

Conversion Therapy

What every Christian needs to know

Introduction

NHS England defines conversion therapy - sometimes called 'reparative therapy' or 'gay cure therapy' - as trying to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity. It and other professional bodies appear to be in agreement that all forms of conversion therapy are 'unethical and potentially harmful.'

In the Queen's Speech 2021, the UK Government said it would bring forward legislation to prohibit such practices. The next step is a public consultation, expected in September, then new legislation will be introduced as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

We wholeheartedly support the removal of all potentially harmful psychological therapies and medical treatments where there is sound scientific evidence for doing so.

We are deeply concerned however about the realistic possibility that claims of harm from these professional therapies will end up being applied to pastoral care and regular, church activities. A wide-ranging ban could end up discriminating against Christian believers who seek counsel for unwanted sexual attractions that are in conflict with their deeply held convictions and beliefs.

The prospect of a broad ban raises serious questions about freedom of belief, religion and expression. This briefing is intended to inform and equip you to respond effectively and graciously.

What's the problem?

A central issue is to do with a lack of definition. What exactly does the Government mean by conversion therapy? We need clarity because a loosely defined law would cause chaos.

As we have noted, some of those in favour of banning unacceptable medical or psychological therapies also want to extend these restrictions to pastoral care.

This would involve any pastoral support, prayer or conversation offered in response to somebody who wishes to explore their sexual attractions in the light of the teaching of their faith and order their attractions and behaviour more closely with it. This could effectively criminalise regular church activities. It is possible, too, that those preaching or even speaking in favour of biblical Christian teaching on the ordering of human sexuality and marriage could be held to be oppressive and abusive or even prosecuted.

Of course, all forms of pastoral care that involve an exploitation of power imbalances are abusive and potentially harmful and have no place in our churches.

However, there should be no legal restrictions on counselling people who, of their own volition, want to explore the possibility of making changes in their lives and seek help in doing so.

SCENARIO 1

Imagine someone starts attending your church. They reach out to the pastor, leader, or a member and ask for prayer because of unwanted sexual desires. No coercion has taken place, they want to explore their feelings in the light of historic Christian teaching and seek help in ordering their attractions in line with their identity in Christ. If the Government listens to some campaigners, those offering such pastoral care could be subject to police investigations and a potential criminal case against them. In other words, it would be Parliament legislating what can and cannot be prayed for.

SCENARIO 2

You are listening to a sermon on the biblical view of human sexuality. In it, the preacher says the only form of sexual activity permitted by God is consensual sex between a husband and his wife. Saying this could become a criminal offence.

SCENARIO 3

A married woman with strong bisexual attractions voluntarily seeks pastoral support in remaining faithful to her marriage vows to her husband, and to deeply held religious convictions about the nature of marriage as being between one man and one woman. If the Government listens to some campaigners, any pastoral counsel and/or prayer that supported her in controlling or suppressing her same-sex desires would be labelled as 'conversion therapy', construed as harmful and oppressive, and possibly subject to legal action.

The Bible's View

- The New Testament forbids us to harm anyone.
- From a Christian perspective, spiritual conversion is of fundamental importance. It's what happens when someone puts their trust in Christ and are 'born again.' 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!'
- The Bible reveals God's power to change lives. It also teaches that persevering and learning to live with unwanted experiences is also a central part of growing in Christlikeness. God never forces us – we come willingly to Christ and in the same way Christian ministers should never put pressure on anyone but respect their autonomy. As those made in God's image, people should be free to make an informed decision to seek prayer and counsel if they so desire.

Here's what you can do

Anyone can take part in the Government's consultation on a proposed ban due to take place in September. In the meantime, please pray, stay informed and consider contacting your MP.

Pray

1. For wisdom, courage and clarity for all Christians as they speak the truth in love with regard to this sensitive issue.
2. For Liz Truss, the Women and Equalities Minister who will be leading on this legislation for the Government.
3. For organisations and campaigners on both sides: for a willingness to listen and a reasoned gracious debate.
4. For gospel freedoms to be protected.

Write

1. Consider **contacting your MP** to express concerns about the scope of any ban on conversion therapy and the need to defend personal autonomy. Please be kind and gracious in your correspondence with your MP. Remember that our concern is with pastoral care; most of us do not have the experience or expertise to analyse scientific evidence claimed in support of banning certain therapeutic practices.
2. Be ready to respond to the September consultation – when it's launched the consultation will be on www.gov.uk/government/organisations/government-equalities-office

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