

Equipping the Church to Respond with Truth and Grace

It is the rare church, in this day and age, that is not in some way impacted by homosexuality. For some, it is clear and obvious. Perhaps an openly gay person or couple begins attending, or someone struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction comes for help, or a family in the church shares that a son or daughter has ‘come out’ as a gay man or lesbian. For others, the issue does not surface as directly. The church may be indirectly impacted by the gay sub-culture in the community or education system, or people may be questioning how to deal with a gay friend or acquaintance, or there might be someone secretly struggling with same-sex attraction sitting in the pew every Sunday. Whatever the situation, the church is called to respond and often feels ill equipped to speak and minister in the area of homosexuality. But no matter the size of the church, no matter the community, no matter the resources, every church has something to offer. The answer is for the church to simply *be the church*.

Homosexuality can seem so mysterious and confusing. Historically, many Christians singled out homosexuality as a sin more serious than all the others. Now, culture is increasingly singling out homosexuality as something to be celebrated and embraced and protected. New theological theories are arising that reinterpret Scripture to fit this burgeoning culture. Some churches are embracing the gay friendly theologies or the cultural push towards acceptance of homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle choice and identity. Other churches are more apathetic and are turning a blind eye towards the issue of homosexuality, and are refusing to really deal with the issue at all. Others are digging in their heels, raising their voices in opposition to homosexuality and fighting against ‘agendas’ or the ‘movement.’ Still others may not be vocally against homosexuality, but have decided that they don’t want any of ‘that’ in their church. Finally, some churches are holding to the truth of Scripture, while graciously loving and welcoming anyone impacted by homosexuality.

The wide variety of responses within the Christian church towards homosexuality is very similar to the wide variety of churches described in the first few chapters of Revelation. While parts of Revelation can be confusing and difficult to understand, Jesus’ words to John about the 7 churches described in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 are surprisingly clear and modern. Within those descriptions we see legalistic, loveless churches and apathetic churches and theologically liberal churches and persecuted churches and churches that have capitulated to culture. Jesus’ words to these churches are completely relevant and applicable today, and provide great warning and instruction to the modern church in its response to homosexuality.

Four churches in particular, the churches at Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira and Laodicea, resonate with the current Christian climate towards homosexuality. The church at Ephesus was highly orthodox and did not tolerate wrong teaching or heretical theology. Its members worked hard, were moral, were tireless and faithfully endured. But they had lost the love they once had for the lost and for each other. They were hard-hearted. The church in Pergamum held fast to their faith and did not back down even in the face of persecution. They were faithful and passionate. But they lacked wisdom, and opened their church to false teaching and false doctrine, which led to idolatry and sexual immorality. The church in Thyatira was full of hard workers, and full of love, faith, service and endurance. They were probably social activists and cared greatly about those within their community and those outside of their community. But they opened their

church to false prophets who lured people into sexual immorality under the guise of Christianity. They accepted wickedness under the banner of tolerance. And, finally, the church at Laodicea was rich in material things, but was destitute in spiritual things. They stayed squarely on the fence, fearful of offending anyone and in that fear, becoming totally powerless.

Jesus had strong words for these churches, words that every church can take to heart in their approach to ministering to people impacted by same sex attraction. Jesus praised the orthodoxy of the church at Ephesus, but called them to love because truth without love becomes cold and powerless. To the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira, he praised their works and their perseverance, but called them to doctrinal wisdom and discernment, and warned them of the dangers of false teaching and false prophets. And to the lukewarm, non-committal, self-satisfied church at Laodicea, he challenges them to do commit to their faith, and to live what they say they believe. It is not orthodoxy that makes an effective church, and it is not love and tolerance that make the church what Jesus calls the church to be. To be all that God has called the church to be, it must be 100% truth and 100% grace. And in the area of reaching out to people struggling with same-sex attraction, any church can be 100% truth and 100% grace.

Five Essentials for Ministry to People Impacted by Same-sex Attraction

To be a church that is helpful for people impacted by homosexuality, a church may be big or small, heavily programmed or lightly programmed. However, there are several key elements of church life that must exist for a church to minister effectively to someone impacted by homosexuality.

First, the church must be committed to uncompromised truth. While culture is indeed fluid, Scripture is a foundation that withstands the fluidity of culture. To assume that Scripture changes with the whims of society is to create a weak foundation for the building of new lives. Second, churches must teach in an authentic, vulnerable and real manner. When the ‘important’ people are real and vulnerable, the people will follow. An environment that fosters honesty and vulnerability is essential for people who struggle with same-sex attraction.

Third, churches must be places of real-life community. Relationships in safe churches are based in love, not in fear. People don’t just pray for illnesses and distant relatives, but instead walk with other people through joy and sadness, gain and loss, hurt and healing. Safe churches foster relationships that go beneath the surface.

Fourth, churches must provide simple, easy opportunities to serve. There is such a thing as healing service. Service allows people to move outside of themselves and to, if even for a short time each week, live with their eyes off of their own issues and on someone else. Safe churches encourage people to live for others.

Finally, churches must be committed to real discipleship. Safe churches are not just about salvation and not just about imparting Biblical knowledge, but are about making disciples. Leading people into discipleship means leading people to die to themselves and to live lives surrendered to Jesus Christ. Walking people into surrendered lives will, at the same time, walk them away from everything else they are inclined to follow.

Specific Ways to Minister to People Impacted by Same-sex Attraction

While specific ministries are not necessary to minister to people impacted by same-sex attraction, they can certainly be helpful. For churches that have the resources (financial resources and people resources) to implement some sort of support group or program, that is a great thing. Support groups for men and women who desire freedom from homosexuality can be very effective, but do require strong, healthy and committed facilitators. Support groups for parents of gay children can also be very effective and fairly simple to start, especially if you have someone eager to step into that ministry area.

But support groups or specific ministry are not necessary and really are only part of the path of healing, change and ministry for people impacted by homosexuality. Any local church can walk with people impacted by same-sex attraction simply by being the church. In fact, one of the most important things to remember is that the homosexual struggle is not that different than any other struggle with sin. Even if you have specific ministry for people impacted by same-sex attraction, a church should not immediately send those people into the 'gay corner' for ministry. People impacted by homosexuality (whether personally or through the struggle of a family member) often feel shame and fear over their issues. They need to be welcomed into the full community of the church, and included in all ministry areas. The reality is that they will likely find what they truly need in the full body of the church and NOT in the segregated ministry focused on their specific struggle or issue.

Many people struggling with same-sex attraction simply need to be heard. Sometimes, what they have to say is hard to hear. For many strugglers, their disclosure of their struggle has been met with clichéd advice, invalidation of what they are feeling or ignorant spiritual counsel. As Job learned when talking with his friends, many times people talk when they should simply listen. The Body of Christ should be encouraged to listen to the stories of these strugglers and to wrestle with the things that they say that go against what they may have always thought about homosexuality. Someone struggling with same-sex attraction needs to be heard, validated and loved. Overly simplistic or flippant counsel can be avoided by praying and researching carefully prior to giving input into specific situations or issues.

Both male and female homosexuality is, ultimately, some form of disconnection from one's own gender. As a result, a big part of moving out of homosexuality is moving in to what it means to be a real, godly man or woman. Male strugglers need men to walk them into their masculinity and female strugglers need women to walk them into their femininity. This is not cultural masculinity and femininity, but real, deep, spiritual masculinity and femininity. For this reason, strong men's and women's ministries can be very helpful for men and women struggling with same sex attraction. Often times, men's and women's ministries are event driven, and the events are often very stereotypical. Effective men's and women's ministries are ones that build relationships, and explore the Bible for what it really means to be a man or woman. Mentor programs, where men mentor men and women mentor women, can be an amazing experience for people struggling in their sexuality. The church should never underestimate the power of healthy relationships.

Educating leaders and the church body about the realities of the homosexual struggle is also very important in creating a church culture that is both helpful for people walking out of homosexuality and for reaching the gay community. Trainings can be conducted for Sunday school teachers, small group leaders, youth workers and others that can help them know how to understand and help people struggling with

unwanted same-sex attraction. If a church is truly going to be safe for people dealing with same-sex attraction, then the subject must be addressed from the pulpit in a redemptive, gracious and hopeful way. If the pastor does not express grace for those struggling, the church will likely not exhibit grace for those struggling.

Finally, people struggling with same-sex attraction must be encouraged to integrate with the church body as a whole. There may be tension from both the struggler and the church body, but church leadership must promote community that is diverse, where all people come together no matter their issue and walk together towards the cross. Include resources related to homosexuality in the church bookstore or library, right next to the other resources for other issues. If a church will make efforts to demystify homosexuality so that it is not so scary or hopeless, the church will become a safe, healing place for those struggling with same-sex attraction.

Ministering to Families Impacted by Homosexuality

While not every church will have the opportunity to minister to someone struggling with same-sex attraction, most churches will have the opportunity to minister to family members of gay sons or daughters. While the church dynamic and culture issues are the same for both groups, there are some unique characteristics to ministering to people who have gay loved ones.

For Christian parents of gay children, a child's 'coming out' is often described as being like a death to them. It can represent the death of many dreams for their children and for themselves. It can completely change the family dynamic, and cause conflict where open conflict never existed before. For this reason, listening is so much more important than counsel. Families must be allowed to process what they know in their own way, and in their own time. This is not to say that counsel can never be given, but counsel should be given with understanding of what the family is going through, and following prayer and Bible study.

There is so much misinformation circulating about homosexuality and theology. These families will be looking for answers, and it is important that they have access to the truth in their churches. The more the church body is educated on homosexuality, and the more church leaders are trained on issues related to homosexuality, the more the families will have to answer their questions and dialogue intelligently with their gay family members.

The homosexual struggle or lifestyle of a family member can consume families. It is important to always work to pull their eyes off of their loved one and onto themselves. The revelation of homosexuality in a family can feel like death at first, but so often it is the catalyst for great personal and spiritual change in parents, siblings and other family members. Even where the gay family member never moves away from their homosexuality, their family members can experience love, grace, truth and compassion in ways they have never experienced before.

Finally, churches should always remember that there are legitimate reasons for families to keep these issues somewhat private. They carry the burden of knowing things about their kids or family members that everyone does NOT need to know. Do not encourage public disclosure of someone else's sexuality. But, work to create an environment where these families can share their personal burden confidentially, and can build a safe support network to walk with them on their journey with their loved one. Parents and families should be encouraged to maintain a small but loyal support group.

All Churches Have the Answer

For those who struggle with unwanted same-sex attraction, and for those impacted by the struggle of someone else, the answer is not so much in the change of sexual attractions, feelings or orientation. The answer is to become a disciple of Jesus, with all of the wonderful challenges and joys that journey entails. This is what the church has to offer – to all sinners, and all strugglers, and all broken people. This was an apparent strength of the church at Corinth, where all sorts of sinners, including homosexuals, were obviously moving away from what they were and into all that God had for them to be (I Cor. 6:9-11)! This can be the testimony of any church.

So, church, just be the church. Welcome all people, love all people, teach the truth, be real, be discerning, equip people to serve....make disciples. Change for people with same-sex attraction may or may not include changes in feelings and desires, but it always includes a change in what they seek in life, in what they follow, in what they make sacrifices for, in what they pursue, and in what brings them true and lasting joy. People can be disciples of many things, including their feelings. But if the church will just be the church, then the church can walk with all people as they become a disciple of Jesus, and everything else will fall into place.

Mike Goeke
Stonegate Fellowship
mikegoeke@stonegatefellowship.com
432.694.5100

© Mike Goeke 2010