe and live as they choose without conflict. Whether your child has rejected God or is trying to meld faith and sexual identity, you must see your child as more than just a sinner; they are also deceived by lies and by the liar. You will better care for them by knowing that they are also being deceived.

Does the idea that your child may be spiritually deceived change how you relate to them? How might this change your conversations with them?

*In what ways are you tempted to view your child's situation as a battle against "flesh and blood?"
What would it look like to take seriously the spiritual influences your child faces?*

Going Somewhere: Soil

It can be overwhelming to consider these soil factors and how many strong influences have shaped your life and the life of your child. In light of the fact that so much feels out of your control, does it seem hopeless?

Redeemed Soil

Take heart. We serve a God who loves to redeem things, including our soil. Understanding God's sovereign plan and purpose for you and your child's life alters your perspective of soil influences. When you believe God is constantly working for his good purposes, which include you and your family, then you can believe that your past no longer defines or controls you. God can and will use both good and bad soil influences within your life. Joseph's words to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 bring hope for anyone who feels overwhelmed by their past: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." God is constantly pruning and refining us for his good purposes, and there is nothing within our pasts that cannot be redeemed and made new.

While you can rest knowing that God is actively at work in this very situation, you can also actively engage your child as you work on how you respond to them and to circumstances in your own life. While these soil categories deepen your knowledge of the influences impacting your child, they are also indicators of where you can purposely speak into their lives.

1. Reinterpreting the Soil

You can help your child reinterpret their experiences in light of God's existence and character, in the hopes of guiding them towards more accurate perceptions about the world and their own experiences, including their gender or sexuality struggles. Reinterpreting their soil will also give you perspective and insight and perhaps transform the way you think about your child. Engaging with your child about past and present situations that impact them provides an opportunity for you to correct your wrongs, acknowledge your parental errors, and invite your child into the process.

Reinterpreting the soil looks like delving into hurtful or significant experiences, often ones we have avoided talking about. As the parent, you should take the initiative to acknowledge and apologize for any life events that have deeply hurt and negatively impacted your child. Have you noticed their friends shutting them out? Has there been a divorce or separation in your family? Have you or your spouse become disengaged from your child? We have all wronged and been wronged, so beginning to talk about these wounds can start the process of healing for everyone.

Reinterpreting also means challenging unbiblical, societal, and misinformed Christian stereotypes about gender and sexuality. Because Scripture refrains from categorizing behavioral characteristics as solely male or female, think through with your child what it means to be a godly man or woman, regardless of cultural standards. For example, awareness of and sensitivity to another's suffering is a godly characteristic that men and women should both celebrate. God encompasses equal parts of strength and power, tenderness and gentleness; if we are made in the image of God, then embodying any of these characteristics is personifying God himself. Together, you and your son or daughter can reshape their experience of being male or female in light of God's character.

What are some of your child's qualities that resemble the character of God? How can you rejoice in these godly characteristics?

Have you rejected or tried to alter any of your child's characteristics? How can you redress these past conversations or reactions?

2. Reframing the Idea of Acceptance

Your child desires to belong, particularly among their peers. Our culture—and perhaps your child—defines acceptance as total and unmitigated approval. In that sense, acceptance is equated with love; any hint of rejection or hesitation is regarded as hostility and hatred. In reality, though, this path is simple passivity, an unwillingness to approach conflict or call

attention to flaws. The Bible defines real acceptance—and love—as offering a safe haven while encouraging one another towards holiness, which implicitly suggests working through sin struggles.

You can help to reframe for your child what true acceptance looks like by loving them and accepting—not affirming—their choices while still standing firm in truth. In doing so, you will demonstrate how God accepts them as well.

How has God defined acceptance in your relationship with him? Can you allow this understanding to inform how you will accept your child?

How has your child defined what acceptance looks like to them? Through both your words and your actions, how can you communicate your acceptance of your child without approval of specific sins in their life?

3. Redeeming Current Soil

Finally, you have the ability to take ownership of your current soil and the voices to which you listen. Have you isolated yourself out of shame, or are you inviting others to speak truth to you and living life in a community of believers? This is where the role of the church and a community of believers can walk alongside you as you navigate this new relationship with your child.

This can also be true for your child, who actively chooses and participates in their present soil environment. Are they surrounding themselves with people who are positive influences, or are they seeking only superficial relationships or ones that are solely affirming of their newly revealed identity? Talk with your child about the soil influences in their lives and how they may prompt particular outcomes. While you may not be able to control these factors for your child, you can speak truth to them in winsome ways and trust that God will work within your words.

Think intentionally about the ways your child has or is experiencing these soil factors. This will not only give you more connection with your child but also create authentic compassion for them and their life experiences.

What does your child's current environment look like? What are some positive influences? What are some negative ones? Are there ways you can speak to the choices they are making about their social surroundings?

Taking It Home

Rather than focusing on the sin in their lives, how might keeping these soil categories in mind cause you to view your child differently?

Putting your child's sexuality or gender identity aside, how might you love your child by engaging them in some of these specific categories? This could mean asking questions about their experiences in these areas, listening closely when they open up, apologizing or actively working to mend any brokenness in the relationship, speaking about God's love, and so on.

Chapter 3 – Roots

Key Concept

When processed through our fallen hearts, desires become twisted and lead towards sinful behaviors. We need God to reroute and even change our desires so that they are oriented towards him and his will.

Intro: Our Desires

In the Harvest USA Tree Model, the roots represent our desires, which direct our hearts as well as our actions. As God's image bearers, each one of us was created to desire and long for certain things, but, due to our fallen nature, sin distorts even those good desires into idols.

Unless redeemed, these powerful desires motivate us toward unbelief and disobedience. Desires become problematic when we seek to satisfy them apart from God, the one who created us with desires in the first place. Unmet longings lead to disappointment, discouragement, and, ultimately, despair. When our frustrated wishes turn into demands, they usually develop into idols—things that we believe we cannot live without.

We pursue particular desires because we think we are the authorities on how to bring ourselves joy and contentment. But when we pursue them apart from God, or when we cannot fulfill a particular longing, we begin to live for these desires, doing everything in our power to bring about their fruition. These same desires then begin to control us. Desires become idols when they hold a controlling position in your life, demanding your time, attention, energy, emotions, loyalty, and ultimately your worship.

Naming your desires and noting the specific longings in your child's heart will more clearly help both of you understand what motivates their particular actions. Comprehending the origin of these behaviors leads towards freedom as you see their controlling influence and instead experience their fulfillment in God.

Exploring the Key Issue

Sin is responsible for our tendency to turn away from the Creator and turn to things in the created world to meet our desires. Scripture gives a simple yet profound description of God diagnosing the sin problem of his people. In Jeremiah, we read of his concern for and judgment of his wayward people who, like us, were prone to wander from loving God with all their hearts, all their souls, and all their strength. God directly points out this truth in Jeremiah 2:13: "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water" (NIV).

The Israelites had sinned in many ways. They had complained over and over, distrusting God's provision; they disobeyed God's commands to take the land; they committed murder, adultery, and a whole host of sexually sinful behaviors, yet God said they had committed just two evils. How can their numerous transgressions be summed up in only two charges?

First, God states that Israel turned away from him, the fountain of living waters, their one true source of life, nourishment, and strength. In Deuteronomy 7:12–16, God promised that he would provide for them, fight for them, and protect them from enemies as long as they obeyed his word. Yet Israel was not willing to wait patiently for what God would give them and instead disregarded his commands to seek their own provision, strength, and protection apart from him by trusting in themselves and by giving their devotion to everything but God.

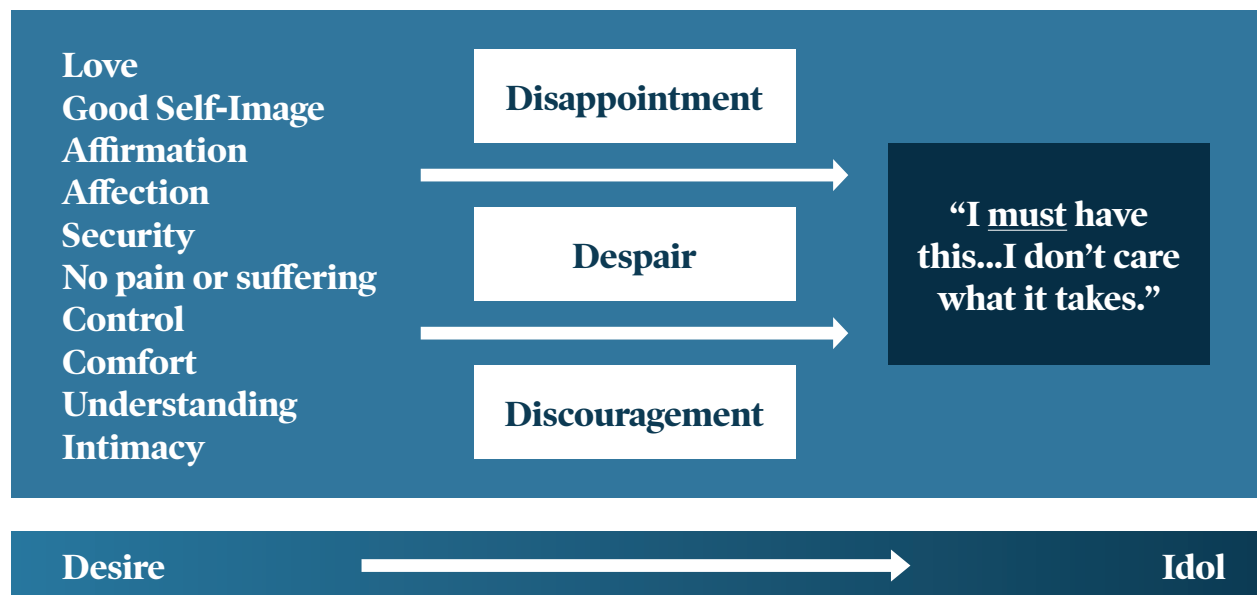
Second, upon running away from God, Israel sought to find their own source of life and nourishment. Another word for this is idolatry, which refers to any experience of worshiping an aspect of creation at the expense of worshiping our Creator. By turning to their own cisterns, Israel, in effect, turned to trusting in themselves.

James 1:13–15 further expounds upon the cause-and-effect relationship between the desires of our hearts and our behaviors, demonstrating how we act out of what we want or desire.

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (NIV).

Our desires fuel our behaviors, so desires can run rampant towards sinful actions. Because they develop within a particular context, a person's specific desires relate to the soil in which they grew up. The culture, our peers, our families, our physical make-up have shaped what we want in this life. Knowing this, you must ask the questions, What do I want? What do I believe will make me happy? What is my child desiring? What are they longing for? Becoming aware of these desires can reveal the drive toward a particular behavior or direction in life.

HOW DESIRES BECOME IDOLS



Let’s now examine what this process of moving from desires to behaviors looks like. From the chart, you will see that there are several basic desires that we all share: desires for love, positive self-image, affirmation, affection, security, freedom from pain or suffering, comfort, understanding, and intimacy.

Notice that all of these desires are not sinful in and of themselves. We were created to desire love and to be loved by God and others. But when we consider our sinful hearts and our sinful environments, we know that our desires are often not met in the ways that we want, which only fuels them until they seem vital to our happiness, finally turning into demands.

Take, for example, a girl who never felt she related well to other girls her age and often felt ostracized by her peers. On top of that, she has never experienced a man taking real interest in her. She deeply wants to belong to a community or friend group, to be accepted and loved, a desire that becomes stronger the longer it goes unfulfilled. It becomes an ultimate perceived need in her life, an idol that she cherishes.

If she then meets an older girl who takes an interest in her, you can see how her sexuality might bend to meet her need for love, intimacy, and acceptance. For this girl, her sexuality may eventually include a gay identity that appears to fulfill her desires, with little room for God to meet her longing for acceptance and love.

From the list of desires in the chart, what are a few desires that you think could be motivating your son or daughter's choices? Looking at your own life, what are a few desires that motivate you?

In light of these desires, what are some social or cultural (soil) factors that are most significant for your son or daughter? What experiences or struggles have influenced your child's specific desires?

As you identify core desires in your son or daughter, consider how this may inform your relationship with them. Wisdom is needed when discussing desires with your son or daughter. Discernment is needed to assess how strong the desire is, how compelling it might be to your child's life. If your son or daughter has learned that they can meet a desire through adopting a gay or transgender identity, they will fight to hold onto this. At least at the beginning, many parents are unsuccessful in addressing this topic straightforwardly because the child fears that their parents are threatening something dear and life-giving. They believe that their new identity should be affirmed, so it seems the height of insanity and unfairness that their parents call it wrong and sinful. Yet these conversations can eventually be life-giving for your child, as you have the chance to speak truth to their distorted views.

When a child first comes out, they usually feel relieved and exuberant, which can be confusing for you, who wants your child to be happy and yet knows this is not the path to happiness. Pray that this idolatrous belief will be revealed as insufficient to deliver what it promises. And continue to trust that God's Word is true, even when your child seems content in their sin.

How would you better understand your child's defensiveness if you know that they see their newfound identity as a source of life?

Are there different ways of speaking with them that might reduce their defensiveness?

Thinking back to Jeremiah 2:13, have you seen your child's idolatry show itself to be a leaky cistern that runs dry and empty for them? Has your child acknowledged any fulfillment in their pursuits? Have they hinted at still being unfulfilled?

Going Somewhere: Find Common Ground

No one escapes the power of desires and wants, and discovering that you share common ground with your child can bring change in your relationship with them. Though you may choose differing behaviors, at a foundational level, you both are capable of seeking life and happiness apart from God. This realization can create compassion and understanding for your child's experiences and life decisions.

You may not know what it means to struggle with gender dysphoria or same-sex attraction, but you certainly know what it means to desire comfort, security, and love apart from God. While you may struggle with anxiety about finances, working too much to elicit approval, or turning to food and entertainment for escape, the basis of sexual sin and non-sexual sin are essentially the same. Your core desires connect you to your son or daughter.

What are some core desires in your own life? What kind of fruit do you produce that stems from these desires?

What soil factors might have contributed to shaping these desires in you?

Self-reflect

As you begin to better understand your desires and the power they exert over your behaviors, you can begin to help your child discover their own desires and wants. Please note that these conversations can be difficult if the relationship with your child is one of ongoing conflict. A relationship requires vulnerability and openness, and you cannot force your child into either of these. If this is true for you, focus on reducing the conflict and building a strong relationship with them, so that you can effectively speak into their lives and behaviors. Look to Chapters 9 and 10 for more guidance on this.

Yet don't let conflict hinder whether you engage your child on these topics. A challenging relationship can still include open, fruitful conversations. As a parent, you can guide your child toward self-reflection, to see deeper recesses of their heart and motivation. Offer suggestions or ask questions that allow them to reflect on what they really want. This can look like posing discerning questions or pointing out patterns that you see within their decisions.

For parents whose children are no longer living at home, you still have an influence in your child's life, though it may look different from when they were younger. Your impact can still be tangible. If you live in the same area as your child, perhaps offer to meet them at a restaurant; invite them to dinner; or drop off a meal for them. If you live further away, consider writing letters or emails that ask how they're doing; FaceTime or Skype often; or send small, thoughtful gifts if you are able. Continue expressing your love for them in whatever concrete ways you can.

What are some questions you can ask your child to help them see the core desires within their heart that motivate their behaviors?

Pray

God wants more for your child than broken sexuality. He desires for them to respond differently to disappointments and suffering. He wants to more fully meet your child's needs than sexuality or gender identity ever can, and he wants to show your child that if they drink of him, they will never thirst again (John 4:1–30).

You cannot create the desire to follow God within your child. Just as you cannot change your child's heart, you cannot change their desires, but you can pray for their transformation. Pray that your child would come to a deeper understanding of their desires and the part they play in prompting certain behaviors. Pray that God would give them a new heart with renewed desires—to obey God's laws and keep his commands, to glorify Christ as Lord of their lives, and to subject themselves to his authority. Pray that they would long for holiness rather than merely personal happiness and comfort.

In what ways would you like to see God redeem some idols in your child's heart? Ask God to reveal to you what they are holding onto, and then ask God to give them a stronger desire for him rather than for their idols.

Redeemed desires are what God is after in your heart as well. Pray that you would turn to God to fulfill your desires and that he would redeem whatever wrong desires you have now. Ask that your desires for your child would align with what God wants for them. It isn't wrong for you to want a healthy, happy life for your child, or to hope for marriage and grandkids. But, if we desire to pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14–15), we know that God is after much more than temporal things for your family. Ask God to grow your prayers to pray for what he desires for your child, and surrender your earthly plans and prayers for your child.

What desires might God want to cultivate in your heart?

What are some specific desires for which you can pray within your child?

Taking It Home

If you will be able to help your child reflect, can you take some time this week to pray through these future conversations? You can even write down how you think the conversation will go or role play with a spouse or friend. Making a list of statements that would invite defensiveness or settings that are divisive for your child might also be helpful for avoiding them.

Following your child's declaration of same-sex attraction or transgender identity, have you seen the desire for a "normal" life become an idol of your heart? Reflect on how you think this could affect your relationship with your son or daughter.

Chapter 4 – Trunk

Key Concept

The trunk encompasses the interpretations and worldviews we've developed throughout our lives that manifest in our patterns of thinking and behaving. Ideally, the Word of God, not the surrounding culture, shapes these worldviews.

Intro: Our Beliefs and Worldviews

The last element of the Harvest USA Tree Model is the trunk, which represents our belief systems and our worldviews, evident in our patterns of thinking and behaving. Each aspect of the Harvest USA Tree Model—our fallen hearts (seed), environment (soil), and desires (roots)—is connected to and culminates in the trunk, as these all work together to form our functional beliefs about life.

As life happens, we seek to make sense of what is going on around us. Sometimes these interpretations are consciously derived, but often we instinctively form conclusions about God, ourselves, people, relationships, sex, sexuality, gender, comfort, pain, pleasure, fairness, and what needs to happen for our desires to be met. Because we are meaning makers by nature, our assumptions begin forming in early childhood and affect how we act and behave for years to come.

Demonstrated through the ways in which we live, our functional beliefs are the lens through which we interpret our world and experiences. These conclusions we've developed over the years profoundly shape us. Often unchecked against God's Word, they influence your child's identity and how they believe they fit into the world.

Each one of us has an official theology—what we say we believe to be true—and a functional theology—what we actually believe and live out. So if I say, "Scripture is what I live by," but then never pray or consciously refer to God's Word in crisis or decision-making, it reveals my official theology as God's Word guiding for life, but my functional theology directs me to act out of my own will and desires.

Sometimes, the difference between these theologies explains a parent's confusion over a child professing Christ and yet choosing a gay or transgender identity. But what your child says and what they actually believe are not always the same, as you likely know from your own experience. Your child's functional beliefs directly inform what they do.

Often we are not aware of these functional beliefs, so examining our fruit, or behaviors, will reveal what we truly believe. Additionally, many of the "truths" at which we have arrived are unbiblical. We need the truths of God to replace the lies we have believed.

Can you name some core beliefs about God and yourself that you hold to be true?

Can you then list a behavior or two that are not consistent with those beliefs? Where are you living out of your official versus functional beliefs?

Exploring the Key Issue

Let's look at Romans 12:2 to see what Scripture says about worldviews: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will."

Because sin has infected every part of our being, Romans 12 reminds us that God wants to transform us by the renewal of our minds, with the purpose of testing and approving what his will is. Furthermore, Paul connects the restoration of our minds with the ability to discern truth and God's will. As God renews our minds, thoughts, and views, his Word and the Holy Spirit slowly align our views and interpretations to conform to his. This is by no means a purely linear progression; however, as we continually return to Scripture with our concerns and questions, and as we submit our will and desire to follow Christ even in difficult matters, we experience this renewal.

2 Corinthians 10:3–5 takes this concept further:

"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Paul is speaking about certain worldviews here—what he calls strongholds, arguments, and presumptions—that are in stark contrast to the knowledge of God. As parents and

ambassadors, you can use this insight to go to battle for your child by the power of the Holy Spirit. We know that the biggest weapon of warfare to combat these strongholds is the Word of truth. You can call on God to work in your child's life, not simply through arguments and debates with your child—through flesh and blood—but by relying on God, who alone intimately knows every aspect of your child's beliefs and hidden worldviews. As you connect the Tree Model to your child's life, you will come to see what some of their functional worldviews are. But remember that people are complex, so here is where you can always pray that God would bring into the open what is hidden in your child's life.

In light of 2 Corinthians 10:3–5, what are your child's specific strongholds and false beliefs that you can bring before the throne of God? What are passages you can use to pray more specifically for your child?

Understanding current cultural worldviews will help you to better understand where your child is coming from and what they hold to be true. Comprehending their value system allows you to contextualize their perspective and communicate more effectively with your child.

Below are some majorly influential cultural views on sexuality and gender:

- Truth is relative. Your subjective sense of self and the world around you is your authority.
- Feelings and experiences are the authority by which you live, and going against or suppressing what you naturally feel is wrong.
- Your sexuality and perceived gender are the core of your being. Expressing your sexuality and chosen gender should be celebrated and embraced. Denying your desires is harmful, and attempting to deny someone else their desires is bigoted and hateful.
- Love means condoning and celebrating someone's personal beliefs about their sexuality and gender. Daring to disagree is a rejection of that person and unloving.
- Gender is divorced from biological sex. You can choose the gender that you feel most fits who you are.
- Sex equals love. Sexual love is the deepest love one can experience. Life without sex is a tragedy.
- This is just the way you are born.

Consider how your child translates these cultural views:

- Life is about having my desires fulfilled.
- If God really loves me, he would want me to be happy, so he's okay with me living from a gay or transgender identity.
- God made me gay or transgender.
- God must be disgusted with me because I am gay or transgender, and there is no way to please him.
- My feelings define my experience and what is true for me. Others must accept my truth.
- I need acceptance from others, and I must get it for my core sexual or gender identity.
- If someone truly loved me, they would support me as the person I want to become.
- To disagree with my chosen identity is a rejection of me as a person.
- Because I can choose my gender and sexuality, I can change them at any time.
- Gender and sexuality are not chosen and cannot change. (Yes, this contradicts the other view, but both are held today.)

Have you heard some of these viewpoints from your child? Notice how each worldview centers on your child's feelings and experience.

Take a moment to reflect on the broad worldviews listed above. Are there others that you can think of? How do these worldviews contrast with truths of Scripture and how God desires us to think and live?

Name a couple of the strongest beliefs that you see your child adopting. How do you see these worldviews manifesting themselves in their behavior?

Uncovering Your Own Functional Beliefs

Just as your son or daughter has drawn conclusions about the world around them, so have you. And as an ambassador who is consciously reflecting Christ to them, you need to discern which worldviews are not centered on the Word of God.

To discover some of your functional beliefs, look at some of the ways you have responded to your child in light of their gay or transgender identity. Your actions will reveal what you truly believe about God, yourself, and others. Asking yourself questions may help you gain deeper insights into your heart. Please note that these questions are not intended for group discussion, but for self-reflection.

- Do you feel that your emotions drive your behavior, or do you remind yourself that God is sovereign and in control of this situation? For example, do your actions show that you are excessively anxious and despondent, or is anger constantly breaking into the open? Or are you fearful, keeping silent most of the time in order to not rock the boat? We are not indicting strong emotions, but rather persistent and controlling emotions that hinder your growth and the growth of others.
- Do you feel your role is the primary gatekeeper and speaker of truth in your child's life?
- Does your response to your child's situation demonstrate a healthy and godly belief in reaching out to others for assistance, or are you trying to handle this on your own?
- Do you find yourself agreeing with your child's definition of their identity, or do you believe that identity is found in God alone? What is your motivation for doing either?
- Do you desire for your child to be happy more than anything else?
- Do you believe that God is unfair, distant, or cruel and is punishing you through your child's choice of identity?

Which of these questions resonates with you? Why? How have you seen this functional belief affect your relationship with your son or daughter?

Going Somewhere: Reinterpreting Worldviews

While Christianity is a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ, it is also a worldview. The Christian faith is grounded in Scripture, through which believers understand themselves, the world around them, and the Lord for whom they seek to live. By regularly reading and understanding Scripture, a Christian is able to increasingly discern the differences between what the world teaches and what the Bible teaches (Hebrews 5:14). Below is a partial list of biblical worldviews that demonstrate the contrast with our culture's values.

- God is my source of truth. His words, written in Scripture, define who I am and interpret all of life. (2 Timothy 3:14–17, 2 Peter 1:16–21)
- Though life brings hardship and suffering, I can trust that God is truly sovereign and in control of my life. (2 Corinthians 1:8–10, Isaiah 43: 1–7)
- Though I cannot change anyone's heart, I can still speak the truth in love, believing that the Spirit works to change hearts. (2 Timothy 2:24–26, Ephesians 2:14–16)
- God has given us a community of believers to walk alongside us in trials. I do not rely solely upon myself, but rather can ask others to help me. (1 Corinthians 12:12–26, Proverbs 17:17, Hebrews 10:24–25)
- My goal in life is not mere happiness but trust in the Lord and seeking his will in whatever he brings into my life. (Proverbs 3:5–8, 13–27)
- God is faithful, constant, and loving and will never forsake me in the midst of my suffering. (Romans 8:31–39)
- Because of my sinful heart, my feelings, desires, and interpretations can be distorted. My feelings and desires are never ultimate; they must be examined and brought under the authority of God's Word. (Jeremiah 17:9, Romans 7:15–20)
- Denying desires is never easy, but doing so can be a foundational expression of faith in God, which is necessary for following Christ in this world. (Mark 10:17–30)

- We are born in sin and are prone to wander away from God. Sin affects our choices, decisions, and behavior. (Psalm 51:5, Romans 3:23, Ephesians 2:3)
- Loving someone biblically means seeking the best for them, so speaking into their life with love and truth is not rejecting them or failing to love them. (Romans 13: 8–10, 1 Corinthians 13:6, Galatians 6:1)
- Gender is chosen for us by God, who sovereignly made human beings as either male or female, so who I am and how I live is shaped by the gender with which I was born. (Genesis 1:26–27)
- God chose my gender at birth, and his sovereign choice for me is not something I should challenge or treat lightly. (Psalm 139:13–16)
- Sex is not the ultimate expression of intimacy or love. Scripture places a high value on non-sexual friendships as loving and intimate. (Romans 12:10, John 13:14–15, Leviticus 19:34, 1 Samuel 18:1–5)

Speaking into Secular Worldviews

If you and your child are at a place of open communication and discussion, listen to their words to discern the worldviews behind their beliefs. Calmly asking “Why do you believe this?” will be more fruitful than responding in belligerence or outright refutation. Careful listening, along with strategic questions that flesh out their underlying belief system, can possibly illuminate for your child their worldview from God’s perspective. Conversations will take time to fully process, most likely coming in the form of short snippets over time.

But what if your child is not willing to talk about their views with you? You can still find ways to communicate without speaking directly to the issue at hand. You may find the opportunity to speak with your child more generally about an issue or topic (rather than speaking directly about their sexuality or gender). Over time, you might indirectly hit on a fundamental distorted belief underlying what they think about their sexuality and gender.

For example, many of those choosing a gay or transgender identity do not understand, or refuse to believe, that denying our desires is a good thing to do in life. The world says embracing our desires validates our authentic selves. To deny yourself anything goes starkly against what our culture values.

How would you bring this up? Perhaps you hear a news story of someone who sacrificed something long-term because of a higher goal than self-interest, and you share your reflections about the story with your child. Or maybe stories from your own life illustrate denying yourself to honor Christ, which led you to a deeper relationship with Christ and to a place of joy. As your child continues in their chosen identity, look for occasions in which you can gently suggest that pursuing your heart’s desire does not always deliver what you thought it would.

How can you speak into your child's distorted views and beliefs without directly talking about their sexuality or gender? Do you think you can still be influential in your child's life simply by parenting them, speaking wisdom, and offering guidance?

Prayer

By now, hopefully you can see the emphasis on prayer and the power it can wield within your son or daughter's life. As a parent of a child who identifies as gay or transgender, prayer needs to become an essential part of your daily life.

Pray that God will reveal any false worldviews that you might hold. Pray that as your mind is reshaped, your actions will clearly communicate these changes to your child. Pray before your conversations with your son or daughter, that they may hear your words through a filter of love. Ask God to renew their minds, helping them to see the lies for what they really are. And even pray for difficulties and hardships to shake up their life, while simultaneously praying for their protection. This is a scary thing to pray for, but God typically uses a crisis to bring about repentance. Hardships can expose their hidden worldviews and cause them to turn towards the truth instead.

Invoke the power that you have in prayer and become a prayer warrior for your son or daughter.

List three unbiblical worldviews that you need to ask God to change.

Taking It Home

What functional beliefs about God or your role in your child's life might the Lord want to challenge and change in your heart?

What are a few specific truths from Scripture that directly challenge or speak to these faulty perspectives?

If you believed and lived by these truths, what is some good fruit that could be seen as a result?

As a whole, how has the Harvest USA Tree Model helped you to better understand and see your child? What specifically will you seek to change in your relationship with them?

SECTION TWO

Caring for Your Heart

INTRODUCTION

Cynthia sat back in her chair, her face a model of surprise and confusion, as her son, Billy, told her that he was gay. He had known for years, he reassured her. But Cynthia had no idea. She didn't see this coming. She knew he had struggled lately with his performance at school, but she had no idea what was going on with him below the surface. He had even dated a few girls. How was she supposed to know he was attracted to other boys? What had she missed? And, more disturbingly, was it her fault? Was there anything in her parenting that caused this? Could she have prevented it?

This situation is a familiar one for a growing number of Christian parents. The revelation that their son or daughter is gay or questioning their gender comes as a complete shock. Wrestling with waves of emotions and thoughts, you may be angry—angry at your child, at God, at your spouse, or just at the situation itself. Or you may be overcome with grief and sadness, unable to see any joyful future for your child. These common emotions often rage most volatily upon initial disclosure, and they will likely ebb and flow as you confront this new reality.

Once some of the initial shock has worn off, you may be consumed with what to do about your child. What should your response be? How can you help them? Is there anyone who can change their mind? Is there any hope?

It may sound counterintuitive to learn that your first move is to care for your own heart. You need to deal with your emotions, name them, and understand them, before you are ready to address the issues your child has brought up. You need God to minister to your heart, speaking words of comfort and love. And you need wise people of faith to walk alongside you and to help you carry this burden.

You are not meant to cope with this situation alone. Finding Christ in the midst of your struggle, as well as finding a community to enfold you, is essential on this journey, whether you just heard your child's revelation for the first time or have known about this for several years.

As your heart heals, through the help of other believers and through the help given from God, you will be prepared to pursue and love your child. Your path is not an easy one, but God has given the assurance that he is the one who binds up the brokenhearted. This may be a long journey, but God offers hope and healing for you.

Chapter 5 – Grief

Key Concept

Bad, difficult, or unexpected news produces grief, which is a form of suffering. As a parent, you are allowed to grieve; you need to grieve. Recognizing and dealing with it is necessary for healing and growth.

Intro

Scripture tells us that there is a time and place for everything, including a “time to mourn.” Grief can be outwardly emotional or dealt with inwardly. Regardless, after learning that your son or daughter is choosing to identify as gay or transgender, you experienced some form of grief. Grief, while difficult to endure, is incredibly important for the process of healing.

Grief will look different for each parent. The level of grief may vary depending on the kind of relationship you have with your child, how strongly your child embraces this new identity, and what kind of dreams and hopes you had for them. For most of you, your grief has been obvious, but for others, you may not even realize that you are experiencing grief. Naming just what you are experiencing is important for moving forward. Though you may experience grief in even more ways, here are some common signs of grief to look for:

- Loss of concentration and focus in everyday tasks
- Difficulty speaking about your child and the situation
- Changes in sleeping and eating habits
- Mood shifts, crying, even anger (most commonly with men)
- Depression or a numbing of feelings

Especially at the beginning of this journey, your grief may be overwhelming, and rightly so. Grief is about profound loss, and it is a godly response when sin and rebellion suddenly intrude upon normal life. Some parents describe the revelation that their child now identifies as gay or transgender as a death in the family. The child they thought they knew is gone. This child into whom you poured your life, raised to share in the values you hold dear, is now moving in a direction in which you don’t believe. Real pain exists in realizing that your child has withheld a deeply entrenched secret from you and that the life you envisioned for them may never come to fruition. Was everything you thought they were before a lie?

What has your experience of grief been like since your son or daughter's initial coming out?

Exploring the Key Issue: Naming Your Grief

When you take the time to reflect on your experience of grief and its different manifestations, you might be surprised at how much it has impacted you. It is appropriate to grieve the losses you personally suffered as a result of your son or daughter's decisions.

Consider that you might be grieving some of the things below:

1. The loss of the relationship you had

This is hard to accept, but your relationship with your child will look different from what it once was. While that doesn't mean your relationship will always be a negative one, it will nevertheless be altered.

Even the closest of relationships will experience tension and strain. Talking easily and openly with your child or asking about what is going on in their life may now feel awkward. Bringing up your child's revelation can trigger defensive reactions. Silence may dominate the relationship for the sake of keeping the peace. Sadness is present even in conversation because you can't shake your deep disappointment over what your child has done.

For some, the relationship can be painfully severed, either by you or your child. (Note that as you go further through this material, you'll see why we believe keeping your relationship alive with your child is the best course of action, based on Romans 12:18.) Your child's rejection of you because you disapprove of their decision is especially painful.

Whatever your situation may be, hold onto the hope that this is not the end of your relationship. We have a God who loves to redeem all that is tainted by sin.

2. The loss of a "normal" family life

Not only is your relationship altered with your child, but your family dynamics have also changed. If you have other children, they have possibly taken sides, either feeling they need to support their sibling or side with you. Conflict exists between everyone where there was none before.

Many spouses experience conflict because they differ in their view of gay or transgender identity or how to address the issues. Conflicting parental views will complicate the everyday parent-child decisions that parents must make together, leading to further strife within the entire family. Either open conflict or fear of addressing the “elephant in the room” can drastically alter the dynamics of holidays and family gatherings. All of family life must adjust to a new normal.

3. The loss of your future dreams for your child

We all have dreams for our children and our future with them. Some of you may be grieving the loss of seeing them married with children of their own, with yourself surrounded by grandchildren. Now if there are to be grandchildren in the future, they may not come through the ordinary, expected means. While your son or daughter’s future was never under your control anyway, grieving the loss of your dreams for your child is appropriate.

4. Their loss of faith or rejection of God (or at least the God of the Bible)

Often Christian children who struggle with their sexual identities have also wrestled with God over this issue. No one wakes up one day and just decides to become gay or transgendered. The experience of feeling different sexually or with one’s gender comes unbidden, not the result of choice. Many times these children will tell you that they prayed for years for God to take this away. When he didn’t, they either rejected him completely or decided that God had made them that way. Regardless, they reject the God of the Bible—a serious decision on their part.

Despite your grief, you can take courage that God is in the midst of this situation, and God is working in ways we do not understand. The Lord has sovereignly given you a son or daughter who is struggling with unbelief and sin in particular ways. Rest assured that he is at work in all things—especially the hard things—for the good of those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). He hasn’t forgotten you.¹

5. Shame and doubt about your parenting

Many parents say that once their child comes out of the closet, they in turn go into the closet themselves. A child’s decision exposes the parents and their parenting to the world. Whether from self-condemnation or condemnation from others, shame and doubt stir up questions like, “Did I do something to cause this? Does this make me a bad parent? What will everyone think of me?” Parents often feel “marked” once their child comes out.

Your relationships outside your family may also change. When close friends inquire about your child, shame can make it hard to speak freely. You may wonder, How much information should I share? How will my friends respond? Can my friends be trusted, or will they tell someone else? Because this topic is divisive, your friendships sometimes suffer depending on how others feel about your response to your child. Additionally, when acquaintances ask routine conversational questions, such as, “Is your child dating anyone?” or “Is your child married?,” you may not be sure how to answer them.

¹ *Your Child Says ‘I’m Gay,’* Tim Geiger, Harvest USA minibook, New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC, 2013

What are the personal losses you have suffered as a result of your son or daughter's experience?

Going Somewhere: Grief

Having an outlet for your grief will allow you to move forward. Grief always finds a way out, often in unhealthy ways if you've tried to suppress it. You need a safe place to cry, mourn, and openly share your heartache. And there is no better place than at the feet of our Savior, Jesus. God gives a curious word of consolation to those who grieve in Mathew 5:4. He says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." God calls those who mourn blessed, for they will know the comfort of God. As a believer, you have access to a God who is attentive to your hurts, who wants to comfort you in your mourning.

God formed you in the womb and knows the exact number of hairs on your head. He knows your grief and pain; you don't need to manage or hide it from him. Grief can and should be expressed in appropriate ways. God acknowledges this and promises in Psalm 34:18, "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." God extends to you a safety net of sorts to express your grief and the promise that you are never alone in this experience. He is near, he understands, and he will comfort you. That is a promise.

In what ways has your grief affected your relationship with God?

How can you appropriately express your grief?

Taking It Home

For some of you, grief can feel like a dark and hopeless place, as if God doesn't care about you. You feel abandoned. If this is true of you, read Psalm 88 and consider the language the author uses to describe his condition before God.

How can you identify with the words of this psalmist? Does this psalm help you to believe that God understands you and allows you to voice your pain? How do you think that running to God in your suffering is an act of faith?

Read Psalm 34. What difference does it make in your grief that God is attentive to the cry of the righteous and near to those who are brokenhearted?

Chapter 6 – Fear and Despair

Key Concept

Fear of your child's unknown future can lead to despair and hopelessness. But God is alive and working, within your heart and within your child's heart. Naming your fears, giving them to God, and discovering his character in Scripture will lead you to an unshakable peace, when all around you seems to be falling apart.

Intro

Once the intense feelings of grief and disbelief diminish slightly, you may begin to envision the full ramifications of your child's decision and the potential consequences that may follow. Their choices will affect your family, themselves, and their own future. Your reactive emotions are likely acute and confusing, especially if you are unsure of how they came to be.

You may find that you can name the emotions you feel—anger, sadness, fear—but you don't fully understand the force or intensity of them, which makes that particular emotion and any associated thoughts or behaviors difficult to resolve. For example, anger can cause you to lash out, and your fear can lead to depression. Discovering the catalyst behind the emotion is a significant step toward healing and change. We will help you work to name each fear that colors your thoughts.

Start by considering this list of some concerns that possibly underlie your fears:

- Your child's future
- How others will treat your child
- Their relationship with God
- Questions about their faith and salvation
- The response of your nuclear and extended family
- Changes in your family dynamics
- Changes in your relationship with your son or daughter
- Judgments from others about your parenting
- How to relate to your child's future partner or a possible same-sex marriage

Which fears resonate with you? Is there one fear that is most prominent? Why do you think that is?

Exploring the Key Issue



Fear of the unknown and the feeling that you don't know your own child anymore can lead to feelings of hopelessness. Fear easily gives way to despair when you see no hope for change. Crippling fears often result in two responses: keeping the peace or seeking change. Both actions stem from a desire to control. Demanding change from your child, the more visible response, usually accompanies specific forceful actions. Keeping the peace may be more difficult to spot since avoidance is passive and lacks demonstrable action, though this parent's heart still desires to manage the situation so as to dodge fights, tension, and contentious conversations.

Parents who desire to keep the peace at all costs may avoid the topic of sexuality with their son or daughter, fearing a strong response of either anger or exclusion from their lives. It often seems the safest path is to keep silent and pretend as if their child has not announced that they are gay or transgendered. Ironically, this can put further distance between parent and child.

Other parents spring into a different kind of action, ready to fix the problem and bring back the child they once knew. These parents exude hyper-control, track every area of their child's life, troll their social media accounts, and bring up sexuality in every conversation—all with the hope of producing change in their child.

While both kinds of reactions are understandable, neither response leads to redemptive change.

One real danger of being a peacekeeper is the strong likelihood of accepting your child's new identity over and against believing in God's design for sexuality and gender. Fear of losing your child may drive you to seek peace and happiness within the family, and, over time, the good desire to remain in a relationship with your child weakens your own faith.

No parent wants division within their family. Yet, choosing to become a peacekeeper above believing truth eventually leads to accepting that child's choice of sexual or gender identity. Speaking truth equates to loving your child. As a parent of a child identifying as gay or transgendered, you will need to grow in your understanding of speaking the truth in love. ("Chapter 9 – Ambassador, Part 1" will teach to this point.)

On the other side are the parents who have no trouble speaking words of truth. No one enjoys feeling helpless or unable to enact change within someone they love. Their connection between fear and control is strong because they don't want those fears to come to fruition. It makes sense, then, that parents commonly respond to their child's announcement of a new sexual or gender identity by seizing control.

Whether setting up meetings for your child with a youth leader, having them read books, or attending conferences on sexuality, you may find yourself seeking to fix your child. You long to turn back time and return to life before your son or daughter's announcement of a gay or transgendered identity. Seeking counsel and educating yourself on a biblical view of sexuality is not wrong, but you must examine your heart to discern your motives. Are you seizing control, believing you can change your child?

Which describes how you are responding to this situation: seeking peace or seeking change? Why do you think that is? If you're married, has your spouse responded similarly?

If your desire to return to a normal life is overwhelming, how does this manifest in your actions and your interactions with your child?

If your desire to keep the peace is overwhelming, how does this manifest in your actions and your interactions with your child?

Going Somewhere: Fear and Despair

A hard lesson for any parent is learning they have no real control over their child. You cannot change their sexuality, nor can you change their heart's desires. When they were young, your discipline may have given the semblance of control over your children, but you never truly controlled their hearts or thoughts. Only God knows the inner workings of each of us. Knowing your child is beyond your control could easily sink you into despair. That is why, in the midst of suffering and fear, you need reminders of truth—that hope is not lost, that God still sits on the throne, that no one can thwart his purposes, and that God promises to walk alongside his children through hard times. Though your darkest experiences may lead you to believe that he does not care or is unable to help, Scripture reminds us that God is active, working all things out according to his will. Despair dissipates as a result of such revelations.

You must steep yourself in Scripture as you face the unknown and confront the fears that consume you. Let's look at Psalm 33:10–22 to bring these biblical truths to life.

The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!

The Lord looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man;
from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth,
he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.

The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue.

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love,

that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.

Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield.

For our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name.

Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

We see from the outset that God rules all life and all that exists. He is in charge of the nations, and nothing will thwart his purposes and plans, despite the agendas and purposes of the nations that go against him. And he does have a plan! It may not make sense to us or appear logical, but God has a plan for all of his creation. This verse also promises that God will persevere to bring his plan to fruition; nothing can stop him.

This psalm proclaims God as sovereign, supreme, and in control of all life. Battles are not won by mere strength, but by the might and power of God. In light of this, God offers a way for you to live faithfully. Trusting that he rules, plans, and sustains the life set out for your son or daughter, as well as your own life, changes how you live and act. No longer do you need to control your child's life or fear that they are outside of God's domain of love and care. While this is not a promise of salvation, it is a promise of God's sovereign love towards all of

his children. As a result, you can now bring each of your fears to God and release them to his control.

It is God and God alone who “may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine.” You can hold firm to this hope despite all that seems to be going amiss in your life and the life of your child. God is able to cut through all negative influences that surround your child and convict your son or daughter’s heart. You can then lift up your child, letting go of your false control and the belief that you can fix them or manage their choices. Instead, release control to a faithful God to do the work within their hearts that only he can do. This doesn’t mean you ignore the situation or pretend it’s not happening, but you can now live with a sense of freedom, released from fear, because you believe that a sovereign and loving God reigns on the throne.

Psalm 33 says that God sees his children (13), that he fights for them (16–17), that he is our help and shield (20), and that his steadfast love is ever upon us (22). How does this knowledge that God sees you and your struggles and promises to walk alongside you in trouble comfort you in this situation?

Looking at Psalm 33:10–22, name all of the different ways that these verses describe God. Which attribute speaks most to you at this time? How might the attributes of God shown here speak to your own fears and concerns?

Along with the descriptions found in Psalm 33 of God’s attributes and the truth that he walks alongside you, Philippians 4:4–9 gives some actionable items for parents.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

Notice in verse 7 that the promise of peace is extended to every believer, yet this is possible only when fears and anxieties are brought to God in prayer. When a child pursues a different gender or a gay identity, fears and questions dominate your every thought about them. But focusing on these fears only feeds them, giving them power over you.

Fear that leads to paralysis is never from God. Fear takes your eyes off of the Lord and instead hyper-focuses you on the problem at hand. When negative thoughts prevail, hope disappears. Within the promises of Philippians 4, God offers to take these fears, sharing the burden and giving us strength to bear them. All those who offer their fears to God receive his peace—a peace that “surpasses all understanding.”

Note here that this peace does not come from knowledge. Many assume that if you read enough books, gather enough knowledge about gender and sexuality, and create an action plan for your child, the obvious outcome is peace and resolution of their struggles. But peace comes not through your own understanding, but from God alone and through relinquishing all fears, doubts, and concerns to him. God’s omniscience trumps all human knowledge, allowing you to rest within this truth.

Name a time when you have seen God at work when you felt fear and despair. Describe that experience.

Verses 8–9 also give a call to action: Though you cannot control your child, you do have the ability to bring your own thoughts in line with Scripture. Our minds easily drift to the “what if” or the “what could be.” You may find yourself frequently projecting your fears into the

future. But these thoughts are not based in truth. Scripture calls each believer to think of what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Because our choices stem from what we think and believe, setting your mind on what is good and true affects how you live day to day and will ultimately impact your relationship with your son or daughter. A large part of the battle wages in your mind; what you focus on will either drive your fears or create peace, which comes only from believing that God himself is “the God of peace.”

These verses create a healthy filter in how you view your son or daughter in light of their chosen sexual or gender identity. Focusing solely on the negative aspects of your child, on their decisions and their unwanted new behaviors, is easy. But your child is more than their sexuality, just as your sexuality inadequately defines you. A helpful practice for each parent, then, is to emphasize the good within their child, looking beyond their sexuality to see what is commendable and worthy of praise. What do you love about your child? Are they creative, loving, compassionate, inquisitive? What makes them who they are?

The fight against fear and hopelessness is an important battle each parent will face. Your path forward must be infused with God’s truth found in Scripture. Armed with the truth that God wants to shoulder this burden with you, and that his presence is constant, enables you to submit your fears and turn to God instead, leading to his peace. Each day may feel like a fight, but God promises that his mercies are new every morning. Forge ahead, knowing that you are not alone.

Taking It Home

List all of the good and positive attributes about your son or daughter for which you are grateful.

Consider writing daily about how you see God working and what you are thankful for. You could also share these things with a spouse or friend.

Chapter 7 – Bringing Others In

Key Concept

You need others to hear your story, to listen to your worries, and to help you understand your circumstances from God's perspective. Community is a gift and cannot be considered optional. Inviting others in to help you process your child's situation will lead to change within yourself and your relationship with your child.

Intro

When a child “comes out of the closet,” parents often go “into the closet” in response. You may find yourself wanting to hide what has been exposed, seek refuge in isolation, and essentially cut yourself off from those who could help. Many rationalizations make this seem like a valid choice. Some hold onto the hope that their child will simply outgrow this phase. Others may be in complete denial, choosing not to believe that it is happening at all. Ignorance seems like bliss.

Shame can also drive you into the closet, generating an intense fear of what others will think while simultaneously convincing you that no one else could fully grasp the situation. Some children who share their new sexual identity or gender with a parent are not yet ready to share it with others, so the parent is compelled to remain silent. You may feel entirely alone right now, holding onto a secret you are unwilling to share or are unable to disclose. Telling others that your son or daughter now identifies as gay or transgendered makes the situation real, almost like an acceptance of their announcement. Understandably, hiding yourself away may seem like a safer alternative.

What is keeping you from bringing others in to help? Of what are you afraid?

Exploring the Key Issue

You must share this burden with others. You were not created to cope with situations like this on your own, so community is essential for every parent. God has not only given his Holy Spirit and Scripture to comfort and guide, but he has also placed you within a body of believers who can walk alongside you through your struggles. You need others to reinforce the truth and authority of Scripture in your life. Scripture must be your anchor when you feel

abandoned or confused by God's actions. It is the place that shapes your reality and offers a firm foundation about both God and your situation, and often we need others to remind us of the truth found within its pages. You must bring your situation into the light, for the good of you and your child.

Though scary and fearful, sharing this news with others is vital. Keeping others in the dark about your struggles keeps you from asking for help or unburdening yourself. You will never be able to be real with others, creating an emotional distance that keeps you isolated and alone. You begin to live a lie. For this reason, God intended for his children to live in community, sharing one another's burdens.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 says,

“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Relationships with others are a gift from God that is worth pursuing. We are made to be dependent upon one another. As a parent, you may be at your lowest point right now. You need others to lift you up, to carry you until you are able to stand. This is as God intended. Galatians 6:2 says, “Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Ask God to defeat your pride and allow trusted believers to care for you. Finding others who understand your experience or are at least willing to deepen their awareness will provide comfort and relief that cannot be found in isolation.

Other parents are going through the same situation as you are, and fellow believers who are willing to walk this path with you are out there, regardless of whether they have a gay or gender-questioning child or not. Other parents who do have similar experiences can provide essential guidance for all of the different stages of this process. Their knowledge becomes your knowledge as you face the unknown future. You also need others to remind you that God has not forsaken you and that his compassion and mercy extend to you in the midst of your struggles.

How have you seen God provide others to help you already? If not yet in this particular circumstance, name a time when others have helped or encouraged you in a trial you have faced.

What kind of help do you need at this point in your journey? For example, someone I can text for prayer, a person I can call at night when I struggle emotionally, and so on.

Going Somewhere: Bringing Others In

As you are encouraged to seek out community, you may find barriers within yourself that hinder you from being open. Naming those obstacles will help you move past them. Here are some possible barriers to inviting others to walk with you.

Fear

- Of what others think
- Of people talking about your situation (gossip)
- Of your child's reaction
- Of others not understanding or judging you or your parenting choices

Shame

- Feeling you have failed as a parent
- Feeling that you have failed as a Christian
- That you can't change your child
- That this is now your story

These barriers are legitimate. Divulging your story can be frightening. But unless others know what burden you carry, they will be unable to help you carry it. Armed with the knowledge that God is with you through this process, you can begin to seek out a trustworthy confidante.

Let's consider what an effective helper needs to be.

- Biblically grounded: able to bring you to the truth found in Scripture and remind you of God's character found within those pages
- Spiritually mature: having experienced hardship themselves and having an understanding of trials and God's grace in the midst of struggle
- Secret keeper: not one to gossip or talk freely about others, having shown themselves to practice confidentiality

- A good listener: chooses to process your words instead of quickly offering advice
- Present in your life and able to be with you for the long haul
- Known to show compassion for you and your child, regardless of the situation

Finding this person takes prayer and sometimes patience. Begin to pray that God will reveal this person to you clearly. Ask that God will work within the heart of this confidante as well, preparing them to minister to you. Pray for one person to walk alongside you, but also pray for a larger community of parents to come together, creating a safe haven to share this burden. Call upon God for the courage to be honest and open as you seek out community.

As this process unfolds, you may find that it takes longer than expected to discover this confidante. Do not give up if the first person you ask is not the right one or if they decline your request. Take their response as an answer to your prayer and continue to press forward, trusting that God will bring to you the brother or sister in Christ that he has set apart for you. These principles hold true for a group of parents as well. If you are gathering with other parents, consider how this community might help you persevere in your situation as you let them walk alongside you. Share your heart with them, learn from them, and you will see yourself grow in your knowledge of Christ, as well as in understanding your son or daughter. Change happens in community, so use this truth to step into the light.

Taking It Home

After praying for a helper, make a list of one to three people you could reach out to in the next couple of weeks. What makes them good candidates?

For further reflection, study Ruth's relationship with Naomi in the book of Ruth, specifically 1:3–18 and 2:1–6, 11–12, and 17–18. How would you describe Ruth? What makes her a qualified helper for Naomi? What specific actions does she undertake to show she is a trustworthy companion?

Who in your life exhibits some of these qualities? If no one comes to mind, how might you commit to praying for God to bring someone trustworthy into your life?

SECTION THREE

Moving Toward Your Child

INTRODUCTION

For Tom and Sherry, the last few months have passed by in a blur. Months filled with confusion, anger, isolation, and acute sadness as they attempted to reckon with their son's decision to identify as a woman. They are thankful for the small community of people who have walked alongside them the last several months, encouraging them and reminding them of God's truth in Scripture. They have felt comforted by the Lord and assured of the certainty they rediscovered in Scripture concerning gender and identity.

But they know one part of this journey has yet to be traversed: relating, day by day, to their child with his new identity. This step has filled them both with fear. They know the relationship with their son is not what it once was, and they wonder, "How do we relate to someone who disagrees with us? How do we talk about these important matters when our child doesn't seem to listen? How do we listen when we don't want to hear the reason for his decision? How do we relate to the child we thought we knew, but who is no longer the same?"

This new path is not going to be an easy one to walk, but Tom and Sherry know they must do so. Their love for their son has not diminished or changed, and, fortified with the knowledge of God's love for them, they will continue to love him and pursue him, no matter what the future holds.

In the previous section of the book, we asked you to look at your own heart and examine your pain, allowing you to express freely how your son or daughter's decisions have affected you. You were also encouraged to accept that you must give up false control over your son or daughter and acknowledge that you cannot change them. Furthermore, you were asked to seek out others to walk alongside you and to seek God in Scripture, finding truth and comfort there.

Now, we will shift our focus slightly by delving into your active role as a parent. Some of you may have felt impatient for this section, ready to spring into action. Some of you are terrified, afraid to make a mistake and make the situation more painful. But pursue you must. Your role as a parent is not over; instead, pursuing your child and deepening your relationship with them, as much as it depends upon you, is now more important than ever.

This path is fraught with difficult questions and gray areas. Your relationship with your child is unique, so there will be issues you will have to answer in the context of your family. Other issues will be clearer, but they may be the ones that carry the danger of more pain for you and your family. Here is where your reliance upon the Lord is essential. Your relationship with him will be the basis for all that you do.

Take this call to action as a gift. As a parent, you have been given an incredible chance to demonstrate to your child that you love them, that God loves them, and that this love can be transformative and life-giving. You can share that God, in his grace, does not leave us just as we are, but instead desires more for us. He desires for us to live a life full of joy, contentment, and fulfillment that can only be found in him.

Chapter 8 – The Prodigal Son

Key Concept

Experiencing how God pursues you when you stumble with sin and suffering will help you pursue your son or daughter with the same wisdom and grace.

Intro: The Parable of the Prodigal Son

In this chapter, we will begin to discuss how to pursue your child by studying the powerful story of the Prodigal Son. We will look closely at the role of the Father, the Prodigal Son, and the elder son. They will be our models, creating a picture for what loving your child in the midst of their newfound identity can look like for you. Make sure to read the passage below before you begin the next section.

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this

son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’” (Luke 15:11–32)

Most Christians are familiar with the parable of the Prodigal Son, and the story likely speaks to your heart as a parent with a child embracing a life for themselves that you never imagined. Your life has been turned upside down, and discerning your new role is integral to moving forward within the reality of their new self-identity.

The Prodigal Son story aptly brings out three specific roles that you can begin to take on as you redefine your relationship with your child. In this chapter, we will look at the first two roles.

Exploring the Key Issue

ROLE 1 — Live Like the Repentant Prodigal Son: Experience God’s Love for You

When Moses descended from Mount Sinai holding the Ten Commandments, recounted in Exodus 34, his face shone with a light so bright that it frightened the Israelites, so “he put a veil over his face” eventually (verse 33). This unnatural light was a direct result of his time spent with God. Curiously, the more time he spent with God, the more he began to resemble him. Moses was then able to aptly give the Israelites a glimpse of God’s glory and his character. Moses did not work at mimicking God or research God’s character to ensure that he accurately portrayed him; he simply spent time with him. Experiencing God in a personal way changed who he was and how he behaved. It made him more like God.

In God’s presence, we experience his glory and his love, which changes us from within. As you regularly commune with God, he increasingly becomes the object of your heart, and you are transformed “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18). As you experience God’s love for you, you can then respond in love for your child with this same love you have received. Though it takes work, this reflective love is not contrived but stems from God alone. Your first role as a parent is to understand God’s patient, faithful, holy love for you. Reread the Prodigal Son parable and find yourself within the story.

As you reflect on your own journey of faith, do you identify most with the younger brother or the older? Why? Can you share a story that illustrates why you identify with one over the other?

You may easily identify with the father in the story, but what about the youngest son? Can you identify with the prodigal who sought his own path? Have you had a similar experience of willfully sinning in this way—disregarding what God desires of you, and then returning, repenting, and miraculously experiencing the forgiveness and mercy of a loving God? Can you identify with your heavenly Father pursuing in this way?

Or perhaps you align more with the oldest son, the “good kid” in this story. You never strayed off the path and typically chose obedience over rebelliousness. You were the parent who did everything right. You loved your child, attended all their activities, taught them about the Lord, brought them to church every week, and had family devotions every morning. Following the rules is easy for you. You work hard at all that you do and know what is right and what is wrong. You believe that if you do “A,” then “B” will logically occur. You may feel more like you earned the Father’s gifts and blessings because you are the one who stayed by his side, never stepping out of his commands.

But the love extended to the prodigal does not follow that theory of how God works. Do you feel resentful that God has not rewarded you with the child you think you deserve?

Knowing which son in the parable you more closely resemble is integral for comprehending this story. As you identify yourself with one of the sons, you can then turn your attention to the father in this story. Some of you may have responded well to your child’s initial disclosure and subsequent behaviors, and in that, you have represented our heavenly Father. Note that the father in the parable pursued both of his sons. He loves them equally, seeks them out, and does so in the unique way that each of them needs. Knowing how your Father has pursued you summarizes how to love your child intentionally right now.

Perhaps the most challenging task God is calling you to at this time is to love your child in the way he has loved you: patiently, steadfastly, forbearingly. This is possible only when you have a firm grasp of your own brokenness and need for God. This may take time and much reflection, but having a deep awareness of your own need for mercy and grace will compel you to pursue your child. You are first a recipient of God’s mercy and grace. Only when you sincerely understand this truth can you extend to other sinners and to your child that same mercy and grace you have received.

How has our loving Father pursued you when you have stumbled and fallen? In what ways do you feel that he continues to pursue you with his love?

ROLE 2 — Live Like the Father: Waiting on the Lord

Let's look closer at the father in the story. By asking for his inheritance, the prodigal communicated to the father that he preferred personal wealth over his own father's life. The son did not want a relationship with his father; he simply wanted to live his life as he chose with no interference. His father's death would only make that easier. We are given no indication of the father's reaction, but the loss of his son can only have left him in immense pain. Can you relate to the father here? Some of you may have been cut off by your child for not embracing their newfound identity; some of you may still be in relationship, but the pain of what has changed feels like the loss of your relationship. Whatever your story, you are now in the role of the father.

The first glimpse of the father's reaction comes in the latter part of verse 20. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him." Notice here that the father saw his son from a long way off. You can picture the father watching every day from his rooftop, scanning the horizon for his son—waiting, hoping, praying for his return. Waiting and praying were all that was left to him. With the disappearance of his son, he had no control over the situation and no influence over his son's choices. He was powerless to alter the situation.

As you put yourself in the role of the father, share what it's been like to wait. What behaviors and emotions are you experiencing in your waiting right now?

Notice that this was a continuous and lengthy waiting. Hopelessness would not have led him to wait on the rooftop every day with anticipation of his prodigal child's return. The father waited with hope that God would work within the heart of his son and in what seemed like a hopeless situation. The father knew he did not have the ability to change his son; that was never his role. That role belongs to God alone. So he waited, putting his trust in the one who is in control.

As you have probably experienced, this waiting is incredibly difficult. Waiting makes us feel helpless because it reveals our powerlessness. Realizing your inability to control can be a terrifying experience, especially when it involves your child. Typically, when something goes awry, we want to be active, fix the problem, find a solution, and make it right again. Being unable to change what has gone wrong seems insufferable. But the truth is, you have always been powerless. God has always been the one in control. Having to wait simply forced you to see it.

Perhaps some of you have accepted your role of waiting, and yet your situation has dragged on with little or no outward evidence of your child's posture changing towards God. Disbelief in God's goodness can easily creep into your heart. You may wonder, "If he was truly in control, why would he allow this to continue?"

Change is often slow and arduous, and this process with your child will likely last a long time. Look at your own walk of faith. Haven't big changes in your life taken time? Yet God never ceases to be patient with us as we take each small step of faith. In the same way, you must wait on the Lord to see growth and change in the life of your child.

But expectant hope for God to work is still not a guarantee that your child will return to him. It is God's prerogative to call anyone to himself. Here is where you need to find comfort in the surprising character of God, who says of himself, "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

Waiting on the Lord is what God is calling you to now. And the Lord wants to meet you in this stage. He desires to show you that he is walking alongside you as you grieve, wait, and love your child. He understands exactly what you are going through because he has experienced it also. He stands alongside you as you wait eagerly on the rooftop, scanning the horizon for your son or daughter.

Going Somewhere: Your Role

Armed with the knowledge that you are not alone, you can resist the temptations to either harden your heart and cut off relationship with your child or stop praying for their repentance because it seems too painful or futile to do so.

With the power of God, you can wait with hope, knowing that he is in control of the unknown future. This truth can give you the power to steel yourself against despair and hopelessness because this hope is based on who God is—a God who never forsakes his children, even if they flee from him. Look at Psalm 139:7–10: "Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me."

The father's hope for his prodigal son was perhaps based on his understanding that God does not turn away from his children and that he does not forsake even those who flee from him. No matter where we run, even for long periods of time, God remains present and active in our lives. God works in the hidden recesses of the human heart. Likewise, parents can have this reassurance for their child, even when they do not see obvious evidence of God's work.

Not one of us deserves God's love on our own merit. Not one of us is worthy of sonship. Yet, God is gracious and merciful; "he does not deal with us according to our sins, or repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10). He can use these circumstances to work things for good in the life of your child—while at the same time he is working his changes in you. We must wait on the Lord by faith, having an assurance of this hope.

For you, what is the hardest part about waiting on the Lord?

What might be some things you need to do or change in your own life to grow your patience and faith in waiting?

Taking It Home

Read Psalm 27. Now read it again, and write yourself into the Psalm as one who is speaking directly to God. For example, change “Lord” to “You” to become, “You are my light and my salvation...”

This psalm references the immense difficulty David experienced when he was being pursued and hunted by Saul. What do you think enabled him to continue to trust and wait on the Lord? What is it about God that calls him back? What calls you back?

Chapter 9 – Ambassador, Part I

Key Concept

Real growth and change happen in the context of relationship, specifically an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. Your role is to pursue your child and model the love of God through your relationship.

Intro

After exploring the attitudes, actions, and characteristics of the two sons and the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, and finding yourself in that larger context, now comes the hard part: being the parent who pursues your child in practical, redemptive ways. Again, this is based on your own experience of God loving and pursuing you. As a result, you are being equipped to reflect God's faithful, long-suffering, holy love to your child. Remember, you can only reflect what you yourself have received from the hand of God. Just as Moses' face shone with the glory of God, when your heart and mind are renewed, your actions will transform as well.

For some of you, the thought of pursuing your child stirs up a fury of emotions, such as fear, trepidation, anger, and possibly sadness. You might be confused about how to actually pursue your child with love and grace, fearful that your continued love might be viewed as accepting their newly-declared identity. You may be angry with your child for the attitudes and actions they embrace, or you may even be angry with God, who didn't stop this from happening. Grief may stop you from doing anything at all, assuming that nothing you do can actually help your son or daughter.

These emotions are understandable and may present an acute challenge for you. But, you can also view the challenges you face as an incredible privilege to show your child the surprising love of God and what an intimate relationship with him can look like. As you reflect God's unearned and unmerited blessing, your love and continued pursuit can be a catalyst for change and growth within your child as they meet this God of the Bible, possibly for the first time.

If you continue to struggle with the fear of pursuing your child, read 2 Corinthians 4:7–11:

“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”

Paul's words remind you that, even in your weakness, you have power because it comes from God. Though you are hard-pressed, you can still show his glory even as you are unsure of exactly what to do. Take heart that, as you pursue your son or daughter, you are manifesting Christ to them, and your worry over just the right way to do so does not negate that.

Keep in mind also that the God of the Bible is your child's greatest need right now. More than a behavioral change, your child needs a right relationship with Christ. They need to personally experience God's love, compassion, righteousness, forgiveness, and holiness. Ultimately, they need to be wooed by the God who loves them in a way no one else can.

It is painful knowing that you cannot change your child, even though you want that more than anything. But you still have a great impact on your child in ways that can help bring them to follow Christ and his Word. As a follower of Christ, you are his ambassador. And as an ambassador of Christ in whatever interactions you still have with your son or daughter, you can model for your child what God is like: how he loves, how he forgives, how he delights in them, how he patiently calls us to lay down our lives and follow him.

We explored your roles of personally experiencing God's love for you and waiting on the Lord in Chapter 8. Now we will look at your third role: being an ambassador of Christ by showcasing, in your actions, the glory of God to your son or daughter.

Exploring the Key Issue

CHALLENGE — How do I relate to my child with their new identity?

Many parents have primarily dealt with their child's new disclosure by declaring on any occasion possible that the child needs to obey God and his Word. The parent keeps trying to come up with more persuasive ways to get their child to turn from their newly-declared identity. But that approach doesn't work well, does it? Our words have been rendered ineffective by a culture that affirms your child's choices and, at the very least, offers alternative interpretations of Scripture that support their own view; at most, some of you have a child who simply no longer cares what Scripture says.

What words, arguments, and positions are you communicating to your child? What are they saying in defense of their position? What is the tone of your discussions? Have you seen any progress as a result of your conversations?

Your words may be ineffective now, but here's great hope: your actions are not.

What an Ambassador Does

An ambassador is required to do more than simply speak on behalf of someone. Everything an ambassador says or does, including their attitude, demeanor, relations, and conduct, all point toward the one they represent. An ambassador of God is called to more than just speaking the truth.

Our relationship with God consists of more than rebuke and edifying words. God enters into our lives, regardless of our failures and sins. He loves us, forgives us, and daily seeks to reveal himself to us in deeper and more personal ways. He is an ever-present God, forever wanting to make us more holy and more like him.

In the same way, being an ambassador is to step fully into your child's life even as their newfound identity signifies a major shift in their relationship with you. You can make an impact in your child's life in the way you represent Christ through your relationship with them.

Describe someone who has represented Christ to you. What are some of their characteristics?

Look at 2 Corinthians 5:20a: "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." When we serve God, we endeavor to represent him, showing to others the full character of this unseen God. This calling is not optional; it is your role as a believer. And by fulfilling your call, you can show to your child the kind of God you represent.

So what does this role actually look like? To define being an ambassador of God, we must look at the one we are representing. Who is the God we are mirroring?

Name some characteristics of God. How would you describe him? Which characteristic has been most defining about your relationship with him?

Ambassadors are not driven by their own motives or means. They are sent to do what God would do if he were present.

Keep in mind where the source of this ability resides. John 15:4–5 says, “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

You are equipped to fulfill the role of ambassador when you abide and rely on Christ. You bear fruit through communing with God, drawing strength and wisdom from him. The verse ends with a clear statement that “apart from me you can do nothing.” This is intended to be a great encouragement to you. God is with you, preparing, sustaining, and encouraging you to fulfill your role of ambassador to your child.

The Key Role of an Ambassador

Let’s look again at 2 Corinthians 5 for what an ambassador of Christ does: “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”

These verses bring out a key aspect of being an ambassador, the ministry of reconciliation. Notice in the latter half of verse 19 that the heart of the reconciling process consists of “not counting their trespasses against them.” Being reconciled to God centers around the forgiveness of our sins, because Christ took the punishment of sin upon himself. Our sins cost Jesus his life, and, as a result, we were brought near to God and were made into a new creation. Our old life of sin no longer defines us. This is the good news: that God does not count “[our] trespasses against [us].” On the cross, all of our sins were paid for through the death of Christ. God does not hold our trespasses against us, past, present or future.

In your relationship with your child, pursue reconciliation by not allowing their behavior or sins to hinder or destroy your relationship. Of course, you cannot forgive in the same way God forgave us in Christ. But in Mark 11:25, Jesus tells us that “...whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.”

Relationships need ongoing reconciliation, and forgiveness sustains relationships. Of course, repentance is required for complete reconciliation, but as God pursued you even while you were an enemy to him (Romans 5:8), you can extend this grace to your child. This is where the ministry of reconciliation begins and continues. It can be a powerful display to your child of how God pursues his people.

We realize that pursuing your child like this may bring to mind various obstacles that make it difficult for you to move toward your child. Here are some possibilities:

One, you remember your child's hurts, wounds, and sins that you continue to hold against them. Can you name specifically what you need to forgive?

Two, you are fearful that, if you extend love to your child, you risk it looking to them or others that you approve of your child's position and actions. What do your fears about this look like? How do they manifest themselves?

Three, do you believe that others are responsible for leading your child to declare this new identity—for example, her friends, a partner, or the LGBTQ+ community? Talk about who these people are. Will you forgive them in light of Jesus' call in Mark 11?

Please remind yourself that, though an ambassador, you are not the enforcer of God's law. Taking on the role of ambassador means seeing yourself as an instrument in the process of change and growth, not as the agent of change, which applies to God alone.

In what ways are you tempted to become the enforcer of God's law, pressing your child into obedience, rather than taking on your role as ambassador and representing God as he would want?

Going Somewhere: Role

Likely, your relationship with your child looks different than it once did. There may be tension and distance, whether coming from you or from your child. The foundation of trust and honesty with them may need to be rebuilt. As the parent, you must be the one to initiate this reconstruction. View this as a blessing, as a chance to recreate the relationship in a new, more beautiful way, constructed upon your own relationship with Christ.

As you actively pursue a ministry of reconciliation, one of the first steps in living out this pursuit is creating a climate of grace in your relationship. Essentially, this means that you communicate to your child through word, action, and deed, that your relationship is a safe place for them. Regardless of their new position in life, you will continue to love them and be involved, even if their choices aren't what you wanted for them. You can be a refuge for them when they need help or when life doesn't go as they planned.

Below, we list four major aspects for creating this climate of grace.

1. Offer the Gift of Relationship

A climate of grace begins with offering the gift of relationship, without the requirement that your son or daughter first repent and turn from their decision. Do you find that you are waiting for your child to change their ways before you offer this blessing of relationship? Just as God does not break his relationship with you in response to every sin, so you can take steps toward relationship with your child even in the midst of them choosing a direction you do not support.

This is not to say that the relationship will be defined by all-out acceptance; rather, by relating to them in this way, they do not have to hide their feelings, questions, issues, or actions from you even though you disagree. One major objective for doing this is so that your child will come back to you for further conversations, which may lead to more willingness to hear you out.

2. Model Your Own Need for God's Grace

A second aspect of this climate of grace is modeling to your son or daughter that you need the same grace and forgiveness from God. Every day, you are aware that sin and unbelief dog your steps (look at Romans 7), which means that, every day, you are grateful for God's forgiveness and his continued relationship with you. Living out this truth gives you a deep humility in how you relate to others, especially to those like your child who choose to live outside of God's Word. This attitude is the antidote to becoming the elder brother that we discussed in the previous chapter.

On a practical level, this means that you will acknowledge times when you have sinned and done wrong, while bearing in mind that your actions have not produced their sexual struggles. Perhaps you need to ask for your child's forgiveness. Were there times you responded harshly or insensitively to your child's chosen identity? Have you spoken words that belittled them? Has your response been one of open anger and disappointment?

As fallen beings, we all sin against our children, so we are called to confess and reconcile with them also. Reconciliation is a blessing in itself, as it leads toward openness and newness of relationship. It is a way to start over afresh, to make right what was once wrong.

3. Enter Fully into Your Child's Life

A third aspect of this climate of grace requires that you willingly enter into your child's life and interests. This will mean relating to his or her friends, partner, LGBTQ+ community, etc. You cannot have a viable relationship with your child apart from having an interest in what he or she considers important. Again, engaging in this way may bring up fears about you approving of your child's decision, but consider the ways in which Jesus entered closely into the life of people who were not followers of God. Read John 4 about the woman at the well; consider the slanderous description charged against Jesus, that he "ate with sinners and tax collectors" (Matthew 9:11, 11:19); recall that he had fellowship with religious authority figures who were against him (Luke 7:36–50).

Read these stories and discuss them (John 4, Matthew 9:11 and 11:19, and Luke 7:36–50). Does seeing how Jesus met with, related to, and cared for those who were outcasts or enemies enable you to engage with all of your child's life? What obstacles remain for you to do so?

4. Acknowledge Reality

Lastly, in order to create a climate of grace with your child, you must acknowledge the reality that this is who they say they are, what they believe about themselves, and how they want to be known. Acknowledging who they want to be is not approval of their new identity. But if you find yourself wanting to deny that they now define themselves as gay or identify as another gender, and you would rather continue focusing on who they were before their declaration, you may find that your relationship with your child stalls instead of moves forward.

For a climate of grace to exist between you and your child, you must meet them where they are. Make believe and denial will further impair your relationship. So while you continue to hope and pray for a change within them, you must also accept that they are now defining themselves as gay or identifying as another gender.

Are you able to acknowledge the new reality? If yes, what enables you to do so? If no, why not?

Taking It Home

Much of this chapter's guidance is incredibly challenging. As an ambassador of Christ, you are identifying yourself with him, taking on facets of his character, specifically his long-suffering, sacrificial love for his children. This is not an easy path, but it is one that leads to a more profound relationship with your child.

As you take on your role as an ambassador, remember that God is walking alongside you. In your relationship with your son or daughter, live out his reflective love. Remember that your biggest impact on your child is now through your actions. Enter their world, pursue them, and love them as God does the same for you. This new path will change you and your relationship with your child.

Looking closely at your actions, words, and demeanor toward your son or daughter, what would these actions communicate or reveal about the kind of God you represent and trust in?

What are some hindrances to you representing Christ well to your child? A good place to start is with some obvious attitudes you need to put off: anger, impatience, harsh or critical words, etc. Read Colossians 3:8–10. Name some actions that belong to your earthly nature that need to be repented of and put off.

Chapter 10 – Ambassador, Part II

Key Concept

How can you hold firm to your beliefs of God and Scripture, while still loving and pursuing your son or daughter?

Intro

Now that you understand your role as an ambassador of Christ, we will look specifically at how you live this out in relationship. Some of the issues raised in this chapter may be hard to work through, so our encouragement to you is to pray through these issues. If you are using this curriculum within a support group setting, feel free to slow down with this chapter, possibly spreading it out over two or three weeks of discussion.

Pursuing your child as an ambassador will take courage, vulnerability, and trust in God.

Courage, because relationships are messy. No relationship is free of hurt and struggle, and that's what we typically want to avoid. Pursuing another person calls you out of yourself and out of your particular needs to focus your attention on the other person. They may not know how to handle this self-giving attention. You will need to pray for courage to persevere, even when you think it is more than you can handle.

You need vulnerability because being in relationship with another requires that you share of yourself. Real relationship requires reciprocity. As you ask your child to become open with you, you must first demonstrate what this can look like in your life. Moving toward your child in the ways we suggest will take courage and vulnerability, because loving someone deeply means you are making yourself susceptible to their rejection.

And finally, you will need trust in God throughout this endeavor. He must continue to be your model, your strength, and your guide. You can trust that he is with you through every conversation, interaction, and experience with your child. You are not promised a specific outcome for your son or daughter, but you are promised that God will never leave you or forsake you, and that he works in and through you to accomplish his good purposes.

We do want to mention that you can and should draw the line at oversharing and overburdening your child with too much openness. This line will differ for each parent, so pursue it prayerfully and thoughtfully with others.

Exploring the Key Issue

Equipped with these truths, we will now look at practical ways you can love and pursue your child.

Ask to Hear Their Story

Some of you have heard your child's story, or at least you understand where they are coming from and what their experience has been. But, if you have never taken the opportunity to sit down with your child and ask them specific questions about their early struggles with sexuality or gender, it is time to remedy this. The purpose is to draw near to them and to understand them more deeply, as well as to grow in insight concerning their particular experience with sexuality and gender.

For many, this might be a difficult step because it requires that you only listen. As you ask your child to share their story, make it clear that you do not intend to comment on what they say or make counterarguments or rebuttals, but that you simply want to better understand them and their experience. This is not a teaching discussion, but a moment to truly hear your child.

Here are some examples of questions you can ask:

- What did it feel like for you growing up?
- When did you first begin to feel differently about your sexuality or gender?
- How did this affect your faith in God?
- Were there words from the church or from me that hurt you?
- What was it like to tell me the news about your new identity?
- What was it like to tell your friends?
- What was it like to keep this a secret?
- How do you feel now that you have brought this out into the open?

If your child lives too far away for this conversation to take place in person, or if your child feels threatened or afraid to have this conversation face to face, you can try communicating with them through email or by letter. In whatever form this discussion takes place, make a point to thank them for trusting you with their honesty and openness.

What do you most fear about asking to hear your son or daughter's story?

What do you think your child would fear by talking more openly with you? Are their fears realistic? If so, what could you do to help reduce those fears?

Pursue Being More Open About Your Own Relationship with God

Now that your son or daughter has candidly shared part of their life with you, you can begin to take steps of openness yourself. Specifically, you can start sharing more openly and transparently about your own life and relationship with God. Talking about God in this way allows you to become vulnerable with your child and make known his character at the same time. Being authentic could endear your child to your position.

Here is an example of what we mean by being more open with your child about your own relationship with God.

One teen, while going through counseling because of depression, told her parents that she could not talk to them about her struggles because they never seemed to have any. Her parents were strong believers, and though the family had endured many struggles and difficulties, which the daughter surely observed, what she saw were two parents who seemed to trust God with no difficulty.

While that was far from the truth, the reality was that the parents did not share with their daughter how they processed their faith in light of their struggles. Finally realizing that the persona they displayed to their child was not true, and that it led her to keep silent, they made an effort to be more transparent and more authentic about how they were dealing with life and its difficulties.

From a Christian perspective, the goal of being authentic is not to respond to life on the basis of your emotions or desires as the world does, but to honestly talk about and share how you relate to Christ, your Shepherd, in the midst of life's ups and downs. Show your child that real faith in God can weather any storm, even when the storm might knock you down for a stretch of time. It's about admitting times of failure, even sin when appropriate, and how you go about seeking God and depending on him in all circumstances, both good and bad. It is being honest about how you struggle to grow in faith and dependence on him, and it's sharing how the role of repentance plays out in your daily relationship with him to transform your heart.

Representing Christ encompasses more than having it all together or living out a perfect faith for your son or daughter to witness. Revealing your weakness could be one of the most

important things you do for your child. Share with them that God invites you to bring your whole self before him, sin and all, and meets you exactly where you are. This process with God can be messy, but he desires to walk alongside his children even in the midst of their sin, struggles, doubts, and hurt. Being more open and transparent about your relationship with God shows that God is big enough to handle how we think and feel about him.

You could also share with your child some of your confusion about God. It may be helpful for them to realize you do not always understand his ways, but that you have come to trust who he is and that all of his ways are good. Often when we become honest about our own spiritual struggles, we open the door for others to share as well.

If you have not been transparent with your child about following Christ in your life, be patient in learning how to do this. You don't need to aim for a lecture or teach a lesson; instead, you could simply speak a sentence or two in an appropriate setting.

As you disclose more about your personal relationship with God, you are painting a picture of a relationship that is complete with love, acceptance, challenge, and deep union. You are showing your child how God sends blessing into our lives, even in hardship. In this way, you might be gently wooing your child back to God.

Are you transparent in sharing about your life in Christ? If yes, what helps you do that? If no, what might be an obstacle in doing so?

How do you think your child might respond to you doing this?

Be Honest About the Situation with Your Child

This section goes a step further in being vulnerable with your child. Honesty means not avoiding the elephant in the room; it means working against the tendency to pretend that nothing has changed, because the truth is that this situation has deeply impacted you. Acting

as if things are otherwise is deceitful, and a solid relationship cannot be built upon dishonesty.

What are we talking about? Share with your child the ways their news has affected you. This conversation demands delicacy, as well as some necessary boundaries. Keep in mind that the goal of this conversation is not to burden your child with your personal struggles, or to shame or heap guilt upon them in any way. Just as you try to be more transparent about your relationship with God, divulging aspects of how this new reality has impacted you should be done with the mindset of banishing secrets and inviting in openness and honesty. Your words should never be said in anger or with flippancy.

You may be wondering when to have this conversation. There's no right answer, but pray for the right opportunity when you can share with them how their choices have affected your relationship, your immediate family, your friends, and your church community. You want to emphasize that you still want a relationship with them but that the situation is hard for you at times. Your child may not realize how their actions affect you, your life, and your faith.

This is not a conversation that ought to occur often, and do not bring it up when you are stressed and hurt.

But if you are finding it hard to completely manage your emotions, listen to how one parent handled it. A mother in one of our groups was honest with her son that she was not handling the situation with his new identity well. She often got angry and was tempted toward being controlling; she admitted to acting poorly at times. But she always went to her son, asked for forgiveness, and said that her behavior was not honoring to Christ. This acknowledgment of wrong went a long way towards keeping her relationship open with her son.

What has changed most in your life since your child's disclosure? Within yourself, your marriage, your immediate and extended family, your friendships, and your church?

Learn to Navigate a Path of Inclusion Without Compromising Your Faith and Values

This step requires that you employ the previous chapter's discussion: You must offer the gift of relationship without the requirement that your child first repent and turn from their newfound identity. To continue a relationship with your child, you need to continue inviting them into your home and into your life, even while they insist on their new identity.

You want to communicate to your child that you have an open door for them, that they can

always feel safe near you and your family. This will look like extending invitations to them to attend family celebrations, holidays, church, or simple get-togethers. If they no longer live at home, make it clear to them that you are desirous of their presence; if you are able, go visit them just because you want to.

These normal-life situations, which were relatively easy before the disclosure, may now be fraught with obstacles and dangers. Consider some of the possibilities:

- Do I allow my child's partner to come into my house?
- Do I allow my child and his partner to openly show affection with each other?
- Do I allow my adult child to stay over for the night with his partner?
- Do I allow my child to dress in clothes that are for the gender they prefer?
- Do I call my child by their new, preferred name?
- Do I use different pronouns for my transgender child?
- Do I agree to never speak of what the Scriptures say about my child's decision?
- How do I respond when my child uses a family gathering to promote her agenda?

These are some of the complex life-situations you might face. As a parent, you are allowed to have boundaries in your home. You do not need to feel like you must capitulate to all of their demands in order to communicate that you love them and want them in your life. You might feel pressured by the culture or your child to agree to behavior that conflicts with your values. Don't believe the cultural lie that having boundaries means you do not love or respect your son or daughter. Possibly you heard this very thing from your child when you did not outright agree with all of their choices.



Our current culture often defines love as acceptance, which means accepting anyone and anything. Your child may only define love as total affirmation of one's choices. But this is not how God defines love. God holds us accountable for our actions, because he knows what is ultimately good for us and is disappointed when we stray. At the same time, he is full of compassion and demonstrates mercy even in our disobedience.



Look at the example of the adulterous woman found in John 8:1–11. Notice that once all of the Pharisees and Jewish leaders have disappeared, Jesus stands up, looks directly at the woman, and makes his pronouncement that, while he does not condemn her for her actions, he does require that she “go and sin no more.” Jesus does not simply love her, tolerate her sin, and let her leave unchanged. He knows that her sin is destroying her, as all sin does, and so he lovingly instructs her to live differently.



Jesus' example emphasizes that addressing a person's wrong or sinful behavior is loving, and the culture's insistence on total acceptance of one's behavior is not loving at all. But in drawing boundary lines where differing personal values clash, you do so not with correction in the forefront, but by acknowledging your faith values. For you, as a Christian, being authentic means following Jesus.

With God, correction and discipline are integral to how he loves us. He does not leave us as we

are, stuck in the midst of our sin. God wants more for us than that, because he knows that we all need saving from ourselves. He knows that we sin daily and need to hear the word ‘no’ to live the life to which he has called us.

Based on your faith values and what you are comfortable with, figure out your boundaries and state them clearly. There may be tension with your child as a result, but you must learn to live with this tension and still love and pursue your son or daughter. Continue to invite them into family life, even if they openly dislike your boundaries. Your role is to continue to love them by including them while not sacrificing your faith values. This isn’t going to be easy, and you will no doubt make mistakes along the way.

Here are two more factors to consider as you figure out how to establish these boundaries.

One, these are your personal boundaries. Others in your situation—particularly those who are not in your position but are looking in from the outside—may choose different lines. The important thing is that you have thoroughly thought through why your boundary lines matter to you.

Two, don’t hesitate to seek input from others in deciding on your boundaries. Asking for counsel is better than quickly coming up with a plan only you yourself have thought about. You shouldn’t accept every suggestion or piece of advice as practical for your situation, but hearing from people you trust will give you options that you may not have considered.

Name some boundary lines with which you are strongly uncomfortable for your child to cross.

Addressing Boundary Crossings

Once these established boundaries are shared with your child, you must also be clear that crossing those boundary lines will result in a breach of trust. Holding your child accountable for their actions acknowledges the sin against you and recognizes that the relationship is in need of repair.

The intention for addressing these boundary crossings is not to communicate anger or disappointment towards your child, but provides a way to address hurts or wrongs. Our actions produce repercussions in our jobs, in our relationships, and even from the government. No one gets to do whatever they want to do whenever they want to do it, which would lead to chaos. This should hold true for you and your home as well. We all live with the results of our choices every day. We cannot escape them.

Looking back to when your child was young, recall the times when you had to tell your child ‘no’ and require that they follow a standard. To have refrained from setting boundaries would have been unloving. Though your son or daughter is no longer a young child, places in your relationship still require you to affirm your boundary lines and follow through when they are broken. Not addressing these boundary violations can actually damage your relationship.

Christian parents naturally want to forgive their children, despite any passing anger, but a pattern of ignoring sinful and wrong actions will add up. When you do not address issues, the breaking of boundary lines will continue, with disrespect creeping into the relationship and making healthy boundary lines that much more difficult to enforce. Standing firm establishes mutual respect and creates a foundation for a loving and healthy relationship.

Look also at 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all.” Your son or daughter needs each of these aspects at different points in their lives: admonishment when they have done wrong, encouragement and help when they are weak, and patience in the midst of it all. It will take wisdom to know when to apply each facet of this verse in conversation with your child. But this need for wisdom also leads you towards prayer and reliance upon your heavenly Father.

A real fear of damaging your relationship with your child and the possibility of destroying the openness you have worked hard to create might tempt you to avoid hard conversations with your son or daughter when confrontation is likely. Yet, for the good of your relationship, you cannot shrink back from speaking the truth in love.

What do you find most difficult about addressing boundary crossings with your child? When has it worked favorably to enforce boundaries? What was the effect when you let boundaries slide?

Purposefully Enter into Your Son or Daughter's World

As stated in Chapter 9, part of creating a climate of grace involves entering fully into your child’s world. This may not be a comfortable or desirous path for you, but consider how Christ entered our world. God sent his incarnate Son to identify with us, so you too must step into your child’s sphere of life.

Often when we face trials or experience rejection, we react in self-protection and retreat. Maybe you have reached out to your child and they ignored you, became cold and distant, or shut you out until you agree to accept their new identity. Maybe you believe the situation

is more than you can handle; you find it easier to keep your distance. Or possibly your child simply lives far away and is not in your daily life, so you tend to forget about initiating contact with them.

Resist the temptation to protect yourself or even end your relationship with your child. Do not allow your pain to lead you to sin, either through neglect or by responding to sin with a sinful reaction yourself. You do not have to respond in kind to your child if they reject or ignore you.

Here are some practical ways to pursue your child that will show your continued love for them:

In conversation:

- Ask about their friends
- Ask about plans for the weekend
- Ask how school or work is going
- Take time to listen and respond
- Try to understand anew their likes, dislikes, hobbies, and who they are
- Ask them what they love to do right now
- Discuss the latest movie, book, music, or sports game
- Ask what their favorite restaurant is right now
- Ask where they would like to travel to and why

In action:

- Participate with them in their interests and activities
- Take them out for dinner, a movie, or shopping
- If they don't live at home, visit them for fun or send a care package
- Bring them a special delivery of groceries
- Joke with them! Send a funny meme or picture
- Mail a card or letter
- Text or email them
- Call them
- Set up Skype or FaceTime dates
- Invite them and their friends to your home for an activity or a meal
- Spend time with them and their friends outside of the house
- Get to know their partner

Some of you may fear that entering into your child's world will somehow communicate that you agree with their identity. But since you have already clearly stated your position on their sexual or gender identity, you can rest assured that your child is fully aware of your views. This engagement in their life is about them, about who they are as your child, and not about embracing the beliefs or ideas they hold. You can simply decline invitations to events or situations that you feel cross your boundary lines, but do so prayerfully and communicate your decision to your child gently.

This may take time for some of you—there is nothing wrong with that, though you do need to find some way to step into your child’s personal territory. Start small. Begin with conversations or find activities that you know they love. Engage your son or daughter in topics, events, and activities that you find safe. From there, you can build a strong foundation, and strengthened by your relationship with God, you will be equipped to take larger steps into their world.

Have you found yourself hesitant to reach out to your child? Why or why not?

What is one way that you can enter into your child’s world this week?

Acknowledge a Significant Other or Partner

For many of you, this will be the hardest step for you to take. You may fear that offering kindness and relationship to your son or daughter’s partner could communicate approval. And you know what? To some people outside the situation, it might look like approval, but, again, you’ve already voiced your disagreement to your child, and they are the ones who matter.

This may take time for you and much prayer. But, if your child does have a partner or significant other, you cannot ignore this person—or worse, show open hostility. How do you think your child and their partner would view Christians if you acted like this? A partner is important to your child, and disregarding them will only hurt your relationship. Welcoming their partner into your life and home can create an open door that will further allow you to speak into their life. Consider this also: your relationship with your child’s partner may impact them as they see you navigate faith and relationships.

Although this is a difficult step, it is possible to do so while holding firm to your beliefs. Offering love to your child’s partner shows how you can fundamentally and essentially disagree with someone and still offer the hand of friendship. Just as Jesus sought out those who were sick in their sin, you can embrace another who is living in a way with which you openly disagree.

Remember that you are still allowed to create boundary lines within your home concerning your child's relationship with a partner. But opening up yourself to their partner is an incredible ministry to your child, especially when they know you do not approve.

What do you fear most about accepting your child's partner? If you have already accepted them, what has surprised you?

Taking It Home

Who can you invite to pray with you this week about this chapter? Who can help you discern how to specifically pursue your child and hold you accountable for doing so?

What Scripture passages come to mind to pray through this week to help you pursue your child with surprising grace and truth?

Conclusion – Persevering with Faith and Hope

Our prayer and hope is that this curriculum has brought you from a place of confusion and discouragement to one of clarity and hope as you have learned what God may be up to in these difficult circumstances. Although this material is far from exhaustive, you are now better equipped to know your child more deeply, to discover how God is engaging your own heart, and to grow in the role to which he has called you in your son or daughter's life. With this foundation in place, we encourage you to simply press on, remaining steadfast in the truth and love of God as you consider the road before you.

Ultimately, the journey that lies ahead is one of perseverance and faith, and the book of Hebrews gives great encouragement to this end. Chapter 11 reminds us that faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Though we do not always see the promises of God realized in this life, we are able to stand firm in these truths by faith. Yet this requires much perseverance and longsuffering. There will certainly be days when you look at the circumstances of your child's life and are hard-pressed to see anything good. There will be times when you feel like your hands are tied completely, unable to effect any kind of change and questioning whether your relationship with your child is in jeopardy. Placing your security on what is seen will leave you on the rollercoaster of ups and downs that only leads to anxiety and discouragement. However, learning to remain steadfast in the knowledge of God and his promises will result in a hope that is sure, and in the peace of God which brings rest. Your eyes will be trained to see the subtle ways God is working, and you will learn to trust him fully with the story he is writing for your child.

Finally, take heart as you consider those who went before you. All who were listed in the "hall of faith" in Hebrews 11 were commended by God for standing firm, even when they did not receive what was promised. May this desire to stand firm also be in you. Most importantly, fix your eyes on Jesus Christ. Perseverance is only possible because Christ endured such hostility from sinners on our behalf. This is where the power to carry on comes from, because his strength and Spirit now abide in you. May you be strengthened by his might as you behold Christ and run with perseverance the race marked out for you!

So, continue on in what you have learned. Take heart and remember that God does exist and rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:1–3, NIV)

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Appendix A – Harvest USA's Statement of Beliefs

The Godhead and Divine Revelation

We believe God is one Being existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is the Sovereign, the Creator, and the Sustainer of all things. God is the source and the end of all truth. Jesus Christ is the eternal begotten Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, fully God and fully man. Christ, having accomplished a perfect, substitutional, sacrificial, and atoning work in His life and death, now lives as the resurrected and ascended Lord to act as intercessor and mediator before God on behalf of all believers.

We believe that the Scriptures, consisting of the Old and New Testaments, are the inspired and written word of God, inerrant in their original writings, the infallible authority by which He directs and governs all our activities. The Scriptures are in and of themselves the basis for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in godly living.

Humanity and Doctrine

We believe that man was created in the image of God as a rational, moral, and spiritual being. Man sinned in Adam and fell with him in his first transgression into a state of death and separation from God. Man's fall affected him spiritually, intellectually, and physically. He is restored and reconciled only by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit and the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We believe the doctrines of grace as taught in the Scriptures to be those truths essential for salvation and for the ability to experience freedom from one's besetting sins. Men and women are saved and justified, that is, made right and acceptable before the holy God, by grace through faith in Christ alone. The free offer of peace with God is available to all who will come to Him, having their hearts prepared and opened by the Holy Spirit to respond to the offer of salvation. Once justified, adopted, and set apart by God's Spirit, believers are kept faithful and obedient to Christ not by mere willpower but by the supernatural power of God who saves them for all eternity.

Human Sexuality

We believe that our sexuality and its expression were designed by God at creation and that our sexuality and its expression were part of God's original and good design for mankind and is clearly communicated to us in the Scriptures. Male and female were both created in God's image, and we affirm that God's perfect design for all sexual activity is between one man and one woman in the context of the marriage bond. We recognize that, as a consequence of the

Fall, all men and women are sexually broken and thus relate in twisted ways to God, self, others, and nature. Therefore, all expressions of sexual activity outside of the bond of marriage are sinful and are a distortion of God's good design. This includes all involvement with pornography, sexual fantasy, sexual addictions, adultery, homosexuality, gender distortions, and any other sexual activity outside of marriage. All sexual sin grieves God and is offensive to His holiness, and all sexual sin ultimately harms people, whether it is homosexual or heterosexual sin.

We believe that homosexuality is not what God wills for human beings made in His image. We affirm that both homosexual desire and behavior are expressions of mankind's fallenness and like all other types of sexual sin, needs to be confessed, renounced, and forsaken by those who would be followers of Jesus Christ. We believe that God has always called men and women out of homosexuality or other sexual sin patterns and into the new life of His kingdom through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Thus any attempt to claim, cultivate, or promote a gay identity for oneself is out of place in a confessing Christian since it necessarily competes with the holy identity in Christ that every believer has been given and must claim by faith. We believe that Christ gives to all who seek it a growing freedom from the pull of all sorts of sinful sexual fantasy and behavior. This does not preclude the possibility of serious lapses of love and obedience on the part of those who truly believe, but such must be evaluated in light of the ordinary path and process of sanctification in which God places all of His children. Such failure on the part of believers can never be taken as license to abolish the call to holiness or to allow a reinterpretation of the Scriptures that permits a "gay Christian" theology.

The Church and Ministry

We believe the Church is the primary instrument God has chosen to use in ministering the reconciliation and wholeness Christ won at the cross. At the same time, believing that the Lord takes up all kinds of instruments into His hand for the perfecting of His people, we are thankful for genuine help for people struggling with sexual sin from whatever quarter it comes.

STATEMENT ON SAME-SEX ATTRACTION

What is Same-Sex Attraction?

We define same-sex attraction as the relational, emotional, and sexual desire that an individual feels towards someone of the same gender.

We believe that same-sex attraction is a result of the Fall. The corruption resulting from the Fall has affected all aspects of human existence and experience.

We believe that Scripture is clear that heterosexuality is the sexual standard in God's creation but recognizes that those who struggle with sinful, heterosexual desire and behavior do so because of the same Fall that affects those with same-sex attraction. We believe the solution for all who struggle sexually is the same, namely repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ.

Is Same-Sex Attraction Sin?

Scripture emphasizes that all human behavior comes from our hearts and that our hearts are corrupted due to the enduring effects of the Fall. This means that every inclination of our hearts, including our thoughts, emotions, and desires, as well as our deeds, is corrupted by sin. The experience of same-sex attraction, however, is not generally the result of a conscious decision but rather one that individuals become aware of as they grow older. Living with same-sex attraction can prove a special challenge for those who want to live according to God's design for sexuality.

We do not believe that same-sex attraction is a benign condition, but is a manifestation of original sin or indwelling sin and not a morally-neutral sexual orientation that can be used for both good and evil. The struggle against indwelling sin is reflected in Scripture, among other places, in Romans 7:5, where Paul describes "sinful passions...at work in our members to bear fruit for death." Similarly, in Romans 7:20, Paul describes sin as the unwanted desire of his flesh toward what he did not want to do.

We believe that same-sex attraction, though a manifestation of original sin or indwelling sin, is differentiated from willful sin. If the struggler experiences a spontaneous, sexual attraction toward someone else, but in faith and submission to God resists that pull and does not act on it in thought, word, or deed, then that individual is actively repenting and has not engaged in nurtured, willful sin.

Does Same-Sex Attraction Arise From A Sexual Orientation?

We do not agree with the cultural perspective that same-sex attraction is genetic, fixed, and unchangeable, arising from the secular notion of sexual orientation; rather, we recognize that its genesis most likely involves multiple pathways in an individual's life. In addition to original sin, multiple pathways can include the following: biological components, cultural factors, family history, abuse, etc.

How Do We Understand Sin and Temptation?

Same-sex attraction is frequently connected with legitimate desires of the heart including, but not limited to, desires for love, intimacy, control, comfort, affirmation, and affection. Coming from a sinful heart, these desires have become idolatrous and out of proportion, replacing true love for God and love for neighbor as God intended. Jesus clearly linked strong, inward desires ("lustful intent") with behavior itself (Matthew 5:28). And James spoke of those same disordered desires as conceiving, tempting, and giving birth to sin (James 1:13–15). It is nearly impossible to separate temptation from sin in the moment of struggle, but the distinction is nevertheless helpful. Inward thoughts, desires, and temptations can be intentional, but sometimes they also arise seemingly from nowhere, unbidden and unwanted.

What is the Hope for Someone with Same-Sex Attraction?

We affirm that our sole hope in all sexual struggling is to turn constantly toward the grace of God through Jesus Christ. God's grace "trains us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age" (Titus 2:12–13). We gain hope as we become increasingly convinced of our own sinfulness and the efficacy of Christ's person and work on our behalf. As Paul states in Romans 2:4, "God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance."

We affirm that one who believes in Jesus Christ has been set free from the definitive power of sin (Romans 6:8–11) and has been made a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). In a very practical sense, through the inward work of the Holy Spirit, believers are able to successfully resist the pull of the flesh and increasingly live with renewed hope, renewed desires, and transformed behavior (Ephesians 4:17–24, Galatians 5:16–26).

We do not believe that a Christian who experiences same-sex attraction should identify with his or her attractions and adopt the label "gay Christian." Christians are called to walk in newness of life in the Spirit, even though we continue to struggle with persistent feelings and attractions that are unwanted. Identity labeling gives undue prominence to this life experience and struggle. Identity is important: who we are and who we want to become is wrapped up in how we view our relationship to Christ.

Appendix B – Guidance for a Biblical Support Group

Why a Biblical Support Group?

Is this a support group? Is this a Bible study? What is it?

Actually, it's both. You are here to look seriously at what the Bible says about your struggle and where to find comfort. You are here to listen to God's truth... about the real issues of the human heart, to receive help and support, and to give it to others. You are here to grow in biblical wisdom that will help you navigate tough situations, as well as learn how to love your child well.

That's why, in reality, this support group is not a self-help group. Better to call it a Christ-transforms group. We aren't leaning on our own understanding or wisdom to address the struggles of our heart, but on God's. As Proverbs 3:5–7 says,

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.
In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.
Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.
It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones.”

You see, this group is not merely about getting better or implementing tools to stop unwanted behavior in your child. And it's not simply about getting rid of your emotional or psychological pain. Although many self-help groups center on helping people feel better, that is often not a sign of godly growth or maturity and will not be the primary goal of this group.

The goal for everyone in this group is a transformed heart and renewed mind (Romans 12:2), leading to a changed person who more deeply loves and serves God and others. In pursuing these goals, we find strength to persevere through longstanding hardship and trials in our lives.

“Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:3–5, NIV)

FIVE KEY STRENGTHS OF A BIBLICAL SUPPORT GROUP

1. **A support group is defined as a place where people understand your situation and offer to help.** Support groups are available almost everywhere. Why? Our society understands a support group as a place where people will listen and not offer judgement. It's a place where others are seeking to successfully deal with their lives and get help. It's where what is shared will be held in confidence, and anonymity is assured. People in crisis attend these groups—and permission to be a mess is given. Support groups offer an accepting environment where people hope to grow. In other words, it's a place where people look for healing. All of these are positive psychological aids that can boost those who are facing struggles.
2. **A support group is a concrete beginning point.** These groups offer a place to begin a new journey or to start over. For many, attending a group represents a turning point with an awareness that one must change. Help is needed and desired urgently. In many instances, the group is the first place the parent has ever become honest about this situation with their child. Therefore, as a first step, attending a support group requires courage. Our sinful hearts tempt us to continue in autonomy, ignoring our need for help from others around us. Because this is a huge step, people need much encouragement and cheerleading.

Perhaps some will see the gospel of Christ meet them in their struggle for the very first time. Just when someone is consciously aware that they have exhausted all personal resources for dealing with life, they will be at the right place to encounter the necessity of turning to God.

3. **A support group functions as a supplement to other interventions.** For many individuals in the group, this will be the first attempt at getting any kind of help—often after some time of silent struggle. For some, however, this step has been recommended by a counselor or therapist in conjunction with their therapy. A pastor may refer someone to a support group as a place to be honest and get help. Although involvement in a support group will be therapeutic, it is not professional group therapy. Therefore, if additional help is needed, some may be advised to seek professional counseling.
4. **A support group creates an environment to hear biblical truth and mercy.** Participants hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and how trusting in Christ enables one to face the real issues of the heart. Groups display a model of receiving and giving the kindness, tolerance, and patience of God that Paul says leads to repentance (Romans 2:1–4).

“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

- 5. A support group gives the opportunity for real honesty.** In a world where everyone is seemingly entitled to their own little (and big) lies and deception, groups offer the venue to get real about our hearts. A weekly gathering that encourages others to let down their masks, no one is frowned upon or shamed for admitting weakness, temptations, and failures. Instead, people are encouraged to become ruthlessly honest with themselves and others, so the Truth can set sinners free (John 8:32, 36).

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . .” (and) “Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

The Possibilities and Limitations of a Support Group

A support group is a great place to begin getting help. The previous section discussed many of the strengths of the support group model we recommend, but there are limitations as well. Here is a summary of both the possibilities and limitations of a support group.

A SUPPORT GROUP IS DESIGNED TO. . .

... offer an environment conducive for healing and growth by providing:

- emotional support
- encouragement and hope
- empathy and understanding
- relating of truth
- an environment where self-disclosure and sharing of vulnerabilities develops trusts between others
- a place to experience and learn from healthy confrontation

... offer the opportunity to pursue relationship with Jesus Christ as the person who redeems and rebuilds broken lives by:

- knowing the healing, forgiveness, and empowerment of Christ
- presenting the reality that change is part of the process of knowing and obeying Christ
- understanding the implications of what it means to be children of God in relationship with a loving father who cares for you

A SUPPORT GROUP IS NOT DESIGNED TO. . .

. . . meet every need of the person who attends because:

- it is limited in focus
- it is not an end in itself, but a stepping stone
- it should be seen as a parallel activity that does not replace wider involvement in the local church body
- it should not replace professional counseling if counseling is needed

. . . rescue people from facing further pain because:

- growth and change are always painful
- giving up habits, patterns, learned strategies, and idols is always a painful process
- truth often brings a new kind of pain and sadness as we see how we have used others to get what we wanted
- our pain and disappointments are meant to lead us to a greater experience of what it means to follow Jesus Christ

. . . take the place of the local church because the church is God's uniquely-ordained institution, where:

- God's people come together corporately to worship him
- we are exhorted and instructed by the preaching of the Word
- we partake of the sacraments and the means of grace
- we meet broad opportunities for growth, service, and maturity
- we carry one another's burdens
- we receive healthy, biblical discipline
- we submit ourselves to the authority of God's Word and to those he has put in spiritual leadership over us



Harvest USA's mission is to bring the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ by:

- Helping individuals and families affected by sexual struggles
- Providing resources that address biblical sexuality to individuals and churches

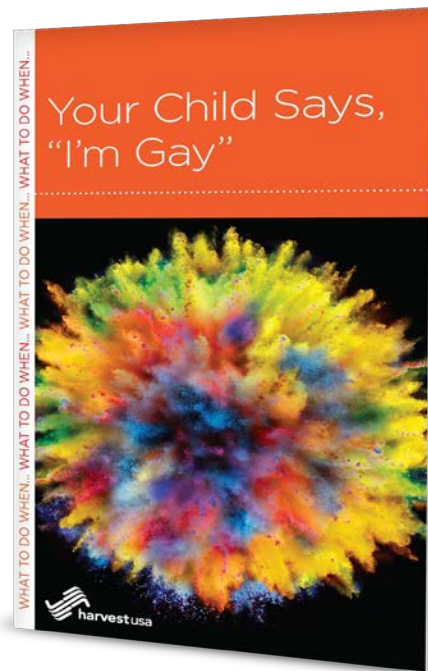
We are a donor-supported ministry, so the churches and individuals who partner with us make it possible for us to produce resources like ***Shattered Dreams***, ***New Hope*** and provide direct ministry to individuals and families, free of charge.

If you found this resource helpful, consider partnering with us financially, advocating for our ministry in your local church, and/or praying for our work.

For free resources, please visit **harvestusa.org**.

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ALSO AVAILABLE FROM HARVEST USA



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