

## Homosexuality and the Church

### *Why the Church Must Speak Into the Lives of Those Impacted by Homosexuality*

#### **Homosexuality is a Worldwide, Cross-cultural Issue**

Christianity does not immunize people from sexual issues and struggles. This may seem like an obvious statement. But the church's response to sexuality, and specifically homosexuality, indicates that, at least at some level, many in the church do not see ministry to those struggling with same-sex attraction, or those who fully embrace a gay identity, as viable targets for ministry and/or evangelism. The truth is that homosexuality impacts the entire world. Every culture, every religion, every society and every country are impacted by homosexuality. And each of those persons is in need of the life-changing message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Estimates indicate that there are 155 million people around the world involved in homosexuality. Interestingly, the largest groups of these people are in countries where homosexuality is either illegal or is still largely not accepted culturally. Nearly 100 million of these people, people with souls precious to God, live in the Far East regions from India to China and the Asia/Pacific region, where cultural changes are introducing homosexuality as part of a new sexual revolution. In many corners of the world, there is no help whatsoever for persons in conflict with their sexuality – persons desiring help in dealing with their deeply rooted same-sex attractions and searching for the hope of freedom from homosexuality.

#### **Why Should the Church Care about the Issue of Homosexuality?**

The worldwide occurrence of increased homosexual identification is often addressed first in the public policy arena. Laws are enacted to either restrict sexual identity or expression or laws are enacted to tolerate or liberate sexual identity or expression. The church often follows society, and sees the issues surrounding sexual attraction as just that – 'issues' to be addressed.

The reality is that homosexuality is not really an 'issue' at all. Homosexuality, in all of its permutations, is really about souls. Homosexuality is about people. Often times, these people have struggled for most of their lives dealing with feelings that they did not ask for and feelings that subjected them to fear, abuse, ridicule and shame. Some of them finally accept those feelings and adopt an identity based on their sexual desires. Others live on in secret, struggling internally but putting on a brave, religious face for those who know them.

Some of the souls who are impacted by same sex attraction are Christians, and some are not. People dealing with same-sex attraction wander the streets of communities all over the world, and many of them are perishing because no one has seen them as worthy of evangelism and ministry. Others are in relationship with Christ, yet are living a double life, half in accordance with their Christianity, and half in accordance with their sexuality. Others struggle in complete silence, living purely yet dying on the inside as their secret struggle fights tenaciously for their joy, happiness and fulfillment. And each of these persons is in desperate

need of the hope of the Gospel. Some are in need of salvation and some simply need the abundant life, forgiveness, redemption and life change promised by Christ. Each of these persons represents people marginalized in the church. Each of these persons represents a people group, of sorts, that is ripe for the sharing of the Gospel and its message of hope for the whole person.

### **Christianity Does Not Prevent Homosexuality**

All over the globe, people are ‘coming out’ of the closet and openly admitting and affirming their homosexuality. In the last few years, many of these have been prominent Christians. Some are exposed in a double life, and others come out on their own accord. Others may not be known for their Christianity, but are coming out in the midst of very public careers and positions. Interestingly, many of their stories include strict religious upbringing or parents who were involved in vocational ministry.

The church can learn something from the fact that so many prominent gay activists and personalities share a common upbringing in the church. Their struggles began, in some way, in the church. As you read their stories and memoirs and autobiographies, many express clearly the way their Christian upbringing impacted them as they dealt with burgeoning, growing attractions to their same gender. For most, they heard nothing that gave them hope as they wrestled with their sexuality. They heard condemnation, and they heard warning, and they heard fear. But they did not hear hope for people like them.

As these people share their stories, it is clear that condemnation, warning and fear can work to restrain someone dealing with same sex attraction for a time. At some point, however, these tools no longer work. Christian rules, Christian regiment, and Christian tradition will only go so far. But the hope of Christ goes deeply to the heart, and the church must start speaking to the hearts of struggling people.

The reality is that the church did not speak into the lives of many of the people we see moving from an identity based on their Christianity and into an identity based on their homosexuality. And, ultimately, most walked away from the church of their youth in search of anyone who WOULD speak to them. And they found that in the gay community.

### **Ministering to Those Struggling Within the Church**

Every ‘gay identified Christian’ most likely began as a Christian struggling with same-sex attraction. These are two different things and represent different places in a timeline of sexual development. The beginning struggle with sexual feelings is like any other struggle or temptation. A struggle with same-sex attraction does not mean someone identifies as ‘gay.’ Once a person openly identifies as gay or homosexual, they have usually gone through a process that gets them to a place of some level of acceptance of their sexuality. But it rarely starts that way. It almost always starts with a strong, deep inner conflict.

Everyone, both Christians and those with a secular world view, who deals with same-sex attraction has likely gone through some form of inner conflict about their sexuality. But the Christian person dealing with same-sex attraction has an added component of conflict. For someone who is not a Christian, their sexual identity has potential practical, familial, and relational ramifications for their lives. The Christian faces all of these issues, but faces spiritual implications as well. And for the vast majority of struggling Christians, their churches were not safe places to share their struggle.

Since the struggle usually starts early, many kids running around are churches are already ‘feeling different’ long before their feelings turn sexual. Then puberty hits, and all of the usual trauma of puberty is excacerbated by same-sex attractions. Usually, as sexual feelings develop during puberty, labels are attached. For the struggling teen, it is during this time of great angst that labels will surface to identity the feelings they are having. Because church is usually NOT the place to talk about things like sexuality, most kids will seek answers from the internet, or TV, or other cultural media outlets. And as they search, they often find a quick and easy label to attach to the way they feel – gay.

These kids are often scared, worried, ashamed and horrified at the feelings that seem to be taking over their bodies. They are afraid of the judgment of their parents, families, friends, peers and even of God. They sit in pews and in youth groups alone, isolated and full of fear. They live with a secret that feels like it will consume them. And they hear nothing that gives them hope. They search the internet in part because no one else is talking about it. Imagine what might happen if homosexuality was addressed hopefully and redemptively from the pulpit of their church or from the leader of their youth group. Maybe letting the secret out would not be so scary, and maybe the secret would no longer have such a fertile ground of darkness in which to grow, fester and take on a life of its own.

Most of the people who ultimately seek help in finding freedom from homosexuality come from Christian backgrounds. They repeatedly share the same story. Over time, the secrecy of their struggle, the same of dealing with something considered so horrific in their church, the way array of misinformation available in culture and the simple weight of their feelings often lead these Christians away from their churches or Christian environments. Some move into a life completely apart from the church and some connect with a church or Christian community that placates or affirms their feelings and lifestyle choices. These are effectually lost sheep. And the church has in many ways decided finding these ‘ones’ is not worth leaving the rest of the healthy flock.

What the church must realize is that Christianity does not exempt someone from sexual struggles, and certainly does not make someone immune from same-sex attraction. It is simply not enough to preach that homosexuality is wrong. The truth of Scripture must be completely balanced with the grace of Scripture. An inequity on either the side of Truth or the side of Grace will create instability in the church. The life transforming power of the Gospel must be verbally offered (in words and in practical ministry) to all strugglers. Homosexuality does not just occur in culture. In fact, it often starts in the church. How will the church speak into an issue that is impacting the souls of its own?

### **Why Homosexuality is More Than Just Sinful Behavior**

It is true that all Christians struggle with sin. And it is true that the church should call people to holy living, and that sinful behavior should be avoided. Most behavioral issues can be dealt with by challenging a change in behavior. The expression of homosexuality is similar in some ways. Clearly, homosexual behavior is a sin, no matter the extent of the inner struggle. There are, however, some unique characteristic about homosexuality that make the church’s response both unique and highly important. Homosexuality, unlike any other behavior that the Word of God calls sinful, has developed into an identity, a community and even has its own theology.

There is not a large movement of self-identified liars clamoring for acceptance. Culture does not celebrate those whose primary identifying characteristic is heterosexual promiscuity. People may do these

things, and people may turn a blind eye toward these things, but there is nothing that resembles the identity that surrounds someone who calls themselves a gay man or woman. The identity runs deep, as does all of sexuality. It becomes not just what they do, but who they are. Disconnecting from one's identity is very difficult. Once an identity is claimed, walking away from that identity is all that much harder.

While there is not a culturally accepted 'identity' associated with other sinful behavior, there is likewise not an open community of people engaged in most forms of sinful behavior. The gay community is a genuine community. The gay community is not homogenous on the outside. Gay men and women do not all look the same, act the same or like the same things. All gay men and women do not have the same backgrounds or the same life experiences. The gay community is comprised of intellectuals, blue-collar workers, artisans, artists, bankers, lawyers, homemakers, athletes and every sort of profession and personality type. But they are bound by the deepness of their gay identities. It is not unlike the community of a local church body. The body may be made up of hundreds of highly unique individuals, yet they are connected closely by a common faith and a common purpose. There are many communities built around some common thread, but like identity, the gay community is the only community built around an identity that has, at its core, sinful behavior.

Homosexual expression is also the only sinful behavior that has a growing theological movement backing it up and redefining and reinterpreting Scripture to validate and affirm the behavior at the core of the identity. Mainstream denominations, as well as new denominations primarily focused on homosexuality, are increasingly denying the sinfulness of homosexual behavior and are encouraging the affirmation and celebration of the gay identity. While it might be easy to write off these theological movements as simple heresy, the people being lured into these movements are often deceived and hurting people – people who are drawn to these movements by both the depths of their feelings and the hurt or rejection they may have experienced in the Orthodox Church. II Tim 4 describes these people as no longer willing to endure sound doctrine and as being so desirous of finding something to tickle their ears that they search for teachers who will teach in accordance with their feelings. These are sheep being led to slaughter by false shepherds, and the false shepherds are growing in their ranks.

These unique characteristics are important for the church to understand certain realities so that, hopefully, the church will both minister to those in conflict with their sexuality and reach into the gay community with the hope of the Gospel. These realities show that the answer for the church is not in being more firm with regard to homosexuality or in being more loose with regard to sexuality. The answer lies first in the church simply acknowledging the reality that these issues impact the church, and people dealing with homosexuality are in their midst. After that simple realization, the answer lies in giving people the simple freedom to struggle openly. This applies to any sin area, but applies to the struggle with same sex attraction for special reasons. The homosexual struggle can either become a means toward sanctification in the Christian struggler, or it can become a means toward agony, isolation, sinful behavior and feelings-based identity. It can be a way for the church to be a true place of community, or it can compel people outside of the church to find community and acceptance in the gay community. It can be a way for someone to fully grasp the magnitude of the powerful love offered by the risen Savior, or can compel someone into a theology that is man centered and powerless.

If the struggle with same-sex attraction were to lose its stigma in the church it could be addressed early, before roots of identity entrench themselves in the fertile soil of young hearts and minds. If men and

women struggling with same sex attraction were free to express the struggle, then they could get help for the struggle while it is still a struggle and before it becomes an identity.

Sin the life of a Christ follower is always a reality, and is dealt with in the same way, no matter the type of sin – through confession, accountability, counseling, truth, Bible study, prayer, freedom in worship and community. The key is to make the church safe for the struggler to share the struggle, and then to call out true identity before inner struggle leads to outward behavior, and before outward behavior begins to define identity.

### **The Church's Place in the Process**

The church is often reactive with social and cultural issues. Instead, the church must assume its true place in the process. The church can lead out, rather than react, by speaking to the issues first. The church must speak to the person impacted by same sex attraction first, before the world gets its chance. Perhaps, when that starts happening, the stories we hear will be stories of the church being part of the solution, instead of more and more stories where the church is described as the source of the problem.

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