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## Sexuality and the Church - A Problem and a Gift?

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### Introduction

It is stating the obvious to say the media loves discussing, exposing and, they hope, scandalising the issue of sex and sexuality in the church. Although any type of sex is fair game, homosexuality usually makes the headlines. Even the appointment of bishops makes the news if it is linked with the homosexual issue. A lot of anger and prejudice surfaces from all sides of the church debate – both liberals and conservatives.

I find it especially frustrating that the 'gay' voice within the church is always represented as a 'liberal' one, campaigning for the acceptance of homosexual sex as a legitimate, and some would even argue Biblical, alternative to heterosexual marriage. This does not, I believe, accurately reflect the situation, experience and opinions of many Christians within the church, who like myself are aware of homosexual feelings. There are probably nearly as many Christians with homosexual feelings who do not believe that homosexual sex is right for Christians, as those who are advocating its acceptance. Apart from one or two people like myself, the majority of these 'celibate homosexuals' (for want of a better phrase) are silent. They fear rejection from their, mainly evangelical, friends but also feel very uncomfortable with the liberal views expressed, and believe these 'gay Christians' will not understand and accept them either. These, mainly but not entirely evangelical, Christians have been contacting True freedom Trust since 1977. The majority have been Christians for a long time and some are church leaders. They are men, women, married, single, old and young. If only their voice was heard and they could be encouraged to speak out, I believe the church situation, its witness and

ministry, would be vastly different. Perhaps even in the Church of England there would be less risk of a major split and division?

I wonder if one of our problems as Bible believing Christians is that we are scared of looking at sexuality, and especially our own sexuality, in a more positive way? We rightly rejoice in a sexuality expressed within marriage, but see most other experiences of sexuality simply as 'problems' to be 'defeated' and 'handicaps' to be 'healed'. We are scared of becoming too liberal if we see sexuality too positively. I strongly believe the Bible says any sex outside male and female marriage is sin and an example of unholiness. However, sexuality is about much more than sex and Scripture continually shows us that even bad things can have value. If that were not the case, most of the stories in Scripture would not be valuable. My aim, therefore, in what I share is to encourage a much more positive attitude to our sexuality. I want to explore ways in which our sexuality helps us understand ourselves and others, to see how we express it without sex, and to find how it draws us closer to God. That last statement may shock many, but I hope I can justify and explain it.

## **My Story**

Before I became a Christian, about thirty years ago, I was quite happy with my homosexuality and was involved with a circle of good close gay friends. Like many, I considered myself a Christian and used to pray. I didn't really know or understand the Lord Jesus and the truth of the Gospel, although I often heard it in the liturgy and prayers in school and even went to Crusaders. When I became a committed Christian and started reading my Bible, I had to ask questions about my homosexuality as a Christian. At first I tried to persuade myself that homosexual sex within a monogamous relationship would be acceptable, but I was not convinced. I realised that driving my promiscuous homosexual behaviour was basically a desire to be loved in an intimate, special way. I didn't need a degree in psychology to notice that the promiscuity stopped whenever I was involved with a 'special person'. At the time of my conversion there were two 'special persons' in my life - the Lord Jesus and the friend who led me to Christ. This meant, as in past experiences, the constant search for sex had stopped. The possibility of sex was not an option with my friend and with all the exciting new things that were going on in my life I didn't miss sex at all. I was celibate, without even realising it! I can remember recognising my love needs and feeling quite positive and excited at the prospect that now, as a Christian, I could love in a wonderful new way. I didn't have to worry about being loved in return and play the relational games, especially hiding my feelings and 'playing

hard to get', which I never really succeeded to master, anyway.

As a new Christian I became a part of a large evangelical church. The vicar (Canon Roy Barker) believed in encouraging everyone to develop their unique ministry and witness, because of their life experience. This meant he saw in me a lot of potential, not despite my homosexuality, but because of it. He encouraged me to share my story with the young people and organised a 'consultation' in the vicarage for anyone interested in the issue of homosexuality. He arranged for me to join his lay ministry team, who used to go out with the aim of visiting every home in the parish. I think it was all meant to help me see and share the truth of the Gospel. Without realising it at the time, I was beginning to see my unique value as a follower of Christ, within His Body. At no time was I ever given the impression that my sexual orientation was a problem or handicap which needed healing. This may have been because I didn't see it that way and was not struggling, at that time, with sexual sin. Homosexuality was not discussed publicly by Christians in the way it is today, therefore most of the people in my church had not been exposed to either gay militants or 'anti-gay campaigning' Christians. It was not difficult for me to be open, because I was not struggling with anything sexual of which I was ashamed. My openness also encouraged others to share their struggles (mainly non sexual) with me.

My first three years as a Christian did not involve any problems with my sexuality. I had other emotional issues to work through, but even in difficult times this seemed positive. However, without realising it, I had become judgmental towards other Christians who experienced frustrations and problems. I would not have knowingly expressed these feelings, or confronted anyone, but they were certainly there. Then a 'sexual thorn in the flesh' was sent and I became aware of homosexual struggles. It was now a live issue for me again. For the first time in my Christian experience I was struggling with sexual feelings and temptations, just like most other Christians, whatever their sexuality may be. I sometimes wonder what my response would have been if this had happened at the beginning of my Christian experience? Perhaps I would have gone back to my old lifestyle? Maybe I would have tried to convince myself that Christianity and homosexual relationships were compatible? But my relationship with Christ, and my life within the Body of Christ, were now so well established there was, for me, no turning back. There was no alternative but to go on with Christ. I could not entertain any thoughts of forsaking Him. So, although I had to work through sexual temptations and sin, there was no temptation to return to my old lifestyle. I wanted to go on with Christ and began to see even my struggles positively insofar as my sexuality was telling me more about myself,

and ultimately more about God's love and forgiveness.

I have met very few Christians with homosexual issues who have a similar positive experience and attitude towards their sexuality. Without fully appreciating it at the time, my early years as a Christian had encouraged me to see my homosexuality as a vital part of my value and ministry within the Body of Christ. This is rare in the evangelical or conservative part of the church today. The majority of Christians who contact TtT find it very difficult to think of their sexuality in any other way than as a problem and sin with which they continually struggle. Some even question if there are any other sins in their lives. They may recognise theologically this is far from true, but because so much anxiety, fear and guilt are linked with their sexual feelings, these seem to be the only sin issue. I wonder if this is also because we don't emphasise enough the nature of the Cross and Christ's redemption in our teaching? We mainly think of the hope we have through Christ in terms of how He changes our lives - in other words what He can do for us, rather than what He has done for us. Perhaps we are not able to know how much we are loved by God, because we have not been able to believe we are truly forgiven by Him, when we sincerely come to His Cross for forgiveness? If we were truly experiencing Christ's redemption in our lives we should long to be made more aware of the sins in us which need His forgiveness, and thereby enable us to know we are loved. It seems to me it is this hope we see in God's Word. I recently did a computer search on hope in the New Testament. I was unable to find one reference to "hope In Christ" which related to what God will do for us in the here and now. They were all concerned with forgiveness and redemption. Perhaps this is one of the fundamental reasons we deal so badly with the issue of sexuality in the church? Sex demands so much of our attention because it connects with so many other fundamental issues. It has so much power to influence our thinking. When it therefore causes us so much guilt we cannot cope thinking about any other sins, which will make us feel even worse about ourselves! Is this why so often our attitude as Christians to sexual sin in others, is actually an expression of sin in ourselves? I guess our human nature and its judgmentalism have not changed much since Jesus' time on earth. In some of the justifiable campaigning against liberalism in the church, the attitude expressed and terminology used often seems as sinful as the sexual sin being rightly condemned.

### **Some Experiences of Christians with Homosexual Issues in the Church**

When church denominations debate homosexuality, the voice of homosexuals themselves is always one seeking affirmation for homosexual sex, albeit usually within

committed relationships. Frequently the homosexuals speaking out do so with some courage in the light of the opposition they will encounter, especially from evangelicals. If they are Ministers and leaders they also risk losing their ministry because they are speaking against the teaching of their own denomination. Sometimes they have come from an evangelical background, in which they have known personal struggles with their sexuality whilst also seeking to uphold Biblical standards. A change in their theological thinking therefore means for them a sense of freedom from battles and conflicts, which have plagued their lives. This gives them even more determination to fight for a change in the thinking of the church, so that others may be spared as they see it, from what they define as homophobia.

### *Convincing arguments for becoming more liberal?*

Many Christians whose theology tends to be very 'experiential' often become more liberal in their thinking. Someone, for instance, may have struggled for years with homosexual desires, seeing them as a problem without any worth or value. The only way to deal with them is to have them healed and replaced with heterosexual desires. The person concerned may seem to accept this is not going to be simple or easy, but the assumption is clearly that homosexuality is something that a God of miracles must be able to completely destroy and replace with heterosexuality, which is believed to be 'normal'. A major focus in this person's life will be to seek this form of healing, and ultimately marriage will be seen as the proof of this. Sadly the church often appears to encourage the idea that marriage is the answer to loneliness and sexual frustration, of whatever type. It may not be spoken of in these terms, but is an underlying message that comes across, especially from married leaders. When I ask a single person why they would like to be married and therefore heterosexual, the answer is usually, "I would feel more normal and acceptable." Sometimes I get the same answer if I ask, "Why do you want to be heterosexual?" If I suggest that heterosexual temptations and sin are not better or worse, as far as God is concerned, the reply is usually "But they are normal." In other words, heterosexual sin is more 'normal' than homosexual sin.

Added to this somewhat distorted theology of sexuality is the idea that homosexual relationships do not work anyway. Figures are used to prove that many male homosexuals die young and often contract sexually transmitted diseases. Lesbians are usually not mentioned. It seems the aim is to persuade us that God condemns homosexual sex because it is not very good for us and will ultimately, one way or another cause harm. With this teaching in mind, evangelicals may meet male and female homosexuals

whose relationships seem to be of a very high quality and rather than being harmful are bringing a lot of joy and fulfillment to the people concerned. This seems to conflict very powerfully with the image presented to them by their fellow evangelicals. I often came across this response from Christians working with HIV and AIDS patients in the UK. They would say, "They are such nice people and often, not always of course, their relationships seem wonderful in terms of love and commitment. It is difficult to see why it should be wrong, when they are just loving one another." I remember once on the Kilroy TV programme, he introduced a couple of women, possibly in their seventies. They looked liked everyone's favourite grandmothers, probably baking scones for the Women's Institute and knitting for orphans. Kilroy turned to the evangelicals in the studio, of which I was one, and said, "Elsie and Mabel (not their real names) are lovely, aren't they? They've been in a lesbian partnership for over forty years. How can you tell me this is wicked and sinful?"

Sometimes a Christian struggling with homosexuality has been brought up to believe that all homosexual relationships must be harmful, and will therefore draw one away from God. Then a Christian relationship in which they are involved starts to express itself homosexually. Much to their surprise they feel loved and affirmed. They question why it should be wrong, because it doesn't appear to have harmed anyone else and certainly not themselves. In fact they may feel happier and more fulfilled than ever before. In some cases the sex may not involve any penetration. It is therefore very tempting to convince oneself that it is not wrong and not the kind of homosexual sex the Bible condemns. Likewise their Christian friends may see what is happening and come to the same conclusion, because the couple appear happier than they have been for years. In some cases their friends may be a bit more reluctant and say, "Well at least it's better than the casual encounters they used to feel so desperately guilty about." The homosexual partners pray together and don't feel God is saying or doing anything to stop the relationship. On the contrary, they actually feel blessed. So their theology changes and they no longer believe Scripture condemns all homosexual relationships. Some would qualify that and say only penetrative sex is wrong. They may even say this is the only way you should define sex. Of course heterosexual Christians sometimes use this argument. "We haven't had sexual intercourse, just heavy petting." But I would argue that if mutual masturbation and oral sex isn't intercourse, then it doesn't constitute adultery. This is clearly ridiculous. How many married couples would believe their partner was not committing adultery if masturbating with someone else of the opposite sex?

I am trying to illustrate how easy it is for our feelings to

persuade us that some 'loving' homosexual acts are not displeasing to God. It becomes even more convincing when the person expressing this is an evangelical Christian without a homosexual orientation and therefore, it may be assumed, unbiased. We must ensure our theological thinking is based on God's Word and an understanding of His holiness, rather than our feelings or what appears in line with sociological thinking. In other words, I do not believe God says homosexual sex is wrong because it will harm us in some way physically and emotionally. It is wrong because it is not what He intended human sexual intercourse to be. I wonder if there was even intended to be an almost sacramental element in sexual intercourse, within the mystery of a 'one flesh' marriage relationship - that is, between a man and woman, created in the image of God?

It really saddened me recently when an ex Tft member I met, who has become more liberal in his thinking said, "Now that I believe as a Christian gay relationships are fine, after all these years I can accept my sexuality for the first time in my life." It saddened me that he could only accept his sexuality when it involved sex.

#### *More 'open' leaders needed*

Many of the Christians contacting Tft are actively involved in church life and often leadership. As Ministers and Priests within their denomination, they often feel very uncomfortable when their liberal colleagues speak up for homosexual relationships and they have to disagree with them, but feel unable to admit their own homosexual feelings. Sometimes unthinking remarks from their fellow evangelicals make them even more fearful of honesty and openness. What a difference it would make to the church debate if these people were to speak out against homosexual relationships but also admit that it is a personal issue for them. A friend of mine in Sweden (Erik) is a Lutheran priest who believes in the traditional Biblical teaching on sexuality and has homosexual feelings himself. He determined, from the beginning of his call to the ordained ministry, that he would be open about his sexuality at every stage. Many evangelical newspapers in Sweden have carried his story with his picture and even details of where his church is based. Erik says this has not caused him any problems with his colleagues or his congregation. He sees his sexuality in a positive way as a part of his ministry as a whole. I hope one day we will see many people with Erik's honesty in our own evangelical churches. The Church of Sweden, like the Anglican Church, has a strong liberal gay lobby within it. Erik finds, as I do, that those with different beliefs seem unsure how to respond, because we are clearly affirming our sexuality, without condoning sex. One or two honest church leaders could start this happening in the UK and we in Tft

want to encourage and support this. They wouldn't need to necessarily make a big issue of it. They could mention their awareness of personal homosexual struggles and temptations, but affirm their conservative Biblical beliefs. Clearly it may attract some attention at first, but it may not. Ultimately as more evangelicals make such a public stand it will seem less costly and I believe have a tremendous impact.

### *Liabilities & Assets*

As I keep saying, a lot of Christians view their homosexuality as a problem or burden. They see it only as a liability and never an asset or a part of their value. As I said, some even doubt if they have any other sin problems, which is clearly never true. Their Christian life is a constant struggle to fight against their homosexuality and it can never be entertained in any positive way. Please don't misunderstand, I am not implying we should stop fighting against sexual sin, but in my experience having such a negative attitude towards our sexuality actually compounds the problems. If I believe the problems in my life have no value whatsoever, then I will probably find it difficult to believe I have any value myself.

For many Christians who struggle with homosexuality, their main aim in life is to become heterosexual. They try every programme and ministry available in the hope of a change in their sexual orientation. They see this as their hope in Christ, which I do not believe is where Jesus wants it to be. I wonder if this is one example of ways in which the church has been influenced by our culture? It seems today as if there must be a solution for every problem and some way we can 'fix' everything hopefully as quickly as possible. Perhaps as a result, when we present the Gospel we feel we need to make it solve people's problems and difficulties. That is what people want to hear, so we say, "This is what Jesus will do for you" rather than, "This is what Jesus has done for you on the Cross and thereby given you forgiveness of sins and eternal life." I am not trying to say that God doesn't do wonderful things for us in the here and now, but if our hope is based on this are we not "more to be pitied"? Many people ask me, "What hope can we offer the Christian struggling with homosexuality?" We cannot say with certainty what God may or may not do in this life, but we can say with absolute certainty the hope we have in forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Christians often hear claims of a change in sexual orientation from another person's story. Frequently this change has really happened in the person's experience, but they also share how they must be aware of avoiding places of homosexual temptation. Sadly, this aspect of the 'changed one's' story is often not heard by the excited

listener. He or she also assumes that what happened in one person's experience will certainly happen in theirs, if they follow the same path. Everyone is unique, and that goes for our sexuality and all it involves in terms of its development and expression.

### *Marriage and Singleness*

I know of many Christians who never thought heterosexual marriage would be an option for them because of their homosexuality. Some, however, have continued to work at underlying issues often linked with their sexuality. They began to see themselves more positively and became more aware of God's love and their own value. Their friendships with the same sex became more affirming, linked with their personal sense of value. In other words, they felt more accepted by the same sex. Perhaps a friendship with the opposite sex began to involve some emotional feelings and even an occasional sexual one. Ultimately the couple recognised they wanted to spend the rest of their lives together. They both accepted the possibility of homosexual issues still being around, but this was not seen as a threat or measure of their lack of desires for each other. These marriages often seem to work well, even if homosexual struggles are still there, because of the confidence in the relationship of mutual love, desire and commitment.

I also come across Christians, in their sixties and seventies, married with a grown up family, where one of the partners is aware of homosexual feelings. These feelings have always been there, to some extent, but the person concerned has often sublimated them with Christian ministry and family commitments. The partner seems to be unaware of any homosexual issues in their spouse. I think this is often a case of 'not wanting to be aware'. In many ways it is not what I would encourage for couples considering marriage, but it clearly seems to have worked well for these older generation Christians.

In some marriages, the emotional attraction to one another involves a degree of unresolved dependency issues and hurts from the past. For example, Sara was sexually abused by her stepfather, but her 'natural' mother did not believe her. This left her with a need to be in control of her own life, and others involved in it, which was at times inappropriate. She was drawn to men whom she could influence and to some extent 'control'. Richard had homosexual issues and always felt much closer to his mother, whose strong personality used to influence him. Richard and Sara married and after ten years of marriage and three children later, his homosexual struggles surfaced and he met a younger man. He started buying his own clothes and going to gay discos. He said, "I feel for the first time in my life I am doing what I

want and not simply living to please others!" Sara felt totally out of control, "I wish he had another woman, rather than a man. At least I could cope with that. I could compete!" This is not a real situation, but not uncommon. Sometimes the feelings involved are more subtle, with just a few of the influences I've mentioned. The pattern of two people primarily relating on the basis of their hurts and unmet needs happens in heterosexuality as well, of course.

Sexual feelings and desires are much more complex and variable than is often appreciated. "Will I always have these feelings?" is a question often asked. We want to be able to determine exactly what life is going to be like tomorrow. We pay lip service to the fact that it's not that straightforward, but we desperately want it to be so. Many testimonies have been written by Christians experiencing heterosexual feelings for the first time, when homosexuality had been all they had known. But we hear far less frequently about Christians experiencing homosexual feelings for the first time, when heterosexuality was all they had known. I guess we believe it is not what people want to hear. How tempting it can be to censor our stories from a fear of not being a good witness. It can sometimes be a subtle form of pride or self-idolatry, which is sin and certainly not Biblical. I have met many happily married women, often involved in pastoral and counselling roles in their church, who find homosexual feelings surface in an especially close relationship with another woman. They are usually horrified because it is often completely unexpected and had not been part of their experience previously. This seems more common with women than men, probably because women are often more prepared to be vulnerable emotionally. Their sexual feelings may be driven much more powerfully by their emotions than physical erotic attractions. This is a generalisation of course and not true for all women or all men. I believe it is very significant that women in this situation often say, albeit reluctantly, "She makes me feel more of a woman than my husband is able to do." This is not usually any reflection on her husband's relationship with her. It has much more to do with the way she feels about or loves herself.

Singleness is not usually seen in a positive way in our churches, or outside them. If we are not in a sexual relationship of one sort or another (in the case of the church this means marriage) we are led to believe there is something wrong with us. I believe there is a legitimate God created desire within us 'not to be alone'. But it is often naively assumed that a stable sexual relationship is the best way of solving sexual frustrations and problems. The evangelical church is probably influenced by this way of thinking to some extent. In some cases a marriage will mean an end to sexual frustrations, but certainly not in all, whether the problems are homosexual or heterosexual. In fact, if there is an addiction issue, sexual activity in marriage may

make it even worse! It could be compared, to some extent, with an alcoholic having one glass of wine at a dinner party. It will not quench the desire for more. This is why we meet heterosexual men still addicted to pornography, even though they are in good sexual relationships with their wives. Clearly married people must seek to work through these addiction issues so they are able to have a sex life. For the Christian struggling with homosexuality there can often be this naive assumption that married heterosexuals don't have sexual problems. Therefore some enter marriage in the hope it will mean the end to homosexual struggles. Sadly their Christian friends have often encouraged this, especially in the case of single men. There aren't enough available for the single women! A single man cannot be wasted! I appreciate this is a bit of an exaggeration, but I often hear heterosexuals say of a homosexual man, "What a shame! - What a waste!" or "I really believe God wants you to be married to her." Single women with homosexual struggles sometimes have the same pressures, but it is probably less common.

#### *Nature or Nurture?*

We are occasionally contacted by Christians struggling with more unusual sexual temptations and desires, maybe homosexually expressed, but sometimes heterosexually. I guess knowing we seek to understand homosexuality encourages people to believe we may not be shocked by their heterosexual fetishes. I think it is a fascinating subject and would like to know a lot more about it than I do. For example John says he is sexually excited by wearing an adult nappy Darren is sexually excited by 'soiling' his pants. There is clearly a link between this behaviour and their childhood. It would seem to be saying something about their past experiences and relationships, including, most importantly, their relationship with themselves. If such a link with the past is fairly obvious in these sexual desires, could that not be the case, to some extent, with all sexual feelings? Maybe this is sounding too Freudian for some people? I know very little about Freud, but I do believe there are links between sexual/emotional feelings and our past relationships and self-image. I find the most helpful way of looking at this process of development to be in terms of messages we have received about ourselves and our relationships, plus the way we have responded. Some of those messages come from circumstances in our lives, perhaps outside anyone's control. Some have come from relationships with our peer group and others. Clearly our parents or parental role models are also very significant influences on our emotional, and therefore sexual, developmental process. Maybe even our genes affect the way we react to all these influences in our lives? The messages we have apparently received are not necessarily those intended by their source. For parents, it must often

seem like a 'no win' situation! You can desire the very best for your children and seek to relate to them in all the stereotypically right ways, yet they still end up with problems and misunderstandings about themselves.

For instance, Paul's father is the pastor of a thriving church. He has always worked very hard for his family and church members. He hoped that Paul would do better at college than he did. Paul's mum was more of an extrovert than his dad. Paul seemed more influenced by her strong beliefs and the way she expressed them. He was aware, as a child, of sometimes feeling jealous of his dad's relationship with Jesus. As a minister's son, at school he felt the odd one out. One of the messages Paul received was that his value was based on what he achieved. This is the last thing either of his parents wanted him to believe. Paul also wished he was 'one of the lads' as a teenager. Some children with similar childhood experiences and feelings don't develop homosexual desires, but Paul did. I don't believe he blames his parents at all, and neither should they themselves. They tried their best for Paul, but various factors and experiences left Paul with the idea that he is not all that he ought to be. The kind of person who usually sexually attracts him is an athletic young man with a strong personality. That is the person Paul would like to have been. Also, some people may be homosexually attracted to the person they would like to be now. Quite possibly they do have the qualities that attract them in others, but find this difficult to believe.

Jane was sexually abused by her stepfather and didn't tell her mother about it until recently. Her stepfather said, stereotypically, it was their little secret and it would hurt her mother, who suffered with depression, if she knew. Jane loved her mum, but was remote from her emotionally, partly because of the abuse situation and partly because of her mum's illness. As an adult, Jane had a few heterosexual relationships, but experienced homosexual feelings for the first time when she was twenty-eight. She fell in love with a forty-two year old mother of four children, who didn't respond sexually to Jane. This was, unlike Paul's situation, a background of traumatic sexual abuse. It clearly affected Jane's relationships with men, but maybe not as might be thought. It didn't put her off sex with men. She was quite heterosexually promiscuous. However her relationships tended to be either with abusive men or very passive ones. As a child she felt unprotected by her mother, who was completely unaware of this. Jane actually withdrew from her relationship with her mother in childhood because of this. However her mother also needed a lot of practical care and support in the home, which Jane helped to provide as a 'good little child'. The messages Jane received from all this included, "Your value is dependent on what you do for others" and "You need to be in control of people and your circumstances, otherwise you will be destroyed". When a

mature, motherly, caring woman becomes significant in Jane's adulthood, she seems to be experiencing what she never felt as a child. The strong emotional dependency on this woman has some strong erotic feelings also. Again a combination of circumstances and relationships from Jane's past have resulted in her reacting in a way that others may not. How can her mother be blamed for her poor relationship with Jane, when she was ill and completely ignorant of her deceitful husband's abuse to her beloved daughter? The only one really needing to repent here, of course, is her evil stepfather. Whilst these and all the personal examples I give are fictitious, except where stated, they are very much like situations I have met through T f T.

Each person's life experience is unique as is the response to it. None of us will, or can, be perfect parents or friends. We can only try our best. None of us have been completely unscarred by our life experiences, which is maybe why none of us can say for sure we will not have emotional or sexual problems as a result. We should not be intimidated by an unusual sexual feeling or desire, because it relates to and 'speaks' of issues that most of us have experienced to some extent in our own lives.

### *Parents and Friends*

Although we encourage parents not to take unwarranted blame and accusation for their son or daughter's sexuality, it is often difficult for parent's to hear and believe this. The tendency is usually to blame themselves in some way or another. This must be worked through with God's Love and Truth fighting against Satan's lies. This includes experiencing God's forgiveness, if this should be required. Parents often feel they ought to be able to do something to fix or change the situation, even when they know in reality this is probably not possible. A parent will often say, when unexpectedly told of a son or daughter's homosexuality, "A part of me thought an Aspirin, hot drink and early night would solve the problem. Then I dismissed it, laughed and cried!"

A very common reaction when told unexpectedly of a relative or close friend's homosexuality is a tremendous sense of loss. The person I thought I knew seems to have gone. We naturally build up an image of another by the information we have been given. When this image has developed, perhaps over many years of a relationship, it becomes shattered by a shocking revelation that takes us by complete surprise. It really hurts us and our sense of security. Like any bereavement, it takes time to work through and may even involve some irrational feelings like anger. It is important to recognise this and give oneself and the loved one time to work this through.

Ongoing communication is one of the main ways to bring healing to the relationship. Sharing feelings and personal information helps to rebuild the identity of the loved one. I believe a good way of seeing this process is one of 'unwrapping a gift'. The gift is one of self-disclosure. You are trusting the other with personal information that can often cost a lot, but is a wonderful act of love. The process involves helping each other to unwrap this gift, by encouraging honesty, love and acceptance.

We often wonder what we should say to the loved one or friend whose lifestyle conflicts with our belief system. The response I often hear is, "I don't want them to think I approve as a Christian, but I want them to know they are loved." I believe the key is to be honest about your own feelings, doubts and questions. If you fear how they will react and don't want them to misunderstand, then say that. Be aware of the perception that may be there within them. They may already believe you will criticise and reject them. They may react defensively to this. You may need to be prepared for misunderstanding as you ask questions in order to better understand them and how they are feeling. I think this is what Jesus models for us in the Gospels, especially with the woman anointing Him and the situation being clearly misunderstood by the Pharisees. It is important to appreciate the feelings and misconceptions that could be there, even if they are not.

Of course the other person may not be responding as he or she should, and unreasonably accuse and condemn us. I guess this is often called 'transference'. The guilt the other feels and probably won't admit is transferred to you in order to ease its pain. This can sometimes be discussed, but we are probably 'walking on egg shells' here! We often meet people who have rejected evangelical Christianity because they feel they cannot live up to its supposed standards. They therefore attack it and its believers. Sometimes there may be some truth in the accusations, but usually they are largely defensive. I personally believe, in the homosexual context, this has a lot to do with the low self-worth which often drives homosexual feelings. There may be a tendency to be perfectionistic in response to negative feelings about oneself. A sense of failure is ever present and very painful. Sometimes a response to feeling a failure as a Christian is to say, "Christianity doesn't work!", or perhaps it may be just one aspect of Christianity, which is accused of 'not working'. But really it has a lot more to do with a deeply painful sense of failure. If I say that something doesn't work, then I can convince myself I haven't failed and therefore take the pain away. The same feeling can also result in the criticism of others. Again, sometimes the person can be gently encouraged to see this, but it's not easy. So good, loving, discerning and honest communication is the key to these

relationships whether with loved ones or in sharing Christ's love. It is far from easy.

### **How can we Respond Personally and as the Church?**

1. We must seek to understand and appreciate the dilemma many Christians face with their sexuality - emotionally, sexually and socially. How tempting it can be to wander off the 'narrow road' of following Christ to the, often fulfilling, relationships available if Scriptural truths are compromised. We must recognise the choice we all have to follow Christ, and that it will be costly. We must encourage people to follow Christ because of what He has done for them at the Cross, not simply for what He may do for us in this life. "*If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*" (1Corinthians 15:19)

2. There may be a sexual addiction issue, which requires a similar response to other addictions. Accountability needs to be set up, which has some power – ie the person to whom we are accountable is 'with us' in our temptations. This can help the temptations to lose their power and secrecy. Perhaps the best person to whom we are accountable is the last person with whom we want to have accountability? "*Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*" (James 5:16)

3. We must recognise the low self-worth from which homosexual desires usually originate. We therefore appreciate the way this influences our relationship to God, others and ourselves. We see the potential for this affecting our spirituality and Christian discipleship. We replace the lies our feelings have influenced with the Truth of our value to God. We repent of believing that God has created us unacceptable. We proclaim that Truth to others. "*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*" (Psalm 139:14 )

4. We must present a Biblical understanding of hope and healing, so Christians will not feel disillusioned but will understand the truth of God's love and forgiveness. We must encourage a greater understanding of sexuality, seeing it as much more than sex, and connecting with many other feelings in our lives. We can learn to understand what our sexuality is saying to us about ourselves, our lifestyles and relationships. We can then begin to understand what God says to us about it through Scripture as a command for us to be holy as He is holy. "*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.*" (Leviticus 19:2)

5. We appreciate the value of our story and the stories of others, because God is the 'potter' or 'storyteller'. We realise

that 'valuing' does not necessarily mean condoning or saying that something is good. We accept the mystery of God's ways and accept we will never fully understand them this side of eternity. "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,*' declares the Lord. *'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'*" (Isaiah 55:8-9)

6. We recognise the ministry that we and others have, not despite our unique stories and situation, but because of them. We are able to experience that ministry as part of the Body of Christ. "*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*" (Romans 8:28)

7. We accept the God created need for human relationships and develop special relationships of commitment with brothers and sisters in Christ. Relationships of love should be empowered by our sense of value to God and the security this brings. We therefore do not seek this value primarily from our human relationships. We love others more completely when we know we are loved by God. "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself.*" (Matthew 22:37-39)

### **The Gift of my Sexuality**

As we work through the choices and processes I have outlined, this will involve seeking to deal with the issues that surface and may hinder the process. Inevitably, many of these issues will have been involved in the development of our sexuality. This may mean it changes, but it may not. We will know we are of value and loved by God and others. We will know we have a ministry, because of our unique life experience and all that involves. Our sense of identity should therefore be secure and not simply in our sexuality. In fact no two people have exactly the same sexuality and therefore labels only serve a very limited purpose. I am a 'Martinsexual' and you are a 'exual'. My life story and experiences, 'written' by God who is sovereign, include my sexuality and is a gift to the Church. It always has been, not just since the ministry of T f T started. I am very grateful that I see this experienced nearly every day of my life. I am able to see my struggles and failures, as well as my victories, being of value to others. I am able to see this is just as true for the people who contact me for help and support. As I hear their own experience, it (in the sense of knowledge) adds to mine and therefore my ministry to others. This must be true for everyone, whatever our sexuality may be. It can be a gift to others. It may be in terms of promoting more

understanding. It may be in the sense of encouraging someone else. It may be simply in terms of loving and trusting another person with a sexual confession. The list is endless and different for each person and each situation. I am not implying we should all share our sexual feelings and struggles with everyone. It may not be appropriate or wise, especially not in the form of a 'sound bite' which can easily be misunderstood. But the way these struggles can speak to us about ourselves can also help others, explicitly or indirectly.

Perhaps a more positive Christian attitude to sexuality, which honours God's Word, would encourage those leaders in the church with homosexual feelings but who believe homosexual sex is wrong, to be more open. As I say, yet again, in the church debates their voice is usually unheard. Liberals speak on behalf of homosexuals and lesbians in the church but never admit that many of us do not agree with a liberal viewpoint. People like Erik, the Lutheran pastor from Sweden, are not a tiny minority in terms of all homosexuals in the church. There may be nearly as many who disagree with the liberals as those who agree. I wish their voice could be heard "We believe our homosexuality is a part of our value and giftedness to the Church, but homosexual sex is a sin." What a difference this would make to the life, witness and future of the Body of Christ.

Martin Hallett, August 2003  
*Bible quotations from NIV*