

A Pastoral Response to Homosexuality

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September 8th 2017

These notes are a summary of a message shared at the Christian Family Centre Seaton in June 2015, with special acknowledgment to Pastor Mark Conner and Reverend Sam Allberry.

1. Some Basic Facts and Questions

1.1 Our sexuality is an important part of our humanity.

- In regards to sexuality, it is important to differentiate between sexual attraction (which may be momentary), sexual orientation (which is determined by a continual and persistent similar form of attraction) and sexual behaviour (what we do in response to our desires).

1.2 Having sexual attraction is not sinful in and of itself...it's normal & natural.

- It's what we do with those desires that matters most.
- The vast majority of people have only attractions for the opposite sex; while a smaller percentage of people experience attraction only to the same sex (anywhere from 2-5% of the population world-wide).
- An even smaller percentage of people experience both opposite and same-sex attractions (referred to as 'bi-sexual'), or have no discernible sexual attractions at all.

1.3 There is a never ending debate as to where sexual orientation comes from.

- Is it 'biological' or 'environmental'?
- Is it a product of 'nature' or 'nurture'? Are we 'born' or are we 'made'? Do we 'discover it' or 'decide it'?

There is no convincing scientific evidence to support either view, which means that there is most likely a combination of factors that shape our sexuality, rather than a single explanation.

Regardless of the source of our sexual attractions or orientation, we can and do choose our behaviour and how we respond to any attractions we may experience.

1.4 There are a variety of opinions as to whether a person's sexual orientation can change or not. Experience indicates that some people can and do experience change while others don't.

Those who do may see a reduction in the strength of one type of attraction more than a complete or instant change.

Sexual orientation is not some kind of a switch that you can just simply turn one way or another.

There is a great book entitled, "Is God Anti-Gay?", that I've given out to many by a celibate Anglican Minister, Sam Allberry, who struggles with same-sex attraction and is living a biblically mandated Christian lifestyle. Sam has helped me get a better understanding of SSA. The website <http://www.livingout.org/> is also an excellent website that Sam contributes to.

2. Three Approaches:

When it comes to interpreting and applying the biblical texts referring homosexuality to our contemporary situation, there are three main views and approaches by Christians and churches around the world today.

Approach 1: Change.

- Some Churches and Christians believe that homosexuality is always a choice and therefore people can and should repent and change their same-sex attractions and behaviour.
- The views in this approach range from condemnation of the person (even denying the concept of 'orientation'), to a promise of healing for 'sexual brokenness' (through some form of prayer ministry or counselling).

Approach 2: Acceptance.

- Some Churches and Christians believe that same-sex attraction is not a choice for everyone and therefore may not change.
- Those with same-sex attraction are accepted as they are without shame, and encouraged to live celibate lives of sexual abstinence within a supportive community.
- Churches with this stance are called 'welcoming but not affirming' churches.

Approach 3: Affirmation.

- Some Churches and Christians believe that same-sex attraction is not a choice and that celibacy is not a gift that everyone has.
- They believe that the biblical references against homosexuality are primarily about abusive relationships (for example, homosexual rape, male prostitution or pederasty, which refers to sexual relations between a man and a boy).
- Churches with this stance are called 'welcoming and affirming' churches and as a result are usually supportive of either civil unions or same-sex marriage.

2.1 The difference in views result from the differing 'interpretations' and 'applications' of the Scriptures in this matter.

- Despite the enthusiastic endorsement of their adherents, each view has some unique difficulties and challenges.
- For instance, the Change approach can cause damage to people who don't see any change, ranging from feelings of failure to suicidal tendencies.
- The Acceptance approach involves a high personal cost for those who don't feel that they have the gift of celibacy.
- The Affirmation approach requires a complete rethink of everything we've known about gender and sexuality, as well as a re-interpretation of the biblical texts (more of a paradigm 'leap' than a paradigm 'shift').

2.2 The CFC takes a combination of approaches 1 and 2.

Some people are confused about their sexuality for various reasons, and so we would begin the conversation by exploring environmental or circumstantial factors that have shaped a person's sexuality, which may be addressed through prayer and counsel.

- We look to Jesus who accepts us all and who is the one who changes us.
- The CFC is a 'welcoming and accepting but not an affirming' church community.
- The reason for the choice of this stance is our concern about the lack of compassion and the damage sometimes caused by the inflexible Change approach and our disagreement with how the Bible is being re-interpreted that is part of the Affirmation approach...

Dr Barry Chant (CRC Pastor & Founder of Tabor College) has put a paper together that shows clearly that these re-interpretations are not sound and true to the whole tenor of the scriptures on this subject. <http://www.barrychant.com/barrywritings/articles/homosexual-practice-in-the-light-of-the-scriptures-3/>

3. The Challenge to Learn and Love

Homosexuality is a complex subject. However, let's not avoid talking about it, even if it makes us uncomfortable.

3.1 Be Informed.

- Ignorance is not bliss. Humility acknowledges that we are all on a journey of learning and discovery about God and his ways. We all know 'in part' (1Corinthians 13:9-12).
- Pray, read widely, ask questions, listen to people's stories, reflect, and learn all you can about this matter. Be informed.

"Most people don't think, but rearrange their prejudices". Howard Hendricks

I have learned a lot over the past 10 years as I've specially engaged on this life issue that affects so many ...
And I'm still learning.

3.2 Be compassionate.

- Show empathy and seek to understand.
- All of Jesus' teaching applies here: love your neighbour as yourself and treat other people as you want to be treated.
- It may be helpful to put yourself in the place of a same sex attracted person growing up in a Christian community.
- Many same-sex attracted people feel rejected by those who express harsh anti-homosexual sentiments.
- Recognise that in any group of 100 people, up to 5 people may feel that they are same-sex attracted. There are also the families and friends who love them that we must consider.
- Your words and attitudes affect them deeply. As Christians we must be known by our love.

We may be right in our doctrine, but if we are wrong in our attitudes we are wrong.

3.3 Be a Safe Haven.

- We want the CFC to be the safest place for people to have open and honest conversations.
- Our CFC values such as integrity, authenticity and dignity are vital in the creation of meaningful relationships and a safe community.
- Let's walk the talk and by Jesus' grace, live out these God honouring, people loving values.

4. Frequently Asked Questions

4.1 What should a Christian do if they believe they have same-sex attraction?

- Talk it through with an understanding Christian pastor, qualified counsellor or a safe, trustworthy person
- Counselling can help you understand who you are (emotional roots and family dynamics) and what has shaped you, as well as the frequency and intensity of your sexual attractions.
- The outcome may not be a total change, but rather a decrease of one type of an attraction and an increase of another, or for some people there may be no change at all.
- Either way, don't go it alone.

People of faith throughout the centuries have lived single, celibate and fulfilled lives.

- They had a close relationship with their Father God, a cause to live for and many close friends.
- We are complete 'in Christ', not through marriage or sexual experience.
- Know that Jesus does not shame you or reject you because of your temptations and feelings.

- Jesus never married and faced daily pressure and temptation, and yes even sexual temptation (Hebrews 4:15-16).
- He understands what you are going through. He is there to help you.

4.2 How should we respond to someone who tells us they have same-sex attraction?

- Avoid over-reacting or responding with hurtful words.
- Don't reject the person or withdraw love.
- They may be confused about their sexuality and possibly feeling condemned. Ask questions and seek to understand.
- Encourage counselling with an understanding pastor, qualified counsellor, or a safe and trustworthy person.
- For parents or family members, there may be feelings of anxiety, failure or even anger.
- Don't reject your children. Make the relationship the priority, even though you may disagree with some of their choices.

4.3 Can a person in a same-sex relationship attend our Church?

- Yes, our church is open to all people regardless of where they are on their spiritual journey.
- However, once people discover that we are a 'welcoming but not affirming' church that may affect their decision to continue or not.

4.4 Can a person with same-sex attraction be a leader in our Church?

- Yes, a person with same-sex attraction (who does not act on those attractions) would be able to be a leader within the CFC and an ordained CRC pastor. It is the same as a single heterosexual person who has sexual attractions and is not acting on those.
- However, we would not bring into leadership someone involved in a same-sex relationship (just the same as we wouldn't bring into leadership a person living together with a partner of the opposite gender and not married).