

‘Love Does Not Delight in Evil, but Rejoices With the Truth.’ A Theological and Pastoral Reflection On My Journey Away From A Homosexual Identity

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Abstract

This article offers theological reflection on the author’s experience, initially as a celibate gay person and subsequently as someone who has chosen not to be defined as gay and who has married. It argues that faithfulness to the classic Christian teaching about sex and marriage is liberating rather than homophobic, and that the contemporary cultural tendency to conflate sexual desire with identity bears at least some of the blame for the gay experience of marginalisation. This conflation must be questioned. The article concludes by relating this to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s critique of anthropocentric construals of ‘love’.

Autobiographical introduction

I became a Christian in my late teens through the youth ministry of two local churches and through preaching I heard at a Soul Survivor summer conference. Not long after that, I came to recognise that I was gay. Readers of ANVIL will doubtless be well aware that sexuality is a spectrum, and by no means can everyone be placed at either the homosexual or heterosexual poles. But in my case, my sexual attractions were firmly and exclusively oriented towards other men. My experience was that of the gay Christian writer Wesley Hill, who describes it as follows: ‘I had come to realise that I had a steady, strong, unremitting, exclusive sexual attraction to persons of the same sex.’¹ Naturally, that led me to identify myself as gay – at the time, this seemed like nothing more than a simple and accurate description of who I was and how I felt.

Over time, and through various changes in my thinking, I felt called by God to stop identifying myself as gay – even though at this stage I had not experienced any changes in my sexual orientation. However, following this shift in my identity, I experienced some change in my sexual attractions so that I fell in love and got married. This article seeks to discuss some of the stages and dimensions of my experience with a view to critiquing theologically certain contributions towards the current sexuality debate, and to offer suggestions and encouragement towards better pastoral care in this area.

Gay and celibate in the Church and in the world

During the period that I identified myself as gay, I was celibate. As a teenager and then an undergraduate I attended evangelical churches where the classic Christian understanding of sex and marriage was taught and explained. Such an understanding was not forced upon me – wise and supportive clergy encouraged me to read widely about the subject and to explore

¹ Hill, W. (2010). *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Kindle Edition. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p. 13.

the different points of view for myself. This exploration led me to the conclusion that sex was indeed created by God as a good gift for marriage, and that recent attempts to find exceptions to this teaching were deeply unpersuasive. To my mind, the classic teaching of the Church about sex was indeed the biblical and authentic Christian one.

As an undergraduate I was fairly open about my sexuality in church and college settings alike, and I never experienced homophobic treatment from evangelical Christians – although I was at times scorned by non-Christians and certain liberal Christians for believing that I ought to be celibate! Indeed, far from being ostracised by the evangelical Church, I was nurtured, given responsibility in ministry, and encouraged to consider whether God might be calling me to ordination – and this in a Church which vocally opposed the appointment of Jeffrey John as Bishop of Reading. I was on the Exec of the Christian Union at my university, working alongside a mixture of charismatic and conservative evangelicals. Christian Unions are not normally bastions of radical liberal theological sentiment, and mine was no exception. But my colleagues on the Exec treated me with nothing but respect and affection.

Is the Church homophobic?

Therefore in my experience, at least, the issue for evangelicals concerning homosexuality was clearly one of action and not of orientation, and this prompts some comments concerning the question of homophobia in the Church. It is undeniable that there is homophobia in the Church. But it is equally undeniable that it is possible to love and unconditionally accept gay people just as they are, without approving of same-sex sexual activity. This was exactly what I experienced. One of the strengths of the recently published *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (hereafter referred to simply as ‘the Pilling report’) is that it rightly perceives that the term homophobia has ‘extended beyond its original technical and psychological meaning of irrational hatred and is sometimes used to denote any opinion on gay issues which questions a presumed consensus.’² A recent example is the contention of Kelvin Holdsworth, Provost of St Mary’s Cathedral in Glasgow, who responded to the Pilling report’s use of the term ‘same-sex attraction’ by claiming on Twitter, ‘Every time you read the words “Same-sex attraction” in the #Pilling report, remember that this is homophobic language.’³ That is, the very refusal to use the term gay is deemed to be inherently homophobic, despite the fact that plenty of people whom Holdsworth would regard as gay prefer to use the term ‘same-sex attracted’ themselves.⁴

² Church of England (2013). *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality*. London: Church House Publishing, p. 54. Retrieved November 12, 2013, from http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf

³ Holdsworth, K. [Twitter] November 28, 2013. Retrieved November 11, 2013, from <https://twitter.com/thurible/status/406096482916245504>.

⁴ See, for example, the following discussion: Berry, J. (2013). *Why Not Say You’re Gay?* Retrieved November 12, 2013, from <http://www.livingout.org/why-not-say-you-re-gay->.

Holdsworth's approach is rhetorically potent but unwarranted, as my experience shows on two levels. First, I was in an evangelical environment which was quite clear that sex is a good gift given by a good God to humanity for marriage, and that marriage is the union between a woman and a man – yet I experienced no 'irrational hatred' in that environment. Second, I happened to share these classic Christian convictions myself, and found no contradiction between them and my self-identification as gay. Still less was I the victim of self-hatred or internalised homophobia. This is not to deny that some people *do* suffer from internalised homophobia: some gay or same-sex attracted people speak of feelings of shame concerning an orientation over which they have no control. Personally I have never experienced such feelings. So, whilst it is true that homophobia may *coexist* with adherence to the classic Christian convictions about sex, my experience is evidence that such convictions do not cause homophobia, still less that such convictions are themselves inherently homophobic.

The Pilling report therefore quite rightly distinguishes between homophobia and adherence to the classic Christian view of sex and marriage. The latter is not inherently homophobic, for the simple reason it does not contain or entail irrational hatred of gay people. One of the core recommendations for which the Pilling report therefore argues is: 'No one should be accused of homophobia solely for articulating traditional Christian teaching on same sex relationships.'⁵ Real homophobia should be confronted and challenged, and there is enough real homophobia around, which needs dealing with without getting distracted by rhetorical accusations that enduring Christian convictions about marriage and sex are themselves inherently homophobic.

Discerning God's will

To resume my own story, I had reached the point at which I identified myself as both gay and celibate, and I found the Church to be a community which both accepted me in my identification of myself as gay, and supported me in my desire to live a celibate life.

However, looking back now, I would say that I had allowed my desires and attractions to define my identity in an unhelpful way. Because of what I – at this point – perceived as my orientation, I assumed that celibacy was simply the 'cross' I had to bear (perhaps almost a bit pompously), but gradually I realised that this was not necessarily the case. I had assumed that my call to celibacy must be permanent, to match the seemingly static character of my sexual orientation. And in a sense this had led me to regard my celibate state as a kind of idol – not in the sense of a thing which is bad in itself, but in the sense of a good thing which we have treated as more definitive and absolute than it really is.

To put it more simply, I had put God and myself into a box. I had put God into a box by making assumptions about what God might and might not want to do in my life. I had assumed that because God had not changed my sexual desires so far, God was not going to

⁵ *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (2013). London: Church House Publishing, p. 102. Retrieved November 12, 2013, from http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1891063/pilling_report_gs_1929_web.pdf.

do so. And I had put myself into a box by assuming that the pattern of my sexual desires was immutable. Over time, I felt that God was changing a number of things about the way I perceived my sexual orientation and therefore my identity.

First, I came to see that it was up to God whether I remained single, not me! By focusing on my orientation and sexual desires, I had drawn my own conclusions about the way I would necessarily have to live my life. So the first factor which changed was a fresh recognition of the *unfolding* pattern of God's purposes in our lives. Whilst much of God's *general* will for our lives is set out in Scripture, much of his *specific* will for us as individuals, families, churches and so on must be discovered *in medias res*: 'that by testing you may discern what is the will of God' (Romans 12:2). (Of course, what we discern of God's specific will for us as must be shaped by and accord with Scripture!) My mistake had been to assume that the pattern of my experience so far was a sufficient guide to what would happen next – rather than waiting for God's voice afresh at each stage *in this area*, as I expected him to speak in others. As someone nourished by the charismatic movement, this more dynamic notion of God's will was a familiar feature of my spirituality. The crucial shift was in applying it to my sexuality and commitment to celibacy.

So, I had come to realise that whilst I should continue to live as I was living, I should also keep seeking God's will for my life rather than simply accepting everything as it was. Alongside this was a growing sense that my sexuality was an area in which God was actually interested. It was a part of my life about which God cared and in which God wanted to be at work. Although it was quite right and necessary to subordinate my sexuality to God's will by abstaining from sexual activity, that subordination *on its own* was not sufficient. I started to accept that whilst there was no guarantee that God would bring transformation to my sexual desires, he was both able and willing to do so.

The psychologist William F Kraft suggests that many of us have learnt that the only two ways of handling sexual desire are repression and gratification, both of which he regards as unhealthy. Whilst there are indeed many times when sexual desire should not be indulged, this does mean it must be repressed. Kraft argues that rather than *repressing* desire, it should be *suppressed* (that is, freely acknowledging the feelings, but refusing 'to promote or act on them').⁶ But even suppression is, ideally, only one stage in turn along a journey towards *integration*.⁷ I find this vocabulary illuminating in terms of thinking back over this stage of my journey. As far as I am aware, I had not sought to repress my sexuality. My orientation was what it was, and I did not try to deny or change it, even though I did not seek to act upon it. In Kraft's terminology, I was seeking to suppress my sexual desires. But now I felt God stirring me to invite God into my sexuality – to be present even in my

⁶ Kraft, W. F. (1989). *Whole and Holy Sexuality: How to Find Human and Spiritual Integrity as a Sexual Person*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, p. 83.

⁷ See Kraft, W. F. (1989). *Whole and Holy Sexuality: How to Find Human and Spiritual Integrity as a Sexual Person*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, p. 90ff.

unwanted desires and to do with those desires what he wanted to do. Already, I fully believed that God accepted me as I was, that I was acceptable to him and loved by him – a truth which is absolutely central to the gospel. But now I was seeing again another central gospel truth – that whilst God loves us just as we are, God also loves us enough not to leave us that way.

So, two key insights were now in place: that God wanted what was best for me (and what was best for me remained open to God to define, and was not necessarily the path I had been expecting) and that God had the power and desire to bring change (or integration) to my sexuality, if that was what God wished to do. But the third and final shift was the most important one.

Constructing sexual identity

The third and most important factor which led to a shift in the way I saw myself, and consequently which enabled me to be open to the possibility of marriage, was the simple recognition that the sexual identity which God has given me is expressed in the plain, tangible fact that I am a man.⁸ The catalyst for this (with the benefit of hindsight, obvious) insight was the moral theologian Professor Oliver O'Donovan, who posed the following rhetorical question in a lecture I happened to attend whilst I was wrestling with these issues: 'Did God create four sexes?' As is the rhetorical intention of such questions, my brain automatically supplied the answer: no. God did not create straight women and straight men to relate sexually to one another, gay women to relate sexually to one another, and gay men to relate sexually to one another. God created two sexes – and he created them to relate to one another sexually. Thus, as a man, God's original intention for me in creation was to be able to relate sexually to a woman.⁹ *This remained true*, quite irrespective of whatever feelings I might have. Indeed, I came to think that in fact my feelings were what were relatively superficial, in comparison to my physical identity.

This claim, that I came to see my feelings as 'relatively superficial', needs elaboration, especially in a culture which places such a strong emphasis on being true to ourselves (by which is meant, doing what we feel like). What I mean is that, without denying or ignoring my sexual feelings, I stopped regarding them as being who I was, sexually, and started regarding my physical body as who I was. And this *did* lead me to experience some significant changes in my sexual desires, so much so that I fell in love and got married (to a woman who had been a good friend for several years already). Rather than trying to change my feelings so that I could change my label, I changed my label and my feelings started to follow suit. This is not to say that the overall pattern of my sexual desires has changed. I would say that I am still predominantly same-sex attracted in general, but as a result of

⁸ That is not to deny the phenomenon of intersex, where a person has a physically ambiguous gender, merely to note that homosexuality is an entirely different phenomenon.

⁹ This does not imply that all men and all women *have* to relate sexually to someone of the opposite sex, obviously.

ceasing to define myself as gay, in a sense this ceased to matter. It doesn't matter in the least whether someone is attracted to women or men in general. What matters with respect to marriage is whether someone is attracted and called to marry *one* person in particular.

When it comes to understanding and constructing identity in our culture, certain strands of modern anthropology tend to emphasise and privilege human *desire*. This leads to defining orientation and identity in terms of sexual attraction: your feelings define your identity. I was an entirely typical example of this. Consider the way in which, in our culture, having a same-sex sexual orientation led me quite promptly and intuitively to the conclusion, 'I am gay.' As I have said, no inherent shame or difficulty attached to this designation for me – perhaps fairly typical for a member of my generation, and my parents certainly never problematised homosexuality. Calling myself gay was a simple acknowledgement of the way that I was wired. But rather than defining sexuality in terms of feelings, the Hebrew Scriptures, as Professor O'Donovan's words reminded me, have a much more earthy, physical and bodily definition of sexuality: 'male and female he created them' (Genesis 1:27). As O'Donovan puts it elsewhere:

Human beings come into existence with a dimorphically differentiated sexuality, clearly ordered at the biological level towards heterosexual union as the human mode of procreation. It is not possible to negotiate this fact about our common humanity; it can only be welcomed or resented.¹⁰

This experience leads me to suggest a possible corrective to certain attempts to change sexual orientation through psychotherapy, prayer ministry and so on. If the goal of the practice is to change a person's sexual desires in order ultimately to change their sexual identity (presumably so that they have the potential for marriage), then it could be that the entire focus is misplaced. For me, a far more liberating and helpful discovery was that my sexual identity as a man was *already fixed and secure* – because sexuality (in the sense of the sexual differences between men and women) is a gift of God to humanity in creation. My role was not, therefore, to seek to change my sexual desires in order to change my sexual identity. Rather, it was to *receive* or acknowledge what I already had (a male body) as a good gift from God. Theologically, this is sanctification by grace through faith rather than through hard work and strenuous effort – the transformation which I then experienced was not on the basis of effort and achievement, but through trusting in God's good ordering of his precious world.

This is not to deny that many people will find prayer and/or psychotherapy extremely helpful! It is to suggest rather that it might be best if such practices assisted the person towards emotional and spiritual wholeness *generally*, rather than focussing on changing one particular pattern of sexual feelings. Such practices should no doubt include the pursuit of greater integration between one's sexuality and faith as *part* of this journey – but, important

¹⁰ O'Donovan, O. (2007). *Transsexualism: Issues and Argument*. Cambridge: Grove Books, p. 6.

as it is, sexuality is only ever one part of who we are. Mark Yarhouse, a conductor of one of the most substantial studies of whether sexual orientation can change, observes that most of the comments people made in his study,

were not about a dramatic change in sexual orientation. Rather, participants tended to emphasise their relationship with God, their experience of God's love and acceptance, and spiritual growth. That's not to say that change did not occur, but it is striking to see that when an open-ended question allows people to talk about 'real change'... they tend to gravitate toward spiritual themes and messages of acceptance.¹¹

A word follows here concerning the pressure from many within and outside the Church to adapt the Church's teaching to fit in more readily with contemporary moral perceptions. If sexuality is defined by sexual feelings, no wonder lesbian and gay people feel marginalised and excluded by the Church. The combination of their orientation with the classic Church's teaching on sex and marriage means that they are excluded *de facto* from marriage, some forms of family life, sexual intimacy and so on. But it is important to note that what is marginalizing is not in fact the traditional Christian sexual ethic on its own. It is the *combination* of the traditional ethic with the much more recent assumption that there some people have a particular pattern of sexual attractions which should be categorised as gay. In our society at the moment, the presumed solution to the injustice this creates is to dismantle the traditional sexual ethic. But my experience suggests that it is possible to be both pastorally effective and faithful to the Christian sexual ethic. But in order for this to succeed, I had to doubt radically the contemporary anthropological assumptions which construct sexual identity on the basis of sexual feelings. It is in fact quite an irony that those thinkers who want to 'liberate' us to enjoy our bodies must do so precisely by downplaying the significance of our actual genitalia in making us who we are, whereas the orthodox position (seem by some as anti-body and anti-sex) allows sexuality its *bodily* integrity as male or female, rather than subordinating these categories to psychological ones.

More recently, I have found the work of Mark Yarhouse very helpful in placing a distinction between sexual attraction (a general description of feelings), sexual orientation (a strong and persistent pattern of sexual feelings), and identity (a person's understanding of themselves, albeit one which is constructed socially).¹² Others add further distinctions, acknowledging that someone could regard themselves as gay, but still refrain from sexual activity and not seek a same-sex relationship – as indeed was precisely the case with me.¹³ Yarhouse may well therefore be entirely correct to emphasise that the most crucial level to address is the question of someone's identity. That is, a person may not consider themselves

¹¹ Yarhouse, M. (2010), *Homosexuality and the Christian*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, pp. 94. The whole of the findings are available as Jones, S., and Yarhouse, M. A. (2007). *Ex-Gays? A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

¹² Yarhouse, M. (2010), *Homosexuality and the Christian*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, pp. 41-2.

¹³ Goddard, A. & Horrocks, D. (2012). *Resources for Church Leaders: Biblical and Pastoral Responses to Homosexuality*. London: Evangelical Alliance, pp. 25-8.

to be gay, whilst still being same-sex oriented. From the perspective of my own experience, this sounds like a step in the right direction. But I would want to add that an important aspect of my journey was coming to believe that a significant part of me genuinely *was already* oriented towards the possibility of marriage – namely, my body. So I would encourage even those who are persuaded by Yarhouse’s approach to this issue, which I regard as one of the most constructive available, to be cautious that in their deployment of psychological categories they do not unintentionally give the impression that sexual orientation is primarily an inward category, at the expense of receiving what God has given and which *is* still ordered in keeping with his original purposes in creation.

Moving away from labels

In the light of all this, I have not found it helpful to describe myself as ‘ex-gay’. On the one hand, this term is too triumphalist, giving the impression that my same-sex attraction has been eradicated. This isn’t at all the case, and I have argued above that it should not even be the goal of our journey to maturity. None of us, before the return of Jesus, will have completely chaste desires, whether sexual or otherwise.

On the other hand, the term ‘ex-gay’ is unhelpful because it gives far too much credence in the first place to the notion of gay as a static category to which one may or may not belong. My journey has been a decision not to allow gay to be a decisive marker of my identity, the relevant ones being male and female. This is a point drawn out well by Christian anthropologist Jenell Williams Paris, who points out that it is only very recently that people have considered themselves to be heterosexual and homosexual, and who argues that the binary concepts of gay and straight can be marginalizing and excluding. Thus, in each class she teaches on sexuality, she ‘comes out’ as being ‘no longer heterosexual’.¹⁴ This is not because she is gay or even experiences same-sex attraction. Rather it is because *nobody* has a ‘straight’ sexuality in the sense of a ‘normal’ or ‘healthy’ one. Nobody’s sexuality remains unaffected by the Fall – there is no moral high ground!

As further evidence of the viability of the perspective which I have suggested, I would note that some of the people whom I know who are still predominantly same-sex attracted have over time become attracted to someone of the opposite sex and been able to marry happily and enjoy a normal and sexually fulfilling marriage. Others, who have not experienced any change at all in their sexual attractions, have quite rightly chosen to remain single. Someone who has moved beyond the labels of ‘gay’ and ‘straight’, who does not define their sexuality in these terms, may be married or they may be celibate. The point is that if they are celibate, it is not because they are gay, but because they are unmarried. This re-establishes a level playing field: *all* people are called to either celibacy or marriage. But they are called to one

¹⁴ See Williams Paris, J. (2011). *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, p. 43. Dave Leal made similar points much earlier in Leal, D. (1996). *Debating Homosexuality*. Cambridge: Grove Books.

or the other on the basis of their own particular vocation and situation in life, rather than by virtue of belonging to a particular sexual category, other than that of male and female.

Some theological reflections on my journey

In his *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer draws on 1 Corinthians 13 to observe that one can possess all manner of worthy characteristics (such as prophetic powers or faith), do many good things (give one's possessions to the poor), even undergo martyrdom – yet be without love.¹⁵ Good behaviour, service of one's community, compassion for the suffering, even close human relationships can exist without love – because, crucially, *love is not a human characteristic*. Rather, 'God is love' (1 John 4:16). This text, Bonhoeffer observes, is persistently misread because of the assumption that it is love which is the known, familiar quantity. Love is necessary to illuminate and elucidate the (essentially unknown) Divine. The truth, Bonhoeffer reasons, is precisely the contrary: only as God is known (through God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ), can love be known, because 'love is not a human behaviour, but God's.'¹⁶ God's love precedes and grounds human love. It is the origin of human love: 'In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us' (1 John 4:10).

Bonhoeffer adds further definition to this, and this definition is Christological: 'This is how we know what love is, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us' (1 John 3:16). That is, there is no 'general definition' of love to be had.¹⁷ Love is not a general *concept* of which the death of Christ is a helpful illustrative example. Rather, the cross is the very *constitution* of love in history. This means that humanity participates in love not merely by re-enacting Jesus's paradigm. This, Bonhoeffer perceives, would be to throw us back onto our own utterly ruined capabilities – a recipe for disaster and despair. Rather, we participate by sharing in the very death of the Lord.¹⁸ The atonement is more than a heuristic device by which we come to know the right things to do and the right ways to live. Correspondingly, Christian ethics is about more than imitating Jesus, as central as that is. The Christian life is a *participation* in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ by union with him through the Holy Spirit (Romans 6).¹⁹ It is through union with Jesus that we are empowered and enabled to imitate him.

The conclusion Bonhoeffer draws from all this is that love is not so much an act of the human will, but fundamentally *God's act*, which shatters human self-assertion and recreates

¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 332.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 334.

¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 334.

¹⁸ 'Love is not what Christ *does* and *suffers*, but what *Christ* does and suffers.' Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 335.

¹⁹ See Purves, A. (2004). *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, p. 40.

humanity in the image of Christ. From the human side, love is not about spending oneself in all manner of heroic sacrifice so much as *undergoing* this transformation, allowing God to destroy and remake oneself. 'Our love for God rests exclusively on our being loved by God.'²⁰ The implication for human loving is that it 'can be nothing more than willingly receiving God's love in Jesus Christ.'²¹ Human love is love only insofar as it participates in the reality of God's work in Jesus Christ. God's love in Christ is not merely an initiatory event 'in order to activate [human love] as an autonomous human doing'.²² Rather, when one loves, 'it is this love of God and none other with which human beings love God and neighbour.'²³

I find Bonhoeffer's theocentric approach both hugely illuminating and urgently needed with respect to our current debate on sexuality. I find it illuminating because it makes sense of my own journey. As a gay man, my sexual desires nonetheless certainly still expressed something good and beautiful about the way God had made me – both in terms of desire for a sexually intimate relationship and in terms of desire for non-sexual intimacy with other men. The problem, as I saw it and still do, was the fallen conflation of these two originally separate but good and godly desires. It would therefore have been misguided to think that my task was simply to live out or practice the virtue of love (if love was being defined by my own perceptions). Far more radical and transformative a task was to let myself *be loved* by God. The outcome of that process was not what I had expected, but it was also far more wonderful than my own imagination had ever envisaged.

But Bonhoeffer's approach is urgently needed because many contributions to this field begin from a much more anthropocentric construal of love. One example:

Suppose two people loved each other with all their hearts, and they wanted to commit themselves to each other in the sight of God – to love, honour and cherish; to selflessly serve and encourage one other; to serve God together; to be faithful for the rest of their lives. If they were people of opposite sexes, we would call that holy and beautiful and something to celebrate. But if we changed only one thing – the gender of one of those individuals – while still keeping the same love and selflessness and commitment, suddenly many Christians would call it abominable and condemned to hell. As I read and reread Romans 13:8-10, I couldn't find any way to reconcile that view with what Paul tells us sin is.²⁴

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 336.

²¹ Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 336.

²² Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 336.

²³ Bonhoeffer, D. (2005). *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6*. I. Tödt, H. Tödt, E. Feil & C. Green (Eds.), R. Krauss, C.C. West & D.W. Stott (Trs.) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, p. 336.

²⁴ Lee, J. (2013), *Unconditional: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gay-vs-Christian Debate*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, p.185.

In such examples, the nature of love is inferred from what human beings *feel*. These contributions therefore endorse sexual activity as long as it is performed in the context of a loving, committed relationship, at the expense of acknowledging the theological significance of the difference between men and women.²⁵ The assumption is that it is the revealed will of God which is difficult and opaque, and which must be illuminated by the human experience of love.

Instead, we must insist that it is primarily the gospel of Jesus which is accessible and clear, and human reality which is fraught with contradiction and self-deception. Because our nature is distorted and fallen, we cannot simply read off how we should act from the way that we feel. Humanity as both subject (the observer) and object (the observed) of moral enquiry is not in its true state: the human nature under examination is no longer transparent to human enquiry on the one hand, and the human perception required to examine it is no longer competent on the other. It is precisely no longer *natural*, no longer as God intended it to be. Even love (human love) can assume idolatrous pretensions and it too stands in need of radical critique in the light of the cross. Thus, even our noblest and deepest feelings must be brought to Christ to be revolutionized – hence the title of this article, ‘love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth’ (1 Corinthians 13:6). God’s love, in my experience, did not simply endorse the pattern of my feelings as they had shaped my identity, but led me to rejoice in the truth that by creation I am a physically sexual (i.e., male) being, which is what orders me towards either marriage or celibacy.

This has implications for pastoral care and discipleship. Pastoral care is not ‘mere’ care alone, but must include encouraging people to live within the liberating boundaries of our created nature and future destiny. The loving and gracious acceptance which Jesus showed to the downtrodden and outcast is clearly a non-negotiable starting point – but equally non-negotiable is the fact that being downtrodden and outcast is not the final destination. The destination is union with Christ – which demands and empowers our transformation.²⁶ Certainly there is a great need for teachers in the life of Church to cover this issue from the perspective of sanctification (rather than healing), and I hope that this article is of use to pastors in this way.

Summary

In the concluding section of this article, I hope I can recapitulate the main claims that I have made and for which I have offered my own experience as evidence, and which I pray will offer encouragement to others as we seek to live, care for and disciple one another with respect to our messy and fallen sexualities:

²⁵ Roberts, C. C. (2007), *Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage*. London: T & T Clark. See especially pp. 236-7.

²⁶ See DeYoung, K. (2012). *The Hole in our Holiness: Filling the Gap Between Gospel Passion and the Pursuit of Godliness*. Crossway, 2012, esp. ch. 7.

- The classic Christian teaching about sex is not homophobic – many same-sex oriented people believe it!
- Unconditional loving acceptance of people is not opposed to offering people moral guidance based on Scripture. If you want to guide people, you first need to love them, and if you love people, you will want them to grow in obedience to Christ.
- God is interested in our sexualities, and has the power and loving desire to bring wholeness and transformation to them.
- This obviously does not mean all same-sex oriented people should get married! Whilst we cannot predict exactly what this will mean for each person, the Christian tradition has been right to believe that sexuality should be expressed in either marriage or celibacy.
- The tendency in our culture to conflate sexual desire with sexual identity requires a radical hermeneutic of suspicion. This is just as much a cause of the gay experience of marginalisation and exclusion as the classic Christian teaching about sex. If we have to ditch one, it should not be assumed that people will be helped if we automatically allow contemporary anthropology to trump theological convictions.
- It would be preferable for people who do not have same-sex attraction to avoid labelling themselves as ‘straight’, because this reinforces the idea that they are the ‘normal’ ones – whereas in fact nobody has a claim to ‘natural’ sexuality because we are all fallen.
- Whilst sexual feelings are obviously important, physically embodied identity as male and female is the primary marker of sexual identity and a reliable guide to God’s purposes. Being created as sexual beings, i.e., as male and female, is a good gift of God.
- We must beware of using even such obvious-seeming terms such as ‘love’ and ‘grace’ as if these abstract nouns are neutral and transparent by themselves. They need concrete definition, since reality as Christians have come to know it can only be perceived and defined in Christ (and him crucified): a specific, concrete, particular person who suffered, died and rose again. Grace, for example, is not a concept but a reality: the grace *of God* as bestowed in Jesus Christ through his death, resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Without concrete Christological definition, the rhetorical power of these concepts enables a coach and horses to be driven through classic Christian beliefs in the name of seemingly unarguable Christian virtues.

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