

You Asked For It

How Do We Navigate Sexuality In The Church? – Ps Mike Griffiths

Let me begin by saying that I hold to traditional Christian thought on sexuality and marriage, and I believe the writings of the apostle Paul in scripture on the subject of homosexuality are clear. And I realise that already I have offended some people here, not offended others, no doubt we will get to you later! Please stay with me.

Yet while I affirm the traditional interpretation of scripture regarding sexuality, I don't necessarily affirm the church's traditional application of that, when it comes to how we deal with people. We need to realise this is not just a theological issue, this is a personal issue.

So I want to read an article written in a public blog by someone struggling with their sexuality.

In 1947, the great English poet W. H. Auden wrote a letter to his friend Ursula Niebuhr in which he confessed: "I don't think I'm over-anxious about the future, though I do quail a bit before the possibility that it will be lonely. When I see you surrounded by family and its problems, I alternate between self-congratulation and bitter envy." The root of Auden's fear of loneliness and his envy of the comforts of family is not hard to uncover: Auden was a homosexual Christian. And this dual identity created a tension for him: As a Christian of a relatively traditional sort, he believed homosexuality missed the mark of God's good design for human flourishing. But as a homosexually oriented person, despite his Christian beliefs, he craved intimacy and companionship with other men. Caught on the horns of a dilemma like that, what was he to do with his loneliness?

The author goes on: I am drawn to these haunting confessions of Auden's because I, too, am a homosexual Christian. Since puberty, I've been conscious of an exclusive attraction to persons of my own sex. Though I have never been in a gay relationship as Auden was, I have also never experienced the "healing" or transformation of my sexual orientation that some formerly gay Christians profess to have received.

But I remain a Christian, a follower of Jesus. And, like Auden, I accept the Christian teaching that homosexuality is a tragic sign that things are "not the way they're supposed to be." Reading New Testament texts like Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 through the lens of time-honored Christian reflection on the meaning and purpose of marriage between a man and a woman, I find myself—much as I might wish things to be otherwise—compelled to abstain from homosexual practice. As a result, I feel, more often than not, desperately lonely.

When I graduated from college, I had talked with no one else my age about my sexuality. One night shortly after graduation, sitting on the dirty carpeted floor of the bedroom of a dingy bachelor pad in a circle of guy friends, I came so close to breaking down and asking them for help and for prayer. ...we were shooting the breeze after a spaghetti dinner. Knees tucked under my chin, I listened as someone brought up the topic of homosexuality. I felt my heart start to pound and my palms grow sweaty. "Have any of you ever had a gay or lesbian friend?" he asked. Another one of the guys, Charlie, said yes, he had had a close friend in college who had wrestled with homosexuality. "He and I would go climbing together and talk about it," Charlie said. "Mainly I listened. We would get excited when he hadn't looked at porn for a day or two... And we would talk about the grace that God always held out to us because of Jesus."

As I listened to Charlie describe his relationship with his friend, I heard what seemed to me at that time to be a rare compassion, understanding, and respect in his voice. A few weeks later I decided to take a risk and trust that that same sensitivity might be there for me. After an anxious dinner at an Indian restaurant, I finally blurted out, "Could we talk about something before we head home?"

"Sure," Charlie said... He pulled off the road, parked his Explorer in an empty lot, and turned off the engine.

"There's something I'd like you to know about me...." I began weakly. I told him that I knew I was gay. I had known since puberty or soon after and had probably experienced some foretastes of my sexual orientation even as a child. I told him I had prayed for healing. I said I just wanted Christian friends who would be there for me, who would help me figure out how to live with a tension and confusion that felt overwhelming.

We talked that night until it got too cold, then Charlie started the engine again, prayed for me, and drove me back to my apartment. It was the very first time I had shared my deepest secret with a peer, and I felt some relief. The burden of loneliness wasn't quite so heavy that night as it had been before.

After that, I grew less timid. I began to take chances on my fellow Christians. I shared my story with other people I went to church with and began a process of learning to wrestle with my homosexuality and loneliness in a community. He concludes with the question - Will the Church shelter and nourish those who are deeply lonely and struggling desperately to remain faithful?

This is not an academic issue for me. I have had and have extended family, friends, acquaintances and church members and attenders, who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer - some not christian, some christian, and I have seen and felt a little of the complexities and the absurdities and the deep struggles of sexuality in our day.

I have also searched the scriptures, both sides of the debate - there are 6 scriptures that specifically address homosexuality - Genesis 19:4-5, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20:13, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Romans 1:26-27 & 1 Timothy 1:9-10. The theology is clear. Interestingly the 1 consistent aspect addressed is the action, not the attraction. This is an important definition. A gay person can be same-sex attracted, and yet not sin, in the same way that I can be opposite-sex attracted, and yet not sin.

I have spent much time trying to understand Jesus' perspective, and am deeply challenged by His grace towards sinners - those who sin sexually, those who sin culturally, those who sin financially, and those who sin against their families.

When I ask the question of the father of the prodigal son in Luke 15, would he have acted differently if his son had also been gay, or had a sex change operation, the only answer is NO. He had sinned in almost every way, and when he returned, the father demanded no confession, no audit of sins - what was lost was found. For now, my son, my daughter is

HOME! I am sure at some point there were discussions between Father and son on what had happened and the way forward. But what was gone, was home, and we need to celebrate that. Am I as the church acting as the Father, or as the older brother, to those in our world, our workplaces, our lifegroups, our churches?

Most importantly I have tried to understand how He would have me engage, on His behalf, with any person who comes into my world who identifies with this aspect of life.

Five perspectives Jesus held that we must also hold

1. We are all sinners

John 8:7-11 NIV ...he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

The story of the women caught in adultery - Jesus levels the playing field. Me, you, them, different sins maybe, but all sins. And if Jesus instead of being confronted by a woman caught in adultery, it was a man or woman caught in homosexuality? The answer has to be no. If He was here on this issue, would He say anything different? Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone.

2. To bring sinners to faith requires a relationship.

Mark 2:16-17 NIV [15] ...they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" [17] On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." Jesus had relationship with those He came to reach. You and I must too.

3. Love is our perspective, motivation and priority

This is an exceptionally potent scripture. 1 Corinthians 13:1-2 (NIV) *If I speak in the tongues^[a] of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*

The best preaching, prophesy and faith and knowledge without love, our best services, conferences, gatherings without love? Meaningless to God.

4. Every Christian is on a journey

Luke 22:34 NIV *Jesus answered, "I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me."* Three years and Peter slips up. Our familiarity with this episode must not blind us from its seriousness! Three years With Jesus in the flesh and Peter is still struggling with fear and pride and selfishness - sin. 15+ years later in Galatians 2 we see Peter is still not beyond sin - allowing himself to be pressured into going back on the single biggest revelation and call God had given him! Everyone, is on a journey.

5. When the time comes to call what is sin, sin, it will produce repentance or opposition.

John 7:7 NIV The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify that its works are evil. When the bible says 'this or that action' is missing the mark, is sin, then it is, and nowever we wrestle with that, each person is responsible before God for their response to that.

So then, based on those 5 perspectives, let's get into it. How do we, how do I, navigate sexuality in the church?

LGBT is an abbreviation for lesbian gay bisexual transgender. Unfortunately, the church has been largely responsible for shaming people describing themselves as LGBT with regard to their sexuality.

The problem? Psychologist Dr Brene Brown says "Guilt is about what I did. Shame is about who I am." When the church identifies issues of sexuality with shame (who I am) instead of guilt (what I do), we create a bigger problem by incorrectly making it an issue of identity, instead of an issue of action.

If you tell me that what I do is wrong, that's one thing, but tell me that who I am is wrong? What am I meant to do with that? Sexuality is not the same as identity. And for all this, the key question is what is our approach to LGBT people in the church?

A person with a sexuality different from ours, or from what we are comfortable with, is most importantly a person,

- adored by God, created in His image, with a purpose and gifts and a destiny.
- A person who if saved, is saved by GRACE ALONE, not by works, not by having cleaned themselves up, not by having overcome their addictions, not by having sorted their sin issues, and not by conforming their sexuality to the scriptures. Saved by grace, through faith. Its a gift. Given to me when I was in my mess and sin and pride and issues. Given to you in your mess. Ps Phil Pringle once said the church is the only group of fishermen who want their fish gutted and cleaned before they allow them into their boat!

How was my life transformed? 3 ways - Slowly, by God, and in community with others. And its ongoing.

So here is the key: we deal with people, not sexualities. And because we are dealing with people, our approach must be through the broad lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That means when people walk in to our lives, our homes and our churches, we must look at them and their issues through the lens of:

1. The love of God - John 3:16. God so loves the people of the world - that means that regardless of their sexuality or how they present - we must see - people made in the image of God.

Can you see, feel how different that is when we see someone not through the filter of how they look or walk or talk, but through God's eyes - as people made in His image? If we see

them this way, we know the path forward for them. Their Path forward is faith. Rom 5:1,2 ... *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*

We now see these people through the lens of:

2. The grace of God - this person is now saved, with all of their issues and sin, but they are in a relationship with God, because of His grace. – Eph 2:8 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...* That means we now see - people in relationship with God. If we see them this way, we know the path forward for them.

Their Path forward is obedience. To Gods word and His spirit, as He leads, just like we did. Rom 1:5 *Through Him we received grace... to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith...*

We now see these people through the lens of:

3. The work of God - sanctification, transformation, obedience to word of God and spirit of God. 2 Cor 3:18 *And we all... are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord...* That means we now see - people being conformed to the image of Jesus. If we see them this way, we know the path forward for them.

Their Path forward - faithfulness. 1 Cor 4:1,2 *This then is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ... Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*

We havent yet had to even consider their sexuality. We know we are all sinners, relationship is central, love is our motivation, we are each on a journey, and if someone is believing, obedient and faithful to God's word, then if they have the gifting, they can lead.

We now see these people through the lens of:

4. The Ministry of God. Leadership. Serving. Moving in gifts. 2 Cor 3:6 *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant...* That means we now see - people serving others as examples to follow.

Now if if they have unresolved issues that the bible calls sin, then the next step can't happen unless this is addressed by leadrs, gently, respectfully, lovingly. Hey you're doing great, but where are you at on this? Ypu know what the Bible says... What does that look like to you? Someone can't stand as a leader or on the platform saying 'follow my example as I follow the example of Christ,' if they have clearly unresolved issues unaddressed in their life, whatever those issues are.

Yet if they have addressed those issues, have believed in Jesus, have obeyed His word, have been faithful and consistent, then regardless of their apparent sexuality - there is no reason why they cannot lead, and serve others as God does.

Notes:

When engaged in the Ministry of God – if we are unfaithful, we find ourselves back in the work of God out of leadership, where we must learn faithfulness what God has shown them again. The need? More of God's working in their life. Path back is faithfulness.

When engaged in the Work of God, when the Holy Spirit is working to transform us into the image of Jesus, if we are then disobedient to God's word, we find ourselves back in the grace of God. The need? More of God's grace in their lives. Path back is obedience.

When engaged in the Grace of God, in a place of forgiveness and second chances, if we stop trusting God, and decide we are done with God and the church, we can give up our relationship with God. We find ourselves back in the world – but still in the love of God.

The need? More of God's love in their lives. In fact Jesus said in Matt 18:17 speaking of someone refusing to deal with their sin “If they still refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.” How did Jesus treat tax collectors and sinners? He hung out with them, had meals at their homes, gave them his time, which showed them His love. Brilliant!

I have a friend who was gay. Got saved. After months was astonished to find scripture about homosexuality. Was devastated. Went through short period of rebellion but he had been changed by God's grace. Many years later he is leading a church, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and is married with kids. He said it was the strangest thing - I never tried to not be homosexual, I just tried to be more like Jesus, and as that happened I became less homosexual and more heterosexual. He loves Jesus and is a follower.

But I also have another friend who is gay, Got saved. Was changed by God's grace. And after many years in church, being filled with the Holy Spirit, he too was married and having kids, the truth is for him it has been a constant battle with same-sex attraction, one that he has lost frequently, one that has caused much grief and turmoil and pain. Yet He loves Jesus, and is a follower.

Can we make room for both?

Talking with a gay person some time ago who wanted to attend our church. Who hadn't been kicked out of 5 or 6 churches previously, but had been 'frozen'-out, ignored-out. I said about 10% of our people are serving as leaders, are ministering in that particular gifting & role. About 90% are serving God, in the community being a witness, on the journey of following Jesus and being transformed into His image, being biblical community, making a difference. I know you love Jesus, and are trying to work out what this means and trying to work out what to do with those 6 scriptures as God leads you, and I understand that it is complex. But if you are happy being part of the 90%, serving God, being a witness, continuing that journey as God leads you and works in your life, making a difference... then welcome to the family.