

When the Same-Sex Couple Shows Up at Your Church

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This paper gathers three articles into one, all of them written for *The Stream's* [Pastors' Corner](#) in December, 2022.

Links to the sources are displayed at the end. Original online styles and links are preserved in here, as well as the original titles.

The first two articles focus on general principles. The last one is very specifically about what to say and do.

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If, When, and How to Welcome the Same-Sex Couple or Trans Person at Your Church

By Tom Gilson

December 1, 2022

The fight has ratcheted up again, and here's a good first clue into how the left is going to fight it. "All are welcome – no exceptions." An entire denomination paraded that message on church banners and web pages, not long ago. Between the lines it read, "We're better Christians than all those fake churches that keep gays out." A gay friend of mine says any church that doesn't accept gays has unchristian theology: We've forgotten that God is love.

Is it true? How do we treat the same-sex couple, the trans person, the Q, whatever "Q" means? Do we welcome everyone? If so, how, and to what extent? If not, how do we square that with the love of God? Maybe your church has thought through all this. If not, be prepared for an explosion. It's coming. Because it isn't just some churches saying we should accept gays. It's practically our whole culture.

I'll say this much for "gay Christian" theology: They're right to say it depends on our view of God. If the rest of it were right — if God's love were the one important thing to know about Him — then their conclusion might be right, too, and we should freely invite homosexuals and homosexuality into our churches. Except it isn't right. In fact there's another error in that conclusion, one you might not even have noticed. It's the word "our," as in, "our churches."

Whose Church Is It?

If it's your church, go right ahead. Feel free to do what you want with it. If on the other hand it's Jesus' church, then He's in charge, and we'd better let Him decide what goes and doesn't go. I don't mean it's wrong to talk about "our church," any more than it's wrong for a child to talk about "our family." Just remember you're talking about membership, not ownership. It's Jesus' church. He is the host, and we are the invited guests — all of us.

So if you invite a person to your church, you're actually asking him to come along with you as a fellow guest in the Lord's house. It's His, so He gets to set the rules, including who He invites and who He welcomes in. Past

ors and other leaders need to know and administer His standards on His behalf, as He has delegated them that responsibility. Still, it is His rules that they administer.

Explaining Jesus' Standards

That relieves some of the pressure, if you ask me. We don't have to answer for our churches' standards, as if we made them up ourselves. That's on God Himself, who answers when He decides to answer. We do need to be able to explain these standards, however. Because people will ask the "why" questions, and God has indeed given an answer. A refreshingly clear one, even.

Here's the short version: It's Jesus' house. Everyone is invited, period. Everyone is welcome — on Jesus' terms. If anyone tries to come on his own terms instead, why think Jesus should welcome them there?

There's not a thing unusual in that. Suppose you invite someone to your home, but when he shows up his clothes are soaked with grease and oil. You say, "Let's keep our conversation outdoors, okay?" He answers, "What's wrong with you? I thought you invited me!" You know what happens next. It's your home, and you can decide what's welcome there. And if you can decide that for your house, how much more can the King of all the universe decide what's welcome in His?

But What About 'God is Love'?

We still have to know what to do with the truth that God is love, and that He calls us to love others as He loves. Does that mean He accepts everyone? Does it mean we should, too?

It might — if love were the only thing true about God. It isn't. In fact it takes quite a twisted view of God to talk only of His love, and not His truth and holiness. God is just as committed to truth and righteousness as He is to love — except "committed" is the wrong word for it. He actually *is* truth and holiness, as much as He is love.

The church that makes "love" their one standard is following a false god. It is literally worshiping an idol.

God Excludes False Teaching

God is love, but He doesn't love everything. Because He is a God of truth, He hates falsehood. He seriously hates false teaching. His Word is emphatic on this. He wants it excluded from His Church. He *demand*s it be excluded.

I find it helpful to separate the "who" from the "what." Every person, every "who," has an open invitation to God's house. Some "whats" — some teachings — are absolutely excluded, however. Jesus pronounced woe after woe upon Israel's false teachers ([Matthew 23](#)).

Paul says to "avoid" those who bring false doctrines ([Romans 16:17-18](#)). He even calls them accursed ([Gal. 1:6-9](#))! He tells Timothy ([1 Tim. 1:3-7](#)) to put a stop to false teachings, and he offers no warm compliments about those false teachers. They're "puffed up with conceit and understand nothing." They have an "unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels."

Paul told Titus to watch out for “empty talkers and deceivers,” to “silence” them, to “rebuke them sharply” ([Titus 1:10-16](#)). If that sounds “unchristian” to you, you need to re-think where you get your definition of “Christian.” Was it from the Bible, or some secular source?

Peter is more vehement yet. “Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.” He’s just getting started there: Read all of [2 Peter 2](#) for the full treatment. John tells us ([2 John 7-11](#)) that to welcome a deceiver into your home, or even to greet him, is to “take part in his wicked works.” To “greet” someone meant rather more then than it does now, but the point remains.

This is the word of the God who loves — because He hates falsehood. And because lies do us serious damage.

God Does Not Welcome Unrepentant Sin

God doesn’t think much of unrepentant sin, either (to say the least), but it’s different in this case. You get a sense of longing in the relevant passages, a desire to bring the person back into the fold. Not with any openness to continued sin, though.

We see it in [Matthew 18:15-17](#) where Jesus says, “let them be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector.” He doesn’t mean we should hate them, but that we shouldn’t treat them as if they’re true members of the Body of Christ. There’s grace in that: It does them no good to think they’re in the right place when what they really need is to repent.

In [1 Corinthians 5:1-5](#), the unrepentant sinner is (according to the best interpretations of the passage) excluded from fellowship. The reason is “so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” The point again is to show the person he’s on the wrong path. (It’s also to warn the rest of the church not to follow his lead.)

This is specifically about unrepentant sin. Sinners are welcome, or else none of us would be in God’s church, but consistent, persistent, and especially (though not only) *open* sin should earn the person an invite out the door. It’s for their good, and for the good of the church.

This is the word of the God who loves — because He also loves holiness. And because sin harms us.

Applying This to the Same-Sex Couple or Trans Person at Your Church

I fellowship weekly with adulterers, gossips, fornicators, liars, hypocrites, and thieves, and I’m a sinner along with the rest of them. We don’t celebrate our sin, though. Rather, we mourn it, reject it, repent of it. We support each other when we fall, but not by saying sin is okay. We keep a guard on our teaching, too.

This should bring clarity to the way we greet the same-sex couple or the trans person at our churches. We can freely welcome anyone who comes to discover, to learn, to seek to know Jesus. We should urge him to come to Christ in repentance, so that he can be restored just as we are being restored.

But we allow absolutely no place for anyone to teach “gay is okay.” That’s false, and it deserves all the vehement rejection you read about in 2 Peter 2. That includes teaching by example. When a same sex

couple holds hands, it's sending a message that this lifestyle good and right, and we have no place for that, either.

Maybe this seems harsh. Don't read too much into that — or too little. There is a standard here to be met. It is in the nature of standards to be rigid and impersonal; anything else would be biased and arbitrary. This topic is only half finished for now, as I still need to speak to the manner in which we treat the person in light of these standards: with love, with care, often with grief. I'll return to that in a later column.

Don't Be Caught Off Guard When the Same-Sex Couple Shows Up at Your Church

By Tom Gilson

December 14, 2022

You're standing at your church entrance, greeting folks for morning worship. It's the usual Sunday morning routine — until you see a pair of men walking up, holding hands. Suddenly your usual Sunday morning has turned unusual. It could go badly, and you know it.

You'll gain an instant impression based on how they're dressed, how they approach the church, how they greet others. You'll mix that together with your own past experiences. If you've heard of homosexual activists disrupting church services, your first reaction may be to put your guard up.

You don't know what to expect. They might be there legitimately responding to His call, and you want them feeling welcome for that. Or maybe you've seen gays and lesbians mistreated, and you're thinking you should bend over backwards to make sure that doesn't happen here.

It took you a few seconds to read through those scenarios. You'll form your impressions a whole lot faster than that when it happens for real. You'll have almost exactly zero time to decide how you'll greet them. But you're short on information: You don't know if they've come to seek Christ or to seek trouble.

What do you do now?

Be Prepared

Here's what I seriously hope you don't have to do. I hope you don't have to make up an answer on the spot. I hope that you don't have to guess what your church holds as doctrine and policy. That you don't fold into merely ignoring them. That you won't have to send for the pastor to handle it. He has enough on his mind already for a Sunday morning.

The good news is, you don't have to do any of that, right there on the spot. You can be prepared, or rather your church as a whole can be prepared in advance for it. Churches will handle details differently, but there are principles that should fit in with every believing church.

The first one is not to let yourself be caught unprepared. Don't forget: Your greeter's split-second decision when the two men walk in the door hold hands could go well, or it could go badly. Do you really want to leave up to a moment's quick decision?

Know Your Teachings!

So let's start with the essential first preparatory step: You must be clear on your doctrines of marriage, sex, and sexuality. This is no time for greeters to be wondering, "What *do* we believe about this?" Your ministry team must be in agreement on it, and your ushers and greeters must know it and agree to it. (Your denomination or legal counsel should have advice for you on essential legal language regarding homosexuality, gay marriage, and so on. This is related but different.)

If you accept homosexuality in your church, then it's easy. It's accommodationist. It's wrong. You don't need this article, but need to review your basic beliefs instead. If your church and ministry teams *are* clear on biblical doctrine, then you're ready to proceed through these principles.

What Love Is

Let's start with the most basic principle of them all: Christian love. God loved you and me "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5:8). We owe that same debt of love to all (Romans 13:8).

We must not let ourselves be confused over what that means, though. The band Foreigner sang, "[I want to know what love is. I want you to show me.](#)" In the right context (not necessarily the song's context) it's a fair question. We do need to know what love is — especially when homosexual activists would rather sing it this way: "*I want to tell God what love is — I want to straighten Him out on it.*"

Blasphemy? Yes. Reprehensible? That, too.

What Love Isn't

They think they know better than God on these things. They'll say, "Jesus welcomes us as we are, so you should, too." That's wrong. Jesus *invites* us as we are, but [He welcomes us based on faith and repentance](#). That's repentance *from sin*. Including sexual sin. Love means inviting them on the path to faith and repentance, and traveling that path with them as far as they're willing to walk it.

Anything less than that — including any sign that sin is acceptable — is wishing them a pleasant and cheery trip on their way to eternal Hell. (Every Christian knows that's true for all sin, not just sexual sin, but sexual sin is the topic here, and we need not let other examples distract us from it.)

They re-define love in all sorts of ways. "My sexuality is my identity. Hate my sexuality, and you hate me." Wrong. True love doesn't narrow people's identity down to one slice of life. It doesn't see humans as merely sexual creatures or even merely physical creatures. God created us for a holy, loving, spiritual relationship with Him. He sets the terms for that relationship, too. It's His Church, not ours, and yes, He actually does know what love is.

So if they want to play God and rewrite the meaning of love, they'd better go find somewhere else to do it. We'll follow Jesus' standards.

Their “I’m Not Feeling Loved Here” Card

Their most effective ploy goes like this: “You’re making me feel really unloved here.” Let’s put a pin in that one. God calls us to love people, not to make them *feel* loved. Jesus Himself didn’t make everyone “feel loved.” He spoke grace and truth. If they didn’t like it, He spoke it anyway.

It’s *not in your power* to make a person feel loved. You can make a guy feel sore in the toe by stomping on his shoe, but no technique, no “winsomeness,” and no magic words can possibly *make* a person feel loved. People come with different experiences, different “baggage,” and different beliefs. Some people will only “feel loved” if you tell them their sin is just fine — which isn’t love at all.

Not Your Responsibility

Further: If there were any way to make someone feel loved, you can bet it wouldn’t happen in the five minutes you’re standing there before the worship service starts. Genuine love reveals itself slowly, through actions that persist, not not by words spoken in a moment. All we’re trying to cover here is how to greet them when they walk in the door.

You are responsible to love everyone who walks in the door. That’s the first principle of greeting anyone who comes to your church. You are not, however, responsible to love them the way *they* define love, and you are not responsible to prove it’s really love.

What to Say and Do When the Same-Sex Couple Shows Up at Church

By Tom Gilson

December 16, 2022

The same-sex couple walks in your church door. This could go a thousand different directions. I [wrote last time](#) of your church's responsibility to love them with the love of Christ, cautious not to let them try to redefine what His love looks like. Today I conclude with specific, practical ideas on what to say and do.

Making It Practical

What's the best, first way to show God's love? With a warm, genuine smile — unless and until they reveal they've come to disrupt or derail your church's worship service, or to debate or protest your teachings. If that's why they've come, you can smile or you can scowl. Either way, I hope you have a security team you can call on to help, because you don't need them staying there to do that.

Let's suppose it goes better than that. You extend them a warm greeting, and they greet you back. That gets you through the first few seconds. It's a start, but only a start. And you have a problem: They're standing there holding hands. Don't underestimate the issue that represents.

I spent a summer in China some 30 years ago, where I discovered it was perfectly ordinary for male friends to hold hands in public. I had a very uncomfortable walk across Tian An Men Square one day, holding hands with a Chinese friend. I survived the experience, knowing it didn't mean anything wrong there. But it does mean something when two men hold hands here.

Know Where You Draw the Line

Maybe you think it's just some tame, almost-innocent level of same-sex romance they're displaying. Maybe you think it's better not to make a big deal over it. I say, Sure, go ahead and ignore it. Ignore it as you would if some guy took off with half the money in the offering plate. And did it in plain view, where everyone could see what he was doing. And tried to persuade the whole church, "Thievery is an acceptable 'lifestyle.'"

If you think you'd let that pass by with a wink and a nod, then you can ignore the hand-holding, too. Don't expect anyone in your church to take sin seriously after that, though.

Clearly you have to do something. Opinions vary on what that "something" is.

And When You'll Draw It

Some churches won't allow known homosexuals to enter at all. I agree it's right to take a hard line, as I am no fan of wrong going on in church. I draw it in a slightly different place, though as you'll see below.

Some churches may prefer to go softer on it to start with. "We'll ignore it the first time, and deal with it next time they come back." But it isn't one bit easier, gentler, or kinder to say it "next time" than the first time. If you act as if it's okay today, you'll only surprise them all the more when you tell them it's wrong next Sunday.

I suspect some churches put it off for "next time" because they're hoping there won't be a "next time." They think by putting off the messy confrontation they can escape it altogether. I don't think much of that policy. If its cowardice doesn't bother you, consider the confusion it creates. There's no better way to send your church a mixed message on right and wrong than by letting a bad example be set publicly, unmentioned, unhindered. That's bad teaching, and it's bad policy.

You do need a policy, by the way. Your ministerial leadership team had better work it out, record it, agree on it, and pass it along to ushers and greeters. Don't leave them without a map or a compass. These are leadership decisions, not usher/greeter decisions.

Persons Yes, Behaviors No

If your church's policy is, "No admittance to homosexuals," your greeter at the door knows exactly what to do: Turn them away. The simplicity doesn't make it right, however. You run the risk of running someone off who's genuinely there to seek Christ.

That's why I recommend you draw a hard line, but draw it somewhere else: Let the persons in, but not the behavior. Simply tell them your church has a policy that *there will be no display of same-sex affection here*.

I do mean, tell them *simply*. It need not be any more dramatic than that. It need not even be awkward. You have the right to set policy and the right to communicate it. Do tell them quietly, of course, off to the side, if you can. There's no need to escalate it by making it more public than it has to be.

If your church has decided, "Yes, we'll tell them that, but not until they've come back the second or third time," be aware you'll still have to lay down the law, but now it really could get awkward: "Yes, yes, we allowed it last week, but you're going to have to stop it now." If that sounds rough to you, then you've just discovered another reason I don't like putting it off that way. At least do them the courtesy of telling them somewhere else before they show up at church again.

If They Push Back

They may respect your request. They might even enter in and begin a life-changing journey toward Christ. It can happen, so don't close the door on it. Or they might give you pushback. This is what makes this so unpredictable.

“What?” they might object. “Why can't we hold hands here?” I could imagine that being a perfectly genuine question, where they just want to know. If so, they deserve a genuine answer — later. I doubt they'd be satisfied with any short answer you might give, and with church about to start, you don't have time to give them a long answer.

So I would say, “That's a fair question, but church is about to start. Would you mind simply respecting our request for now? We'll find you a chance to talk with one of our pastors or teachers about it later.”

If they won't respect a request like that, they've come for some reason other than church. You need not let anyone browbeat you into thinking you must answer, and must answer *right now*.

What If They Get Belligerent?

The greeter at the door might not be the right person to answer anyway. I believe every Christian should know the truth about marriage and morality, but I do not expect everyone to be good at articulating it under fire. That takes special skills, skills that shouldn't have to be part of a greeter's job qualifications. There's absolutely nothing wrong with saying, “Our church has its convictions, I understand them, I agree with them, but I'm not the best person to explain them.”

Hopefully that will settle it. They'll agree to stay on your church's terms, or else they'll leave. You are under no obligation to adjust your standards to make them “feel welcome.” It's [not your church, and therefore not your standards](#). It's Jesus Christ's church, and He sets the standards.

If they get belligerent over it, I return to my earlier answer: I hope you have a security team you can call on, and I hope that team is well trained for the job they have to do. But now we're getting beyond the scope of this article.

Can Good Come of This?

I've kept this focused on one limited scenario: What to do when the same-sex couple walks in the door. Things can go bad in a moment. Your church could set policies and make plans for it the right way, in advance, when the pressure isn't on. Or you could let your greeters make up an answer on the spot. Don't put them in that position, okay?

I close with an important final question: Can good come of all this? Of course it can! God is always at work. Consider the bystanders watching as this goes down. When my son, Jonathan, was in high school, he and his atheist classmate Jason debated religion almost every day. The year after they graduated, Jonathan heard from another classmate who had just accepted Christ — and one reason for his decision was seeing how Jonathan had handled those debates.

Likewise, someone will probably be watching the way you greet the same-sex couple at your door. By God's grace, they may learn something new about His truth and love from it. And only God knows what He has in store for the two visitors who started the whole thing going, as long as you love them with His love and speak to them with His truth.

Original links:

<https://stream.org/pastors-corner-when-and-how-to-welcome-the-same-sex-couple-or-trans-person-at-your-church/>

<https://stream.org/pastors-corner-dont-be-caught-off-guard-when-the-same-sex-couple-shows-up-at-your-church/>

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