



*Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life*  
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## Godliness is Heterosexuality?

I was recently on a panel talking about same-sex attraction at a large Christian conference. One of the questions I was asked was a thinly veiled version of the one question that many Christian parents most want to ask me: “How can I stop my children from being same-sex attracted?,” or (as no one has really had the courage to put it), “How I can I stop my child from becoming like you?”

It’s a revealing question. The number of times I’ve been asked it (always in roundabout ways) demonstrates how great a fear it is for many Christian parents – to raise a child that might be sexually attracted to their own sex. It’s not something that they want to have to share in the Christmas letter in years to come – either openly or by what’s clearly left unsaid. The great hope is that they will be able to write of happy marriages, numerous grandchildren and continued involvement in a good evangelical church. They don’t want to have to say instead that a child is gay, that there won’t be any grandchildren (at least, not in the conventional way), and that their son or daughter is now part of some LGBT-affirming church (if any church at all). What they want from me is a few simple steps they can take to stop that from happening – ban their young son from playing with his sister’s dollhouse and discourage that sister from playing football when she’s older.

Why the paranoia (a word honestly used by a Christian parent asking me this question)? It’s because, in the evangelical church, godliness is heterosexuality and no one can really grasp how same-sex attraction and godliness could ever exist together. So if you want your child to be godly, you must do all you can now to ensure that they are heterosexual. And, obviously, if your child starts experiencing same-sex attraction, you must then do all you can to change that as quickly as you can.

All of this explains how much time, effort and money some evangelical churches have invested in counseling that promises a permanent change in someone’s sexuality. Many same-sex attracted children of evangelical parents have been signed up for reparative therapy or sent off on residential courses that will “heal” them of their same-sex attraction. Often the children (and sometimes the parents) have then given up on evangelical Christianity when these attempts have failed. If godliness is heterosexuality, what’s the point of trying to be a Christian when you’re not heterosexual?

It’s tragic that this link has been made in people’s minds. But I understand why: it is a link that has often been at the forefront of my mind too. If heterosexuality is godliness, the big change that’s most been needed in my life is for me to become heterosexual. And so I’ve prayed hard and searched hard for an effective antidote to my same-sex attraction. The pursuit of holiness has nearly always equaled the pursuit of heterosexuality for me.

So I was helped enormously – hopefully like everybody else listening – by the reply of

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# BOOK EXCERPT

*"As a Christian who also knows same-sex desire firsthand, I would put a few things differently than how Ed Shaw does here. But that doesn't stop me from applauding this biblically thorough, evangelistically zealous, humbly self-disclosing and pastorally compassionate defense of traditional Christian sexual ethics. Ed Shaw's life and teaching are an inspiring variation on what the church throughout history has celebrated as consecrated, holy virginity. May his tribe increase!"*

— **Wesley Hill**, assistant professor of biblical studies, Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and author of *Washed and Waiting*

another panel member at that conference to this question. A heterosexual church minister, he runs his church's support group for same-sex attracted church family members. He's also the married father of two sons. He said something like this: "We, most of all, want our boys to grow up as godly and mature Christians. Some of the most godly and mature Christians we know are same-sex attracted. So why should we be so afraid of them growing up as same-sex attracted?"

I was (and I think this is the correct use of the word) flabbergasted by this reply. It finally blew apart my wrong presumption that same-sex attraction and godliness, like oil and water, don't ever mix. It made me recall that some of the most godly people that I have ever known are those who've also experienced same-sex attraction. In fact, one of the Christian leaders I most respect as godly has been made so *through* his struggle with same-sex attraction. I'd just never heard the link made so obviously and in such a moving way and context.

But that panel member is a parent whose main ambition for his children is the right one—godliness, not heterosexuality. I'm sure it doesn't mean that he's praying that his boys will grow up to be same-sex attracted. . . . But his reply showed that he has what we should all really care about in our response to the gospel of grace—Christlikeness. Being like Jesus is the true biblical definition of godliness.

Paul's clear passion for the Ephesian church is that they will reflect who they now are in Jesus. He says to Christians like us: because of all that you now are in Jesus (chaps. 1–3), you are to be like Jesus (chaps. 4–6). Just one example comes from the start of chapter 5: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1–2). As God's children (that's our new status in Jesus), we are to imitate him, to love like him—in the same sort of way that led Jesus to sacrifice himself in our place on the cross. That's the sort of love he personified and demonstrated for us in human history.

— *Taken from Misstep #7, "Godliness is Heterosexuality"*



**Ed Shaw** was educated at Durham University, the Cornhill Training Course and Oak Hill Theological College. He is the pastor of Emmanuel City Centre in Bristol, England, and part of the editorial team at [livingout.org](http://livingout.org). He has worked for churches in Durham and London and was the student minister at Christ Church Clifton for six years before joining Emmanuel in 2009. He loves his family and friends, church and city, music and books.

## “Biblically Thorough, Evangelistically Zealous, Humbly Self-Disclosing and Pastorally Compassionate”

### What was your motivation for writing *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church*?

I wrote this book because I've kept discovering that the main reason brothers and sisters in Christ are abandoning orthodox teaching on sexuality is not because of biblical exegesis but because of what they perceive to be the unreasonableness of what same-sex attracted Christians like me are asked to do. I wanted to persuade them (and remind myself!) that the celibate Christian life is plausible – that it can be the life to the full that Jesus promises us all.

### What sets *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church* apart from other Christian perspectives on this topic?

The reason that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality sounds so unreasonable is because of a whole number of missteps that the church has taken over the years, a whole host of ways in which we evangelicals have become too shaped by the world around us. Correct our mistakes and what Jesus says about sex and relationships says will become more plausible, will sound, again, more like life to the full. And that will be good news for all of us.

That is what this book seeks to do: highlight these missteps so that we can begin to rid ourselves of this plausibility problem. This can only be done if evangelical churches correct the various theological and pastoral missteps we have taken that make celibacy sound and feel implausible for many. This book is not just for Christians who experience same-attraction – or their families and friends – it is for us all.

Other books on this issue tend to just defend or undermine orthodox teaching and share experiences of either living in the light of this teaching or rejecting it. This book does contain apologetic and autobiographical aspects but is written to have a wider appeal and impact.

### What do you hope readers will take away from *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church*?

1. Celibacy is a plausible option for same-sex attracted Christians – it *can* be life to the full.
2. But celibacy can be life to the full only if evangelical churches repent of the ways in which they have made it sound and feel implausible for so many.