

DISCIPLESHIP WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTED CHRISTIANS: SOME INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS

For a gay Christian, speaking openly about same-sex attraction is extremely hard and a giant step of vulnerability. Someone who takes this step needs to know that they are loved, precious and not diminished for having taken it. As Christ loved us unconditionally so too must we love them and help them to discern how to respond faithfully to His love. Furthermore this vulnerability needs to be respected and defended as you engage in discipleship together.

First and foremost realize this is a complex person, created by God that you are communicating with and not just a problem to 'fix'. There are no quick fixes and seeking 'causes' of these attractions should not be the first or primary approach. There are experiences, feelings, emotions, hopes, dreams, fears and thoughts that will be unique to them and what has gone into their sense of self, so listening without judgement and loving fully is going to be necessary to engage in a discipleship relationship with them. As well, do not limit discipleship to dealing with just the attraction challenges they face but with their entire being in the same way you would someone who was not struggling in this particular area. The goal is not to make this person into a "straight Christian"; the goal is to help them become a more fully devoted disciple of Jesus, as it is for all Christians regardless of their sexual identity.

Remember that we seek God with our whole heart, whole mind, and whole strength, not just one part of us. The following is some more specific information regarding the struggle with same-sex attraction but it is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. It is merely a tool to begin searching for a more robust answer and to make one aware of coming challenges.

Sexual identity vs. Christ-centred identity: There is a strong relationship between identity and behaviour¹. How we understand who we are, and more importantly, what we identify ourselves with, directly leads to how we act. As sexual attraction becomes more and more fluid it becomes increasingly dangerous to tie the sum of our identity to it. Society tells us to use our own feelings, thoughts or interpretation to define who we are, but there is another source of identity that provides a significantly more sound and healthy interpretation: who we are in Christ².

Who we are in Christ should be the primary source of our identity. As disciples we submit each facet of our identity to this understanding. So an extremely

¹ <http://spq.sagepub.com/content/76/3/203.full> accessed 8/24/2015.

<https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/729> accessed 8/24/2015.

² <http://fmcic.ca/wp-content/uploads/Rethinking-Sexual-Identity-with-the-Mind-of-Christ.pdf>

important question is: how do I submit my sexuality to the larger framework of my identity in Christ? To ignore the input of God Almighty, creator of all in how we understand who we are is, to leave out the designer when trying to understand the design. The article "Rethinking Sexual Identity with the Mind of Christ" referenced above offers incredible insight in this area and explores in much more depth what is very basically summarized here, please read it!

Spiritual Friendship: "It is not good for man to be alone³"-God. We are made to be in relationship with someone: real, sacrificial cost-you-something, dedicated relationships. While this obviously takes place in the context of marriage, sacrificial, intimate friendship is not exclusive to marriage. Spiritual Friendship is a one-to-one relationship of deep commitment and intimate design that allows for deep connection without sexual intimacy. It is a redeeming of friendship⁴, best exemplified in the friendship between Jonathan and David. A coming together of people that provides the connection our spirit longs for. While there are dangers of intimacy escalating to sexual desire, the danger of misuse should not prevent its exercise in an appropriate manner.

Actively partner with this person to seek out and form healthy, spiritual friendships with Godly people in their lives, specifically those of the same gender. To better understand this aspect of discipleship and how to go about pursuing spiritual friendships, Wesley Hill's website www.spiritualfriendship.org is invaluable.

Celibacy: We understand the Godly expression of sex as being between one man and one woman within the bond of marriage⁵. This understanding doesn't change for those experiencing same-sex attraction. While there may be circumstances when someone experiencing same sex attraction can find wholeness in a heterosexual relationship, research indicates this is not the norm so in most cases celibacy will be the only way to live faithfully in response to the gospel and its call to holiness.

To more fully understand and engage in a celibate lifestyle please see "A Healthy Approach to Christian Celibacy" (coming soon) at FMCiC.ca.

In marriage, sexual fulfillment, longing, attraction, intimacy, acceptance, support and love are interwoven into a beautiful tapestry ordained by God. For someone experiencing same-sex attraction within a heterosexual marriage: guilt for not being able to engage their spouse the way they want them to, disgust of themselves for not being able to live "normally" with their partner and fear of losing the closeness, acceptance and support, as well as genuine

³ Genesis 2:18

⁴ Wesley Hill, <http://spiritualfriendship.org/> accessed July 21, 2015

⁵ Mark 10:6-9, Romans 1:21-27

love for someone and not wanting to see them hurt can all be woven into that same tapestry.

For these reasons it is foolish and potentially catastrophic to encourage or force someone experiencing same-sex attraction into a heterosexual relationship. The "Fake it till you make it" approach will almost always end in suffering, pain, anger, resentment and at least two hurt people, more if the couple has children. In cases where there is already an existing marriage extensive counselling and/or support is going to be mandatory.

Authentic community: If the church is going to counsel same-sex attracted Christians to take the path of celibacy then they are responsible to provide a community where that is possible (Galatians 6:2).

The highest expression of love is not between man and woman in marriage but the sacrificial love in the "new creational" community of the body of Christ⁶. A person's value to the church is not in how sinless they are but how precious they are to Christ. An authentic community engages with people and loves them as part of itself despite a person's sin, fallenness or struggles. Authentic community seeks to lift up, engage, assist and love all its members. It is founded on honesty, openness and identifying people as they are in Christ rather than using worldly modifiers.

An authentic community expresses love through contact regardless of orientation (hand-shake, kiss, hug, arm around the shoulder etc.). It invites people to share life together (eating side by side, doing ministry together). It values and celebrates the choice to live celibate as not only viable but good the same way it values and celebrates marriage.

Grieving loss (lament): There is crushing loneliness in choosing to be celibate⁷. There is also grief in the realization that a spouse and children may not be in a person's future. Frustration, anger and sorrow should be expected at this and shared in⁸. Grieving with someone will be essential to the discipleship process, as will recognizing that this grief and lament is likely to be part of every day. Be prepared to listen to, cry with and mourn alongside someone.

There is opportunity and responsibility though for the church to provide some of the love and family that will be painfully missed⁹. As a family who loses a loved one bands together to care for one another so too must the church for

⁶ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting* (112)

⁷ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, ch. 2 specifically but thematically throughout his entire book the lack of intimacy he and others he quotes express deep anguish at the loss of an intimate relationship like marriage.

⁸ Romans 12:15

⁹ Galatians 6:2

people who may never experience traditional family¹⁰. Part of that is grieving with someone in this present time, but also remembering together the coming time when we will live with Christ as one family without the pain of loss or a nature that demands constant self denial.

Suggested Reading as you go forward:

Washed and Waiting: reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality by Wesley Hill, Zondervan 2010

The Plausibility Problem by Ed Shaw, InterVarsity 2015

Spiritual Friendship by Wesley Hill, Baker Publishing 2015

The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is too Important to Define Who We Are by Jenell Williams Paris, InterVarsity 2011

Homosexuality for Christians: A Guide for Parents, Pastors and Friends by Mark Yarhouse, Bethany House 2010

Is God Anti-Gay: And Other Questions About Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction by Sam Allberry, Good Book Company 2013) needs to be reviewed

¹⁰ A traditional family is a family structure that consists of a man, woman and one or more of their biological or adopted children. <http://study.com/academy/lesson/traditional-family-definition-lesson-quiz.html> accessed October 13, 2015.