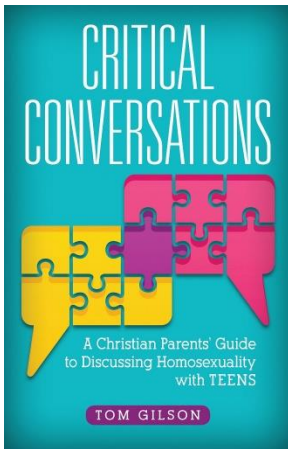


**An interview with Tom Gilson,
Author of *Critical Conversations:*
*A Christian Parents' Guide to Discussing Homosexuality with Teens***



Parents of teens today may have a tougher job in front of them than parents of any other generation in recent history. While immorality has always existed in the world, the Western world has never seen such a time of moral confusion, especially regarding sexuality, gender and the definition of marriage. To help parents cut through the lies and political correctness and find a way to impart truth to their teens, Tom Gilson has written *Critical Conversations: A Christian Parents' Guide to Discussing Homosexuality with Teens* (Kregel/February 27, 2016/ISBN: 978-0825443961/\$15.99).

This is one of the most complex issues Christians face today, and it's rife with landmines. In *Critical Conversations*, Gilson describes the efforts by some to paint Christian beliefs as hateful, making many believers hesitant to speak truth for fear of being seen as homophobic.

Q: You describe the content of your new book, *Critical Conversations*, as the “perfect storm” of awkward parent-child topics. What elements combine for making discussions on homosexuality so difficult?

This topic opens up the threefold potential of intergenerational conflict, young people's sometimes-accurate belief that their parents are out of touch and, of course, the awkward topic of sex. Conflict in particular can arise because young people are frequently far more accepting of homosexuality and gay marriage than people in their parents' generation.

Q: Parents sometimes avoid addressing tough subjects such as homosexuality and gay marriage with their kids. Given how difficult it is to talk about, why would a parent even want to have these “critical conversations”?

Parents sometimes avoid the subject because it's as awkward as it could be, and it's a contentious issue, often with one generation pitted against another. Parents fear it will start out bad and get worse. Above all they're not sure they have what it takes to explain why they believe what they believe.

There's an awful lot at stake. Teens are typically suspicious of the way Christians treat LGBT people, and they see themselves as morally advanced on this topic, compared to their parents' generation. Tragically, for many this separates them from their own church, from their parents and most significantly from belief in Christ himself. However, with proper equipping, these critical conversations can draw teens back into closer relationship with their parents and give them new confidence to stay connected with Christ and Christianity.

Q: How can a tough topic like this one actually help build parents' relationships with teens?

Teens appreciate being taken seriously. If parents will talk with them respectfully about this topic, they'll know they're being treated seriously. If there are hard questions parents can't answer, that's actually OK — as long as the parents stay in the process and seek to uncover the right answer alongside the teen.

This depends, however, on parents being at least moderately well-informed. It's no help at all (and it's not respectful to teens) for parents to launch into a discussion in total ignorance! (Teens can tell.)

Of course, it also depends on the parents maintaining the proper position as parents. Teens still need someone at home to act as their authority person. Their need for that changes a lot as teens grow up, but it usually doesn't go away until after the teen years. But a person who's in authority should know what he or she is talking about — especially on crucial issues like this one.

Putting all that together, parents who are well-equipped on this topic are in a good position to act as real parents while showing genuine relational respect to their teen. That's a great way to build relationships with teens.



Q: In what ways is parenting teens different today than 20 or 30 years ago? How did our culture decline so far, so fast?

There's always been immorality, but never before such moral confusion. We've lost touch with the moral reality that sexual relationships are for a married man and woman, and that this is for our good. Right is now considered wrong, and wrong right.

In some ways the decline has been slower than it might seem, though. Same-sex marriage arose quickly in our culture, yes, but it came as a direct consequence of a long-term decline in heterosexual morality, by which sex — and even marriage — became practiced strictly for the pleasure and happiness of the couple. It was just a short slide from there to accepting gay and lesbian sex and marriage.

Q: What advice do you have for handling this topic in a way that's age-appropriate for teenagers?

There's no need to talk about the sexual mechanics. Most teens know everything they need to know about that already. What teens usually need instead is to be assured that Christianity is still true and still good in spite of the anti-Christian challenges put forth against them on the Internet, in music, on film and TV and even in the classroom. They need to know how to live as faithful Christians and being authentic friends with those who disagree with them, while keeping proper moral boundaries in place.

In short, they need to know what's true with respect to this issue; they need to know why it's true, and they need to know why it's good that it's true, and how to live in light of that truth.

Guidance of this sort can be immensely helpful to pre-teens, too, except they may not be ready for detailed explanations. My best advice in that case is to invite questions — lots of questions — and when an answer seems to be going past the pre-teen's comprehension point, invite another question.

Q: Some parents may even struggle with understanding certain issues themselves. How does *Critical Conversations* help prepare parents for these difficult conversations?

First, this book explains the biblical and common-experience reasons for keeping sexual relationships within the bounds of marriage between a man and a woman. Through this, parents will know how to answer with more than just, "The Bible says so." They'll know how to explain the Bible's teachings in a way that shows the Bible's teaching is both true and good.

Second, there is an introductory chapter that briefly describes the social history of homosexual activism. It's the kind of background knowledge that helps parents be confident they know what's going on in this issue.

Q: How is the design of *Critical Conversations* different than other parenting books?

The book is written in three parts:

1. Understanding the issues (reasons for biblical morality and a brief social history of gay activism).
2. Navigating the rocky relationships: how parents can help teens live in the real relationships they'll find themselves in.
3. Practical help in handling the challenges.

This third part is where the book is really unique. It lists more than two dozen anti-Christian challenges and explains briefly where these challenges go wrong. But that's not all. If it were, it would be just another piece of information for parents to absorb. Instead with each one of these challenges I include "Conversation Coaching," advice for parents on specifically what they can say to their teens to help them deal with the challenge. It's extremely parent-friendly and practical in that sense.

Q: To get a better understanding of the third section of the book, could you share a few examples of conversations that are included?

I give advice for parents on how to coach their teens when they're faced with challenges such as:

- “You're homophobic.”
- “If you disagree with homosexuality, you're a hater.”
- “You're against marriage equality.”
- “You're on the wrong side of history.”
- “The Bible doesn't even mention gay marriage.”

Q: Christians are often painted as being prejudiced and out of touch for their beliefs. Is there a way to speak truth about homosexuality without being perceived as hateful or homophobic?

There are actually a couple of questions that come before that one. *Can we speak out about it without actually being hateful or homophobic?* The answer to that is yes, certainly. We disagree with LGBT advocates, sure. But that isn't automatically hateful or phobic. If it were, then they would also be automatically hateful and phobic for disagreeing with us. I don't think they think that's true of ourselves, and I don't think that's usually true of them, either.

The second question is whether we can speak out without being *perceived* as hateful or homophobic. I think in personal friendships we can often do this. In larger contexts, we'll probably be perceived in all kinds of bad ways, and the best thing we can do about it is to make sure we're living in Christian integrity no matter what people say about us. We can also make our case for our position respectfully, knowledgeably and with conviction. This book helps with that.

Back to the original question. Some Christians have unfortunately acted in hateful and homophobic ways. (I don't usually like to use that term, but it does fit sometimes.) That's a matter for increased knowledge and for repentance.

Q: Why is it such a popular belief that Christians hate homosexuals simply because they disagree with their lifestyle?

There has been an intentional, concerted campaign by homosexual activists to paint Christianity that way. This is not paranoia or conspiracy theorizing. It's documented in their own strategy documents, which they have followed quite effectively. (I detail this in the book.)

Q: What are some ways parents can prepare their children for the possibility they could be bullied for their beliefs?

Kids need to be confident in their beliefs, and they need to see their parents living in confidence too. That's the main thing.

It's great if they can be part of a group of friends who share that confidence; it's the best protection possible for them at school, and of course there's a biblical principle of mutual support and encouragement involved there.

Q: How should parents coach teens on being wise in manner and timing when making a stand for their convictions? For example, when and where is the appropriate time and place?

It's hard to advise on this from a distance. The more important thing, in my view, is for teens to have a solid, almost easy sort of confidence in what they know to be true. Then they can speak their convictions authentically when the pressure is off — in everyday conversation with friends, for example — or when the pressure is on, and their faith is being challenged. It's a whole lot easier for any of us to assess a situation and respond to it appropriately if we're confident in our ability to respond when the time comes.

Q: If you had to simplify your argument in support of biblical marriage into a few sentences, what would they be?

God gave us plenty of good reasons in both the Old and New Testament to know that he designed sex to be for a married couple, and that he designed marriage to be for a man and a woman. It's in Leviticus, in Jesus' teaching on marriage and all over the Pauline epistles.

Marriage between a man and a woman is good. It's a comprehensive human good that supports the nurturance of children and the growth of strong communities. Because children come out of marriages (normally), marital love is an outward-looking form of love, in contrast to the inward-looking and comparatively self-focused "just you and me, babe," form of relationship found in non-marital sexual relationships, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Children thrive in homes with a mom and a dad.

So there are both biblical and non-biblical (common experience) reasons working together to make the point.

Q: Describe the "Bible brush-off" and how parents can avoid it during discussions with their teens.

"The Bible says it. Believe it." That's the Bible brush-off. That's not much help: You can't command belief. (You can't make a person believe by telling them to.) Parents need to help their teens understand how to know the Bible is true and how to know the Bible's teaching is good too.

Q: What are the eternal and cultural implications for helping Christian young people understand this issue?

Let's not be fooled here: The big question isn't whether homosexual behavior or same-sex marriage is moral. The big question is whether Christianity is credible. Gay activists have tried to tear down Christianity's believability. The more they succeed, the harder it will be for anyone to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Q: What should parents do if their child has questions about his or her own sexuality or gender identity?

The first thing is, keep on loving unconditionally, no matter what – which is what "unconditionally" means. If that is at all challenging for you, find the support you need so you can do it – support that's steeped in biblical grace and truth.

Don't think you can go it alone! Don't even assume your pastor is fully equipped to help with this issue. Rely on your pastor, yes, but find a Christian counselor with specific expertise in this area. Parents should spend time with that counselor, learning how to handle their relationship with their teen. If the teen will see that counselor (or a different one, equally qualified), that's great.

Even before that's set up, though, parents should gently seek to find out whether their teens have friends who are encouraging them to "explore" their sexuality. If so, it would be wise to set a firm and loving boundary between the teens and those persons.

If there's been abuse (which is a factor in some, though certainly not all, such sexual questioning), then get the law involved — and again, a qualified counselor.

Learn more about more about *Critical Conversations* and Tom Gilson at www.criticalconversationsbook.com or on [Twitter \(@ThnkngChristian\)](https://twitter.com/ThnkngChristian).