



PASTORAL RESPONSES TO LGB

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Sunday 10 September 2023

If you've been tracking with me I am hoping that, over the past few weeks, I have located us theologically in that place of affirming the Biblical vision of sex and marriage - that sexual immorality is, according to this biblical vision, is any sexual activity (opposite or same-sex) outside the Biblical definition of marriage. Jesus clearly endorses the binary and even quotes Genesis 2 in Matthew 19, and makes it clear in Matthew 5 that sexual sin matters and begins in the heart, that it's both a problem and a symptom of the deeper desires we seek to fulfil for intimacy and identity. Sin is a problem and we all come to God only by His grace; but equally, sin is everyone's problem, and everyone needs the same Saviour.

As a community, we are learning to place our lives under the authority and teaching of the Word of God and model our lives after Jesus first. I say we are learning because we all have blind spots and places of resistance in our hearts. We are deformed by sin, then saved by grace, then gradually in cooperation with the Spirit being reformed into the likeness of Jesus. It's lifelong, and it only happens to the extent we daily direct and order our desires under Jesus.

Everyone who would genuinely follow Jesus is wrestling with complete submission to God; and the wrestle is different for each person, as it was for Paul himself in Romans 7: *"The things I do I don't want to do..."* We live in the tension between the fallen nature crucified with Christ and the new creation..; but sin is still present and tempted and tested.

So I've been calling us to consistency around sin and our shared wrestle. To deal with the planks in our own eyes and recognise that God has as much work to do in us as in the next person. So, we need an uncompromising conviction around the way of Jesus, a humility in

ourselves, and a gentleness with each other. Grace and Truth – for one another and for others.

Today is less about theology but more about locating us pastorally, and specifically considering sexual orientation or attraction to the same sex – about LGB – lesbian, gay, and bisexual (TQI+ is separate, complex and needs more time than I can offer here). I tried to get someone to chat with me – but very few are willing, and less are available. And that in itself is symptomatic of the problem. I imagine by now you understand that I hold a theologically conservative view; but theology is not enough and, frankly, has been weaponised in the church to do great harm. People who are gay or lesbian are not theology to debate or issues to discuss; they are people in our lives. Best estimates say around 4-5% of the population are LGB. If you have people in your life who are gay or lesbian, I bet you think about this differently because this has moved out of the realm of theology and ideology and into the realm of reality. I think that's a really good thing. You move from seeing people as a category of 'sin' to just seeing people. You move from statements like "You cannot be gay and a Christian," to "How do I love and include this person who is gay? How do I encourage them to keep coming to Jesus and to submit their desires to Him and find their identity in Him? How do I encourage them to be a faithful follower of Christ?"

I feel it is really important to differentiate between individuals and ideologies. Gay and lesbian people are just people – some might be lovely, who I would be happy to include in my life; and others may be people I would not really warm to. But that's just people, regardless of their orientation. You can't, in fact, sum up anyone with one attribute.

I've been reflecting on my own attitudes to gay and lesbian people lately – those who I know, those who I've met who are Christians, those who I've read or listened to... And the conclusion I'm coming to is that it's not the people but the ideology that really aggravates me.

Firstly, I do think LGBTQI+ advocacy has done some good, seeking to bring dignity and care to a highly vulnerable and marginalised segment of the community. To call out homophobia. Lesbian, gay & trans identifying people have massively higher rates of suicide, suicidality, self-harm, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues than the general population. These people are also more than twice as likely to have experienced discrimination and assault in the past 12 months. In some age brackets, they are up to 15 times more likely to attempt suicide. Ok, so that matters, and it matters to Jesus, and therefore it should matter to us too. Do you agree?

But, where my sense of frustration expresses itself is the dogmatic "this is the only valid worldview, and everyone who disagrees is a homophobe or a transphobe or a bigot." There is a constant flow of cultural messaging, especially to younger people. It is framed as a new morality, has a set of doctrines and language to be adopted. It offers a way of salvation

through being true to your authentic individual feelings and desires; others sin against you when they do not affirm your identity or desires, and you sin against yourself when you repress your own desires (thank you Freud and all the fathers of post-modernism and critical theory...). It has a community to belong to; merchandise to wear or dress your kids in. It has a curriculum in schools; flags to wave; emoji's to attach to your Insta profile; rituals to follow; parades to march in and intense social pressure if you don't join in. This has all the hallmarks of a political and social religion - and that's my problem! Not the people, many of whom just want to get on with their lives and be treated just like everyone else.

It's what feels to me like a relentless, almost evangelistic, insistence of post-modern thought - queer theory, trans theory - that erks me. And this is not individuals - this is more like powers and principalities. People say, "Love the sinner, hate the sin..." which incidentally is a pretty offensive statement when that thing you call 'sin' is the defining identity piece of a person's life. So, I have a new slogan: **love the individual; expose the ideology.** The two are usually very different things. The ideology sets itself up in opposition to the way of Jesus... And many people just want to belong to a church.

Let's acknowledge that historically the Church has treated gay people terribly, and very few LGBTQI+ feel welcome in churches despite their genuine desire to know and love God. This is a rolling tragedy deeply affecting our younger generations, and it is building momentum. I'm troubled about the suffering and vulnerability of this group, and we must exhibit the same love and grace we have received. I'm not saying we must endorse what is contrary to scripture; I am saying we must see the person as a whole person.

So, as a church, how do we pastorally respond to people who are gay or lesbian?

That depends. If we are not prepared to compromise on the biblical vision of human sexuality, what kind of a church do we want to be for people in our community who don't see it the same way?

As I said last week, I want to be in a church community where people can come as they are, feel genuinely loved and included as they are, and be transformed by the Spirit and Grace. A church where people are safe and feel like this is a community they can belong to and be genuinely included in. That's the way of Jesus on so many occasions - Jesus risked reputation to be with religiously taboo people: the Samaritan woman, the Tax Collector, the woman caught in adultery, a bleeding woman, the leper, the demon-possessed... the list is long, and they were all people Jesus had no reservations about being with. Jesus had a reputation as a friend of sinners and tax collectors. We often have this attitude that first you have to believe right, then behave right, then you belong... Jesus seems to flip that - they can belong before they believe or behave.

Ok, well, that's all nice in theory. What does it mean in practice? We should decide

together that, except under extreme conditions where there is a known risk of harm, our church is a place where anyone is welcome and that welcoming is inclusive, genuine and good.

How would it feel to be welcoming and inclusive in a way that is genuine and good?

How they are welcomed:

- **Respect** - See the whole person as made in God's image and more than their homosexuality. Rudeness is not a fruit of the spirit.
- **Listen** - "What's it been like to be you?"
- **Seek understanding** - Read, listen, be with.
- **Sensitivity** - Tolerance is not an adequate response. Tolerance means, "I can put up with you, but only that much..."
- **Honesty** - "We want you, but that may not mean we affirm your beliefs or behaviours and that will limit to some extent how you might lead..." The pastors at GRLC cannot perform same-sex marriages.

How they are included:

- **Socially included** - Small Groups and other events specific to life stage.
- **Intentional spiritual relationships** - Mentors and people they can grow with.
- **Ways to serve** and contribute to the life of the church.

So are there any conditions on a person's capacity to lead? There are always conditions on a person's capacity to lead. The level of responsibility anyone has is connected to their emotional and spiritual maturity, their character, and their capacity and gifting... So my short answer to, "What are the limits on leading," is that it is always case by case.

In the case of LGB, we are not talking about one kind of expression:

- **Gay and celibate** - Orientation is gay but choosing to lay down sexual activity and living a single and celibate life.
- **Gay and mixed-orientation marriage** - A same-sex-oriented person choosing marriage to a heterosexual partner.
- **Gay and wrestling** - Sincerely seeking to follow the way of Jesus and working through their sexual feelings.
- **Gay and adolescent** - Working it out, questioning.
- **Gay and ambivalent** - It's just not an issue they are dealing with. They don't think who they love matters.
- **Gay and settled** - This is their life. They are married and have adopted a kid, but they just want to live in suburbia, take their kids to soccer, and do normal stuff.
- **Gay and activist** - It's core to their identity. They are loud and proud and evangelistic about gay rights.

Which person, or combination, am I talking to? Can you see how a different response to serving and leading may be needed in each case? We already have a ministry screening process, so we already have a mechanism to work through this with the person... *Which is exactly the same process as we have with everyone. No one is being singled out.*

But there is another part to how we respond that is so often overlooked: Are we prepared to play our part in being a place of family, of deep satisfying friendship, where they can experience what we all long for? Or are they met with suspicion, whispered about, left off the invite list?

Honestly, I don't think we can ask much of a person wrestling with their desire for identity and intimacy if we have no willingness to create space in our lives to experience deep connection and fellowship...

I think, when it comes down to it, we have to ask: What outcome do you want for them? (What would you want, say, for your child, a sibling, a friend?)

- Do you want them to have a spiritual home – or feel alienated and unwanted?
- Do you want them to be able to find deep Christian friendships – or an activist community hostile to Christianity?
- Do you want them to come under the faithful teaching of scripture – or a cultural religion?
- Do you want them to be at least in an environment where they might consider an alternative response to their same-sex attractions? Or an environment that represses any questioning of queer or trans theory?

Some final thoughts:

- If you want to give someone motivation to change, they must do it and in a way that preserves their dignity.
- When you attack a person's beliefs, you make them stronger and more deeply entrenched.
- It is as Paul says in Romans 2 – it is the kindness of God that leads to repentance, and how does God show his kindness? In His sacrificial love displayed in the cross and in His people.
- Patience and trust – it's not your timeline and you aren't the Holy Spirit.
- 1 Peter 3 – responding to people with gentleness and respect
- John 13:34-35 says, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*
- Talk about something you have in common, not what you disagree about or what you want them to change.

Connection doesn't mean endorsement.

The kind of church we want to be is maybe 5% the Pastors and 95% the church community's role. How we welcome and include people is the work we all do when we come to church gatherings. So what kind of church do you want?

Further Resources

Books:

Gay/Same-Sex Attracted Authors/Theologians

- War of Loves - David Bennett
- Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert - Rosaria Butterfield
- Is God Anti-Gay - Sam Alberry
- Gay Girl Good God - Jackie Hill Perry

Secular Authors

- Cynical Theories - Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay
- The Case against the Sexual Revolution - Louise Perry
- The End of Gender - Dr Debra Soh

Pastors/Theologians

- A Letter to My Congregation - Ken Wilson
- Messy Grace - Caleb Kaltenbach
- The Meaning of Marriage - Tim Keller
- The Fire Within - Ronald Rolheiser
- Live No Lies - John Mark Comer
- Love thy Body - Nancy Pearcey
- Being the Bad Guys - Stephen Mcalpine

Links

- The Centre for Faith Sexuality and Gender - www.centerforfaith.com
- Christian Sexuality www.christian-sexuality.com
- The Gospel Coalition www.thegospelcoalition.org/topics/gender-identity/

Podcasts

- Moral Revolution
- The Girl Defined Show
- Premier Unbelievable
- Ask NT Wright Anything
- Anything on the topic by Tim Keller, Dave Lomas, John Mark Comer