

Liberty University's Gay Christians

Nothing about 21-year-old Logen Hodges would suggest that he is different from any other senior at Liberty University. He goes to football games with his face painted in red, posts pictures of himself aiming rifles on social media, and goes to church every Sunday morning. In *Choose Joy*, however, a video published on YouTube last April, Hodges came out to the world as a gay Christian.



"I know that I can live a Christ-centered life and be gay at the same time," Hodges says in the video, after acknowledging the polarizing nature of his statement. "We're all going to disagree on things, but that's not the purpose. I

want to share the joy that I found in my life through Christ."

Liberty University disagrees. Its Student Code of Conduct states that "sexual relations outside of a biblically ordained marriage between a natural-born man and a natural-born woman are not permissible." Unsurprisingly, this view is also shared by a majority of students at Liberty.

"Being gay is not a thing, or should not be a thing," said 19-year-old Daniella Zolla, a music major. "It should not be your identity. If I am struggling with lustful thoughts, I don't go around saying I'm a lustful person. My struggle does not define me."

Still, it's no secret that there are many LGBT people on campus.

"Being gay *is* a thing," Andrew Summers, a gay Christian whose name has been changed to protect his identity, responded to Zolla. "It is not my entire self, but it is a small part of it. Seeing homosexuality as a struggle is just based on a person's misguided worldview. It is completely possible to be gay and to not be lustful, just like it's possible to be heterosexual and not be lustful."

The above altercation illustrates the broader debate that is currently raging in conservative circles nationwide. Amid a strong conservative backlash, a growing number of "gay affirming" churches have started to welcome LGBT people to their houses of worship. Like Hodges, these churches have been influenced by popular initiatives including Matthew Vines' *The Reformation Project*, which seeks to alter the way that churches have historically interpreted homosexuality in the Bible.

In his bestselling book *God and the Gay Christian*, Vines dissects the six main verses that have historically been used by Christians to condemn homosexuality in the Bible and reinterprets them according to what he believes is a far more accurate reading. The YouTube video that inspired his book, *The Gay Debate: The Bible and Homosexuality*, has received nearly a million views to date.

Amid increasing social change, even Liberty has lost its immunity to progressive demonstrations.

Last May, just one month before same-sex marriage became legal in the United States, the famous "spirit rock" outside of DeMoss Hall garnered a lot more attention than usual when it briefly sported the equality sign that is associated with the gay rights movement. The artist behind it was 20-year-old Chance Stone, who also identifies as a gay Christian.

"People tell me it's a sin all the time, and OK, it's a sin," Stone says. "So is lying,



so is divorce, so is having sex before marriage, yet people still live in that every day. They're still allowed to be as Christ-like as they can, so why can't I?"

For male students who are struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction, LU offers Armor Bearers, a program which aims to provide "support, guidance and accountability to those struggling with

same-sex attraction and seeking the glory and grace of God and freedom from sexual strongholds," according to the program's official mission statement. This is done by gaining "a biblical perspective on identity in Christ, grace and repentance."

Twice a week, Pastor Dane Emerick leads the group's meetings, which are held every Tuesday and Thursday in an undisclosed location.

"I remember when I first started the group, I talked to the counselor over at Thomas Road Baptist Church," Emerick said. "I told him, 'I don't know, my heart is there for these guys. They're coming and talking to me. I think I want to start a group,' and Thomas Road already had one. Well the counselor said 'you're going to see some guys really make it and you're going to see some guys really fall, but you can't live there. You just pray for them and continue to love on them.'"

In spite of Emerick's arguably good intentions, Summers claims that Armor Bearers has become "a hookup area."

"I never went there personally, but I know people who did and that's what they told me," Summers said. "Basically, there are some people who actually do want to change themselves, but from what I've heard, most people just go there to find guys to hook up with."

Emerick denies these claims.

"We're watching kids grow, but then there are some that come along and they're not applying what we're teaching," he said. "They're just coming in, maybe angry or really struggling, and we love them, but we do set up policies and regulations. We say, 'two guys that are struggling with the same issue, they're not to be alone in a bedroom.' Now, within the group, if something like that starts moving in that direction, we confront them."

Hodges, for his part, seemed a lot more respectful of the program.

"The premise of what I understand Armor Bearers is is fighting your homosexual tendencies, and in some cases I think that that is God's calling in someone's life and I think that in my case it's not. So that group had nothing to offer me," he said.

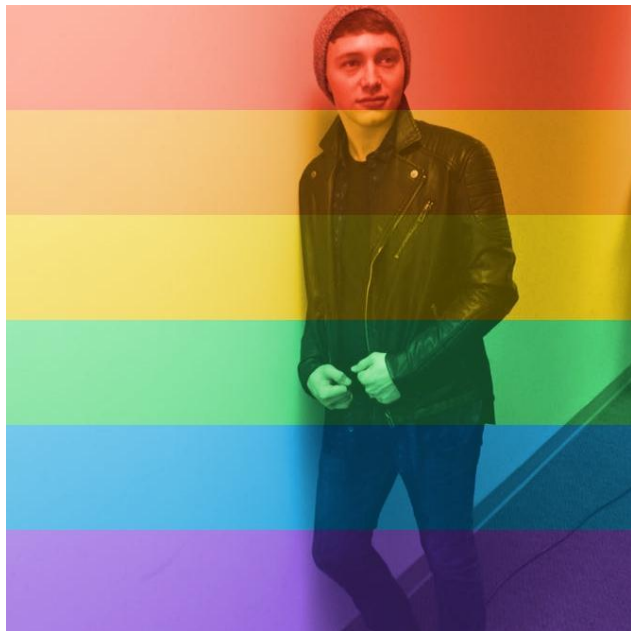
A recent study of 2 million men conducted by the Danish Epidemiology Science Center found that children who experience parental divorce are more likely to engage in homosexual behavior. While Stone and Hodges both admit to coming from broken families, Summers' childhood was a fairly typical one.

"I was raised in a Christian home," Summers said. "It was a mix between Assembly of God and pentecostal of a background. My dad worked for UPS and he was

also in the military as a marine. There was nothing unusual; I was never sexually assaulted as a child. There was no normal indicator besides the fact that my father was not always there.”

Although other studies have also suggested that environmental factors are the likely cause of homosexuality, Hodges is convinced that his sexuality is God-given for a specific ministerial purpose.

"God created me gay, I know that for certain. But what that means in his omnipotence for every other life of a person that's gay, I don't really know," he said. "If He makes a person gay but His call in their life is for them not to participate in that lifestyle, then I can't argue against that, but for me it's the complete opposite. It's to use my sexuality as a mode of ministry."



Stone, on the other hand, believes the existence of a “gay gene” is a real possibility.

“Honestly, I think there could be (a gay gene) because I don't think people would want to choose a lifestyle like this,” he said. “If I had the choice, obviously I would pick being straight because that would be less explaining to do to people,

and that would be less likely for me to get bullied and picked on.”

While Stone's opinion is extremely controversial at Liberty, even Emerick believes that most gay people will never completely become heterosexual. He recalls a day when Christian author Joe Dallas, an "ex-gay" himself, spoke at Liberty.

At the event in question, Dallas was asked by a member of the audience if he could still fall into homosexuality.

"To fall into sin is against my new nature, but can I?" Dallas asked. "It's like walking a path. If I'm walking and I look over and I stop long enough, I could bring it back into my life. Yeah, I could fall back into it."

Still, Emerick does not consider the issue important.

"Personally, I don't believe same-sex attraction is a sin," he said. "I believe if I act upon it, then that is sin. It usually doesn't work this way, but I know some guys that went forward and confessed it and prayed, and they said 'from that point on, we never had a problem.' Far and few in between. There are going to be kids that I know in our group that will probably never marry, and there are others that will get married and have wonderful families. I have done a number of weddings of guys who said they'd never marry. So that's where I stand."

Like many other gay Christians, however, Hodges is unable to see himself with a woman, and resents the idea of a life without love.

"I think that God does call some people to be celibate, but I don't think that it is a generalized calling on every gay person's life," he says. "If we were going off of that, then we would all listen to Paul who talks about in Romans that he thinks everyone should be celibate like him, because it is just a two-person relationship between Paul

and God, but that's a calling on his life and he doesn't call all heterosexuals to a life of celibacy. I don't think God does for homosexuals, either."

For better or for worse, Emerick said he is praying for Hodges three times a week.

"Logen is just a sweet kid," he says. "I love the kid with all my heart. I've asked him to read *Desires in Conflict* by Joe Dallas, but most of these kids don't get into those."

Yet other students at Liberty appear to see no conflict between Christianity and homosexuality.

"I don't think you can really compare them," 17-year-old Winter Sterling said. "Christianity is a life choice; It is choosing what you want to believe about the afterlife. Being gay is a sexual orientation. I just don't think that they are related, so I absolutely believe that someone can be a gay Christian. In terms of the Bible, it comes down to how you interpret it. You can interpret it in different ways, but I think they can work together."

Despite his very public coming out video, Hodges neither identifies primarily as gay, nor as an activist. As a government major, he believes it is much more important to focus on working for human rights as a whole, preventing terrorism and saving the economy.

"You cannot understand something that you do not try to understand," he said. "If straight people completely push gay people away, you will never understand it, but people always tend to fear what they don't understand, and then you create a gap within

society, where there could be so much unification and working together for a greater cause than gay rights.”

Zolla remained unconvinced.

"I may have a struggle, but I die to it everyday out of love for Christ," she said. "If that means I never have sex in my entire life, then so be it. I was born with sexual desire; I discovered it when I was young, but I choose not to let it define me because I believe God when he calls me his pure child. I choose to die to myself."

Summers fired back defensively.

"Gay people feel a need to come out because of the heteronormative society," he said. "Basically, everyone assumes that you're straight unless you act extremely effeminate and then they're just gonna make an assumption about who you are based upon that. Coming out is a tool that we're able to use when we're emotionally prepared to handle everyone else's reaction."

Hodges simply sighed.

"It's just a part of who I am," he said. "It's definitely not who I am in general. I'm so much more than 'gay Logen' and I hope everyone else that is gay or straight finds their identity outside of those things. I would encourage everyone to try to find their identity in Christ because that's where the fulfillment and the joy is found."