

Will You Walk With Me?

Developing a pastoral care framework
for ministering to same sex attracted
young people in the transition from
adolescence to young adulthood

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This document, with some very minor changes, was originally developed in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Divinity program at Sydney Missionary and Bible College. It is being made available in the hopes that someone, somewhere by the grace of God might find these words and their effects an encouragement. My prayer is that it will find its place amongst the growing body of literature, and supply a fresh, perhaps slightly nuanced voice to the discussion.

Joel

More words in a mound of literature?

It would seem that the battle lines have been drawn. The church, with its ancient might and conservative strictures has hewn its trenches. Seemingly diametrically opposed stands a well-resourced, highly passionate LGBTI¹ social movement. Shots have been fired and the toll keenly felt by both sides. Few paradigm clashes hold the social and emotional gravitas of those surrounding sexuality, and few hold such high stakes. This paper is seeking to call attention to a small band of individuals who are caught in the crossfire. Unwitting collateral of both sides and injured in a barren no-man's-land, these people present with the hallmarks of the gay community; attracted to others of the same sex and longing for validation, intimacy and community. And yet for myriad reasons they have found their greatest conviction in the demandingly loving words of the man Jesus and his teachings on sexuality.

The experience of young people coming to terms with unwanted same sex attraction is a well-documented journey, and is one tainted with social exclusion, depression, anxiety and suicidality.² Whilst most heterosexual young people find adolescence to be a time of intense identity exploration, this process is compounded for homosexual youth by feelings of guilt and shame stemming

¹ Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex.

² Gabi Rosenstreich, *LGBTI People Mental Health and Suicide. Revised 2nd Edition* (Sydney: National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013). 2.

from a politically hostile rhetoric and deeply entrenched social stigma.³ Far from mitigating such systemic turbulence, the teachings and practices of the evangelical church almost universally perpetuate a cognitive dissonance in which deep-seated conviction collides violently with deep-seated desire.⁴

These young people seem to be faced with four options: seeking a 'cure' for their unwanted feelings of same sex attraction; compartmentalizing their sexuality so as to maintain a private 'gay identity' whilst remaining involved in the church; committing themselves to celibacy; or rejecting church teachings and embracing a lifestyle which affirms their sexuality.⁵ Whilst none of these options is entirely desirable to many young people, research suggests that the latter is the most common course of action.⁶

To this end, this paper presents a pastoral care framework for ministering effectively to same sex attracted young people who, despite great opposition, maintain a faithful biblical sexual ethic as they transition into young adulthood. Initially, the task will be to expand the theological discussions which are currently taking place, exploring an holistic view of human sexuality and its place within concepts of personhood. Secondly, the role of the pastor will be examined

³ National LGBTI Health Alliance, *Pathways to Inclusion: Frameworks to Include LGBTI People in Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Services and Organisations* (Sydney: National LGBTI Health Alliance 2012).

⁴ Denise Loiuse Levy, "Gay, Lesbian and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing: Exploring the Process of Resolving Conflict between Sexual Identity and Religious Beliefs" (The University of Georgia, 2008). 203. Despite its pressing nature, Australian conducted research regarding the correlation between mental ill health, non-heterosexuality and religious affiliation is severely limited. By necessity there is here an assumed high degree of transferability of conclusions from elsewhere. Further research into the Australian context is greatly needed.

⁵ Lynne Hillier, "'I Couldn't Do Both at the Same Time': Same Sex Attracted Youth and the Negotiation of Religious Discourse," *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Review* 4, no. 2 (2008). 81.

⁶ Ibid. 81.

in light of grief and loss theories, examining various models of grief and lament and their application to lived experience. Finally, drawing on the conclusions posited in these chapters, suggestions will be made which seek to mitigate dissonance and enable these young people to view the journey ahead with hope as members of the body of Christ.

Very little of the literature to date concurrently maintains a faithful biblical sexual ethic whilst providing pastoral insight and concern. Even less literature specifically provides frameworks for the vital transition period into young adulthood when so much identity formation is taking place. The hope is that the framework presented in this paper would be pastorally nuanced and theologically grounded. The journey is a treacherous one, the attrition rate alarming, and never before has the need for this discussion been as dire.

Expanding Some Theological Horizons

The increasing chasms between the beliefs and practices of the church and a post-Christian society have been driven in part by a resolute 'sexual essentialism,' which asserts that sexual ecstasy and erotic intimacy connote a pinnacle of human existence.⁷ Such a philosophy espouses the notion that sexual expression is a fundamental aspect of personhood and thus assumes that sexual desire plays a vital role in defining humanity at both a corporate and individual level.⁸ This is the sexually candid rhetoric which young people in the West are absorbing, and too often this is taking place alongside theological dialogue which seems at best confused, often non-existent⁹ and at worst, unapologetically harmful.¹⁰

For young people struggling with same sex attraction, the interplay between societal norms and conservative Christian ethics is more than theological musing. It cuts to the foundations of their experienced reality and consequentially hues much of their self-understanding. Research suggests that Christian leaders are 'not only missing the chance to address the sexual struggles of young people, but are piercing the confidence of young believers by not offering a biblical response to the issue of homosexuality.'¹¹ Church-goers may

⁷ Andrew J. B. Cameron, *Joined-up Life : A Christian Account of How Ethics Works* (Nottingham, Eng.: IVP, 2011). 291.

⁸ Ibid. 291.

⁹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian : What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007). 103.

¹⁰ Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "The Logic of the Interpretation of Scripture and the Church's Debate over Sexual Ethics," in *Homosexuality, Science and the 'Plain Sense' of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch(USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000). 244.

¹¹ Kinnaman and Lyons. 102.

be capable of identifying the pejoratively labeled ‘clobber passages’¹² which assert the sinfulness of homoerotic sexual expression, but outside the broader theological framework of a positive view of sexuality and personhood, these proof texts are falling on disengaged ears. The difficult decisions facing young same sex attracted men and women cannot simply be conceived of as ‘to sin or not to sin’. Rather these decisions must fall within the broader discussion of ‘identity’. Against the tide of voices asserting that one’s personhood is intrinsically defined by sexuality, young people need to hear clearly that their identity is most fundamentally found in Christ.

The need for this holistic understanding of sexuality and identity is made all the more pressing with the growing body of literature that casts doubt on the exegetical relevance of passages which have traditionally been seen as condemning same sex sexual expression. The past decade has seen a number of evangelical leaders¹³ follow the trajectory of Boswell¹⁴ in dismissing these passages by means of linguistic and cultural reinterpretations. This has exacerbated the dissonance experienced by young people as they seek moral guidance from a select few passages with increasingly eroded confidence.¹⁵ To this end, the church has a responsibility to young people to not only be well informed regarding these revisionist interpretations, but also to offer a hermeneutic which simultaneously maintains the sanctity of sexuality whilst also

¹² Gen 19:1-29, Lev 18:22, 20:13, Rom 1:26-27, 1 Cor 6:9-10, 1 Tim 1:10

¹³ See for example Tony Campollo, David Neff and Matthew Vines

¹⁴ See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality : Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

¹⁵ See for example Dazza’s story in Christopher Keane, *What Some of You Were : Stories About Christians and Homosexuality* (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media, 2001). 53.

de-idolizing its status as fundamental to identity. This must take place on the basis of more than just these few passages.¹⁶ Thankfully, the Bible does just that.

Far from remaining resolutely silent on matters of sexuality, the Bible uniformly endorses sex as a good gift from a loving God.¹⁷ This gift is to be enjoyed within certain parameters- namely, marriage between one man and one woman.¹⁸ For many young people in a cultural milieu of sexual essentialism this demarcation appears arbitrary, bordering on capricious.¹⁹ It should come as no surprise then when stories such as Edward's appear- "I seemed to have only two options- to affirm homosexuality as a lifestyle choice, as acceptable as any other, or to be narrow-minded and hateful."²⁰ DeYoung thus rightly calls the church to 'a deep demythologizing of sex'²¹ and to this end, an holistic theology of sexuality must promote the following profound truths.

Firstly, the church must be clear that there are neither simple solutions nor easy answers within this vastly complicated theological territory. Within the domain of sexuality young people need to hear that all people carry varying degrees of burdens and baggage, and to single out homosexual behavior as intrinsically more sinful than other forms of sexual sin is unwarranted. Simultaneously, the church must also hold out a hope of potential for sexual wholeness for each

¹⁶ For a helpful discussion of the importance of a non-reductionist hermeneutic see Greene-McCreight. 242-252.

¹⁷ John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway 2nd ed., 2010). 160.

¹⁸ Ibid. 160.

¹⁹ Kinnaman and Lyons. 92.

²⁰ Keane. 11.

²¹ K. DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality?* (Crossway, 2015). 119.

individual²² and work toward a united front which preserves the purposes for which God created sexuality.

Secondly, examining the Edenic narrative and its reiterations throughout scripture, it is necessary to affirm the complementarity of man and woman and the profound purposes for which God established this duality. From the outset, God instituted marriage as the normative practice in which a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, becoming one flesh (Gen 2:24). In the New Testament, this is reaffirmed by Jesus (Matt 19:5) and Paul (Eph 5:31). Whilst one purpose of this union is procreation (Gen 1:28), the theological burden of complementarity is expressed in 'image' language- 'So God created man in his own image... male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27). To this end, 'it is *only with* the woman that the man can be God's image, and it is *only with* the man that the woman can be God's image... *to be united in this complementarity is essential for the humanity that God describes as "very good"*.'²³ Standing against the assertion that gender defined relationship exists solely as a social construct, heterosexual union provides a profound insight into God's enduring purposes for unity in distinction; as Barth argues, it is thus impossible to define personhood discrete from the divinely ordained complementarity of the sexes.²⁴ Under this schema, it is apparent that God as co-relational is stunningly reflected in his creation, establishing a co-humanity in what might be

²² Kinnaman and Lyons. 105.

²³ Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission, *Human Sexuality and the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate* (2015). 30.

²⁴ Ray Anderson, "Homosexuality: Theological and Pastoral Considerations," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 14, no. 4 (1996). 5.

labeled an 'ordered ontology'.²⁵ This ordered ontology is not to be understood on an individual, person-by-person basis, but rather provides the theological paradigm by which heterosexual union is seen to be God's desired norm for his creation as a whole.

This Edenic dualism is given further theological weight in Eph 5:22-33 as Paul expounds the teleology of the marriage union in reflecting the relationship of Christ and the church. Christ's redemptive work is explained in terms of a husband and wife partnership- the most intimate, sacrificial relationship presented in the created order. It is precisely the complementarity presented in the Garden and restated by Paul which provides the framework for this profound reflection. This theological conception of marriage and sexuality is vital for the church to comprehend if it is going to faithfully minister to young people journeying with same sex attraction. Far from standing as an arbitrary lawmaker, God is seen to be concerned with the salvific trajectory of his people, and the created order, in its complementarity and thus at its most intrinsic level is reflecting his purposes.

However if this were the complete biblical depiction of marriage, one would be left wondering about the possibility for any single person to experience life to the full. Thus, thirdly, an holistic theology of sexuality follows the trajectory of God's purposes in marriage beyond the teleology established in Eden and casts the Christian's mind into the Eschaton. Jesus taught that at the resurrection,

²⁵ Ibid. 5.

people would neither marry, nor be given in marriage (Matt 22:30). Marriage will no longer be needed as a reflection of Christ and the church, as the reality will be present for all to see as all take part in the final consummation of the created order. In doing this, Jesus established the temporal nature of marriage and evidenced the broader theological truth that marriage as it stands currently must always be understood as ontologically peripheral to personhood.

The church's predominant response to the candid sexual essentialism of this age has by and large been to (rightly) promote an ideal of sexuality as bounded by the sacred bonds of marriage. In the face of a hyper-sexualised culture, the call to those with 'burning passion' has for the most part mirrored Paul's advice to pursue marriage (1 Cor 7:9). Perhaps unwittingly however, this rhetoric has regrettably served to place the heterosexual married status on a pedestal as an idealized *raison d'être*, in some manner godlier than the single state.²⁶ This idolizing of marriage has had progressively detrimental consequences upon those for whom marriage, for a myriad of reasons, simply is not an option.

An eschatologically nuanced view of sexuality and marriage is vital if the church is going to de-idolize marriage and reaffirm the equally godly pursuit of celibacy in singleness. For the young person striving to live out faithful servant-hood in the face of immense pressure to express their sexuality, the profundity of relationships in the new creation must stand simultaneously as a future hope of repaired being, and also as a present reminder that their personhood is

²⁶ Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem : The Church and Same-Sex Attraction* (Nottingham: IVP, 2015). 96.

primarily bound not in their sexual orientation, but rather in the person of Christ.

Finally, examining the theological rubric of Paul's thinking in Rom 1:18-32 reveals a striking progression, enabling the church to comprehend the nature of homosexual desire in terms of its relationship to humankind's tendency to 'worship and serve created things rather than the creator' (Rom 1:25). The flow of the passage suggests a movement from right worship of God, to futility of thought and the subsequent handing over of humanity by God to the desires of their hearts. Of note, the passage is not addressing any single individual caught up in idolatry, nor does it appear to be delineating a prescribed series of events for a given culture. Rather it is addressing the seismic shift of the entire creation away from exclusive worship of the one true God and the shockwaves which are permeating every sphere of a world which groans as in the pains of childbirth (Rom 8:22). If the root cause of all sin is a propensity toward idolatry, then it logically follows that all sexual sin should be conceived of as symptomatic of a deeper incongruence between the creature (humanity) and the creator (God). It is, perhaps, this wound which runs deepest amongst all Christians within all congregations. Evidently, to view homosexual activity (or all sexual sin for that matter) as in some manner separate to questions of idolatry and exclusivity of worship to Yahweh is not only theologically reductionistic, but also serves to undermine the foundations which Paul presupposes.

The six passages throughout scripture that specifically address the phenomenon of homoerotic behavior provide a useful starting point for developing a theological affirmation of homosexual abstinence. However to simply pronounce these passages as conclusive leaves young same sex attracted Christians flailing with an ungrounded concept of God as arbitrary and capricious. Concurrently (and somewhat ironically), responding to a young person who engages in homosexual activity with a greater degree of severity than to his or her heterosexual counterpart betrays an unfounded doctrinal proclivity toward the very sexual essentialism that the church should so ardently be opposing. These accounted for, it is vital that the church presents an holistic understanding of human sexuality which affirms the good gift of sex whilst maintaining the sacred bounds within which is to be practiced. This requires a theological grasping of the Edenic narrative- understanding the complementarity of man and woman in light of both the 'image' of God, and in light of their teleological reflection of Christ and the Church. Further, the process of casting this theology beyond the binds of Eden and into the age of the Eschaton ensures that marriage as it currently stands is recognized as temporal and avoids idolization. Without regular affirmation of these theological mores, the Church will inevitably continue to cause undue pain and distress for those within its walls who struggle with unwanted same sex attraction.

Enter The Pastor

Having established some Biblical groundings, it is now vital to turn to the pastoral context in which young people are making the transition to young adulthood. In this information age, the plethora of hyper-sexualized social norms and candidly liberal rhetoric which permeate the West are by and large at young people's fingertips. Post adolescence, the loci of identity formation have transitioned from the family and authority figures to peers and popular culture. It is here that young people are finding for the first time in their lives the pressure to identify according to sexual orientation. And it is into this vitriolic society of sexual essentialism that the pastor now walks, only to discover that *what* is said appears to wane in importance when compared to *how* it is said.

Two methods seem to dominate the evangelical church's sphere of engagement in regards to homosexuality. From behind the pulpit, the preacher has well and truly engaged in the debate, with a predictably substantial increase in the number of sermons presented addressing the topic of homoeroticism as sin.²⁷ Simultaneously, a strong public face has been presented in regards to a keenly felt political movement seeking to influence social policy with a Judeo-Christian ethic. Whilst the church has a vital call to be involved in both preaching and politics, the tendency to lose sight of the relational pastoring of individuals has left many young people marginalized and alien in the very churches in which they grew up. According to Kinnaman, '(this generation is) hardwired for

²⁷ Kinnaman and Lyons. 100.

relational connections, so when Christians overlook such solutions, they come across to younger adults as insincere and uncaring. We may not like this, but this is how they evaluate the reality of the Christian faith.'²⁸

Given the relational connectedness of this generation, it is no surprise then that the vast majority of those who struggle with same sex attraction and yet desire to maintain a faithful biblical sexual ethic experience a dissonance inconceivable to many of their peers.²⁹ At a time of identity exploration and consolidation, the young person is often alone in undergoing an experiential internal division between the 'religious self' which seemingly stands diametrically opposed to the 'homosexual self'.³⁰ Whilst the holistic theology outlined above is quick to assert that the Christian's *fundamental* identity is to be founded in the person's union with Christ, it is reductionistic and unwarranted to assume that sexuality does not constitute a vital and irreducible aspect of personhood.³¹

To this end, the framework presented here seeks to validate the 'identity crisis' taking place in young same sex attracted Christians and identifies the mechanisms by which this is taking place. Strikingly, the question that must influence and guide much of the pastoral response to those struggling with this journey is 'what does this person stand to lose by adhering to a faithful biblical ethic?' This question, almost non-existent in the vast majority of literature,

²⁸ Ibid. 101.

²⁹ Hillier, "I Couldn't Do Both at the Same Time': Same Sex Attracted Youth and the Negotiation of Religious Discourse." 82.

³⁰ Ibid. 82.

³¹ Stanton Jones; Mark Yarhouse, "Anthropology, Sexuality and Sexual Ethics," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints; Michael Horton; Mark Talbot(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co. , 2006). 119.

provides a vital insight into lived experiences and forms the basis of a response which moves beyond discussion of *identity* and into the territory of *loss* and *associated grief*.³²

In a paradoxical manner, loss is at the centre of all change and maturation, both positive and negative.³³ Any life transition entails loss of some form, whether this be a loss of prior lifestyle, behavior pattern or assumptions.³⁴ The vast majority of losses are perceived to be relatively minor or easily mitigated (for example the loss of independence due to a temporary injury), with the individual experiencing loss capable of employing sufficient coping systems to navigate the ramifications. Other loss however presents the individual with a complicated grief response mechanism extensively outside of their control.³⁵ This grief has been theorized in numerous ways over the past several decades³⁶ and must stand as a vital aspect of any pastoral response to young people journeying with unwanted same sex attraction.

Grief as pertinent to this discussion is most commonly conceived of as a response to loss, incorporating the biopsychosocial spheres of life and (vital to

³² To date, little to no research has been conducted into the interplay between same sex attraction and a conservative Christian ethic from a grief and loss framework. The pastoral response presented here is an attempt to synthesise findings of numerous associated research papers, however further study in this area is urgently needed.

³³ Carolyn Ambler Walter; L.M. McCoyd, *Grief and Loss across the Lifespan a Biopsychosocial Perspective* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2009). 1.

³⁴ Ibid. 1.

³⁵ The vast majority of literature on grief and loss pertains primarily to death and bereavement. For a more thorough application of theories across the broad instances of loss, see Linda Machin, *Working with Loss and Grief: A New Model for Practitioners* (London: SAGE, 2009). 12. and Junietta Baker McCall, *Bereavement Counselling: Pastoral Care for Complicated Grieving* (NY: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2009). 37-42.

³⁶ For a helpful summary of the theoretical landscape see McCoyd. 4-27

this framework) is increasingly recognized to likewise impinge on the spiritual domain of an individual or community.³⁷ Similarly, a helpful insight suggests that grief is intrinsically tied to situations over which no personal control is experienced.³⁸ With this understanding, what follows is a synthesis of literature outlining various elements of grief theory and their application to same sex attracted young people, with the aim of demonstrating the necessity for such an understanding to playing a pivotal role for pastoral care.³⁹ Of note, the process of grieving is very rarely linear, with the griever often experiencing one or more overlapping elements and a recurrence of multiple throughout the process.

Whilst with prayer and forms of therapy some people have experienced a degree of change in their sexual orientation, the vast majority of those who have undergone reparative therapy have found it to be at best ineffective and oftentimes exceptionally harmful.⁴⁰ Along with this, a large proportion of same sex attracted people struggle to comprehend the notion of a viable heterosexual union. Coming to terms with the reality of potential celibacy for life at a young age is an exceedingly strenuous task, and the grief associated with just this element is complex and multifaceted.⁴¹ Returning to the paradigmatic question

³⁷ Susan Selby, "New Every Morning: Integrating Current Developments in Grief Theory and Practice with Jesus' Compassion and Teaching.," in *Loss and Discovery : Responding to Grief with the Compassion of Christ and the Skills of God's People*, ed. Margaret Wesley(Preston, Vic.: Mosaic Press, 2013). 9.

³⁸ Donna Reilly Williams and JoAnn Sturzl, *Grief Ministry : Helping Others Mourn* (San Jose, Calif.: Resource Publications, Inc, 2001). 47.

³⁹ Whilst it is recognized that postmodern notions of grief shy away from phase structured approaches, the models presented incorporate phase frameworks as they provide a useful rubric for the current discussion. McCoyd. 13-14.

⁴⁰ Gabi Rosenstreich, *LGBTI People Mental Health and Suicide Revised 2nd Edition* (Sydney: National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013). 10.

⁴¹ Whilst some pastoral similarities can be drawn between general singleness and those struggling with same sex attraction, the difference between being single at a given point in life and knowingly facing a lifetime of singleness are two vastly different existential states and should

‘what does a young person stand to lose by adhering to a faithful biblical ethic?’, it is easy to see that the loss associated for many young people is one around unfulfilled ambitions and severe disappointment.⁴²

Understandably, the grieving process associated with this loss may initially play itself out in a period of denial, as the young person compartmentalizes their reality and seeks to suppress the same sex desires which they are discovering within themselves.⁴³ This act of denial and compartmentalizing enables them to continue on with their previous identity without having to deal with their sexuality. At this stage, the young person may heighten their involvement in religious activities as a means of dealing with the internal conflict.⁴⁴ It is rare that at this stage they would come out to anybody as they are still attempting to understand their situation for themselves.

Transitioning to older adolescence and the preparatory stages for young adulthood, the pastor should be aware that a well-documented and seemingly universal aspect of the grieving process is that of anger.⁴⁵ Jake’s experience is telling: ‘You just get pissed off. You’re just tired of it. As each year goes by, you’re tired of feeling so guilty and one day you just explode. One day you just say, ‘Screw it.’”⁴⁶ As sexuality and intimate partnerships are such heightened ideals in modern culture, it is difficult to exaggerate the experience of loss many people in

be treated thus. A. Tylee, *Walking with Gay Friends: A Journey of Informed Compassion* (InterVarsity, 2007). 92.

⁴² Machin. 22.

⁴³ Levy. 206.

⁴⁴ Levy 204.

⁴⁵ Williams and Sturzl. 47.

⁴⁶ Levy. 178.

Jake's situation feel. Of note in regards to the anger response is the non-finite and ambiguous nature of the loss and its broad ranging implications. That is to say, it is difficult to pin down exactly what has been lost, as what is perceived to have been lost often never existed physically in the first place. Thus, the young adult may not have had to separate from an intimate partner, but the *concept* of an intimate partner. Likewise, hopes of raising a family; of growing old with a loved one; of meeting family expectations to produce grandchildren; of reaching socially constructed norms, and 'fitting in' are all ideals which were never physically present and yet in some manner have been 'lost'.⁴⁷ It has only been recent theorizing of this *loss of potential* that has recognized the validity of such grief.⁴⁸

Partially due to this non-finite nature of losses, it is common for young same sex attracted Christians to experience grief in a manner which is potently disenfranchised. When grief is disenfranchised, it is generally conceived of as either socially unacceptable, misunderstood, or in some manner breaks the 'feeling rules' of a given culture.⁴⁹ Within evangelical Christianity, the call to 'rejoice in suffering' (Rom 5:3-5) is frequently cited as a proof text against prolonged mourning, and when the losses are as ambiguous and disenfranchised as they are for young same sex attracted people, the pressure to conceal one's negative responses understandably results in varying levels of unresolved anger. Alongside this, the stigma surrounding homosexuality in mainstream church life

⁴⁷ For an analysis of this concept from a non-Christian perspective, see Carol A. Thompson, "Lesbian Grief and Loss Issues in the Coming out Process," *Women and Therapy* 12, no. 1-2 (1992).

⁴⁸ Machin. 22.

⁴⁹ Williams and Sturzl. 65.

results in a form of silent suffering, avoided by many in the church and often highly difficult for the struggling individual to broach.⁵⁰

When recognized as a vital phase of grieving, the pastor is encouraged to avoid being hasty to stifle or pressure the young person to ‘move on’ from their anger. Rather, it may be necessary to assist them in channeling their anger in ways that are helpful for them. As Allen describes, “when I was younger, it was anger at myself for being different. Then it would become anger at other people because I was different. I was having to be angry at them because I didn’t know how to justify it [same-sex attraction] in myself. As I got a little older, in high school and in college... it was anger at my father, which then became anger at God.”⁵¹ The object of a young adult’s anger may shift numerous times over the course of their journey, and even after a period of acceptance a form of shadow or anniversary grief⁵² (such as a wedding of a close friend) may cause this anger response to reappear. This is a normal response and should not surprise the pastor, and the pastor should be equipped with ways to call the young adult to bring their concerns to God, as suggested below.

As reality sets in with the processes of denial and anger not having changed the young person’s orientation, it is common for hopelessness and helplessness to set in.⁵³ This state of depression is exacerbated by a sense of isolation and ostracism (whether actual or perceived)⁵⁴ and, like anger, may appear concurrently alongside other symptoms of grief and often reoccurs on multiple

⁵⁰ For example, see Christopher’s story in Keane. 20.

⁵¹ Levy. 178.

⁵² Williams and Sturzl. 65.

⁵³ Ibid. 54.

⁵⁴ See for example Christopher’s story in Keane. 19-20.

occasions throughout the person's journey.

The developmental crisis commonly understood at adolescence is one of 'identity formation versus identity diffusion'.⁵⁵ Ideally, by the latter teenage years, the individual has formed a sure understanding of who they are and is gaining a level of independence as they explore and develop romantic relationships.⁵⁶ The young adult who struggles with same sex attraction has, by this normative model, failed to achieve society's expectation of them. This is propounded by the recognized developmental crisis of young adulthood as 'intimacy versus isolation'.⁵⁷ In other words, the predominate recognized biopsychosocial need for the young adult is that of partnership, with the alternative being a sense of isolation. Whilst a biblical understanding of celibacy and union with Christ form a sound mitigation of such an assumption, these developmental crises should be recognized as having a profound impact on the state of young adults, even within churches. Given this, it is again not surprising that such depression should come over people who are implicitly labeled by society as, in some manner, failures, whilst simultaneously experiencing intense isolation. Significantly, research suggests that young adults experiencing such grieving are unlikely to turn to peers for fear that they will not be supported.⁵⁸ Pastorally, this depressive state can be exhausting and frustrations may lead the carer to encourage a rapid transition away from depression. At these points, it is useful for the pastor to be reminded that grieving over loss is necessary and depression is a part of that journey which positively shows that the griever is no

⁵⁵ McCoyd. 130.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 130.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 172.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 181.

longer denying their situation but is processing it in some manner.⁵⁹

To this end, this framework encourages a pastoral response that is realistic in its expectations and errs on the side of the griever moving slowly.⁶⁰ Like Hannah, who wept year after year facing the reality of infertility (1 Sam 1:1-15), it may well be necessary for periods of weeping to play themselves out- year after year.⁶¹ In this, the pastor is urged to recognize the importance of longevity in listening, as Bonhoeffer asserts, “the first service one owes to others in the community involves listening to them. Just as our love for God begins with listening to God’s word, the beginning of our love for other Christians is learning to listen to them.”⁶² Some crises are temporally contained and only require a listening ear for a short amount of time. Same sex attracted young adults who are continuing to grieve conceptual losses propounded by intense sexual desires are more likely to require a pastoral response that persists for an extended period.⁶³

All of the above grieving responses must, of course, be predicated on a theological basis rich enough to grasp the vital role of lament in the Christian walk. Gravely, and counter to the call of Jesus, the Christianity often on display in churches is suffering-averse⁶⁴ and subsequently those who give voice to their pain are implicitly branded as somehow deficient in faith. The biblical view of

⁵⁹ This is not to say that in instances of mental ill-health the pastor can replace other professional assistance. If a depressive state persists, the young person may be well advised to seek medical attention.

⁶⁰ Williams and Sturzl. 40.

⁶¹ Similarly, the vast majority of the book of Job is dedicated to his ongoing grieving process after his devastating loss. This further demonstrates the occasional necessity of longevity in grief. Of note, Job is never rebuked for his grief, thus suggesting that God approves of the manner in which Job has conducted himself in his emotional expression.

⁶² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans., John W. Doberstein (London: SCM Press, 2015). 75.

⁶³ See for example Mark’s story in Keane.89-90.

⁶⁴ Shaw. 121.

lament is vastly different, providing a God ordained mechanism by which suffering may be expressed in agonized terms with a view to retaining God's sovereignty over all things.⁶⁵ Bayer, Waltke et al. rightly observe that "Systematic theology in general tends to refer to a happy ending all too hastily and fails to take seriously the fruitless disorientations of the journey in all its uncertainties." Joy is the last word, but lament may fill much of a Christian's earthly sufferings.⁶⁶

It should not be surprising therefore that more than a third of the Psalter is comprised of 'lament psalms,' calling out to God as the sovereign one who alone can provide comfort for those in pain. The predominance of these lament psalms leads naturally to the conclusion that 'the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual, but rather are central to the life of faith... moreover, they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is not a sign of deficient faith, something to be outgrown or put behind one, but rather is intrinsic to the very nature of faith.'⁶⁷ There is a long and rich history within both Israel and the Church of praying these Psalms at times of distress and grief,⁶⁸ and as such there is good reason to be wary of the modern stoicism within evangelical Christianity which unwittingly seeks to move far too quickly from lamenting to suffering in silence.

⁶⁵ Bruce K. Waltke; James M. Houston; Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014). 2.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 4-5.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 1.

⁶⁸ Brian Brock Eva Harasta, *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion* (London: T&T Clark International, 2009).1-7.

Finally, this eventually must lead the pastor to the final phase of traditional grief theory- acceptance. Theologically opposed to the liberal rhetoric of acceptance as embracing one's homosexual identity and lifestyle, a faithful biblical ethic does ultimately draw the suffering Christian to a place of contentment even in pain (Phil 4:11-13); of joy even in suffering (Matt 5:12). This is not a blissful ignorance of the fallen nature of this world, but is predicated on the Christian's vital union with Christ and hope of eternal glory.

Living as the Church

The theological groundings and pastoral ramifications of grief and loss in young same sex attracted people presented here should give cause for the pastor to prayerfully consider the weight of the task at hand. As seen, this is no practice in obscurantism, but rather as the Church is called to carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), so the people of God have a mandate to bear a portion of the weight that these young people carry. It is to this that attention shall now be given, drawing on the primary metaphors employed in the Bible to describe the nature of the Church. From these, a reconsidering of some vital aspects of life in community are offered.

The concept of the church as the 'body of Christ' has shaped much ecclesiological thought and enabled vast discussions on the broad unity of God's people under the head, Jesus (Eph 1:22-23). Encompassed within this unity is a resplendent diversity of peoples and giftings who, being many parts, 'form one body' (1 Cor 12:12). This image alone provides the theological moorings for an assertion that there is a place for every same-sex-attracted person in the body of Christ. It is an inconsistency within the church that so many young people who struggle daily against homosexual desires should feel to some measure on the outside of the people of God.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Shaw. 100.

Further, moving beyond the concept of unity in diversity, the body metaphor provides a powerful insight that, it would seem, few pastors are grasping the gravitas of: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.” Here, powerfully depicted is a stunning mutuality between diverse members. At its simplest, this mutuality means that if one part suffers, every part suffers with it (1 Cor 12:26), and thus it is something of a mandate that the church should grieve alongside its members who have lost something precious in creation. Moreover, this mutuality implies a level of interdependence within the body. Most frequently, this interdependence is understood to invoke a pastoral response for same sex attracted people from the heterosexual majority. But if this is a faithful exegetical reading, then the opposite must also be true- the heterosexual majority in the church *need* the same-sex-attracted minority, by the very design and purposes of God. Those who struggle with their sexuality are not a blight on the otherwise blemish free surface of the church- they are vital members of it and, God’s design being sufficient, play an indispensable role in the life of the body. Young adults who have struggled with same-sex-attraction through adolescence have profound insights into practicing theology from the margins; they grasp the inclusivity of Christ and the exclusivity of his teachings in ways which heterosexual people simply cannot; they often understand what it means to work through resentment, disappointment and despair in ways that many ministers may never comprehend. Through a lens of reciprocity, this pastoral framework asserts that the church as it stands today needs its members

who struggle with same sex attraction and pastors would do well to validate their members as such.

Importantly, alongside this functional reciprocity depicted in the body motif, there is the pertinent reality that the church under Christ is a family, engaging in a relationally driven mutuality.⁷⁰ When informed that his mother and siblings were near, Jesus replied ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ and pointing to his disciples who were gathered, he said ‘here are my mother and brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’ (Matt 12:46-50). Biological descent and the family as a nuclear construct hold little sway in light of the greater reality that all who follow Jesus are part of an eternal family. This reality lead Paul (who was single) to view Timothy as his ‘dear son’ (2 Tim 1:2) and whole churches as familial brothers and sisters, sons and daughters (1 Thes 2:1-12).

Despite the emphasis the New Testament places on the church as family, many within its walls continue to experience ostracism and marginalization. Those who are coming to terms with a life of singleness very much fall into this category. One survey found that only 20% of churches felt that they were meeting the needs of the single people in their congregations well.⁷¹ Recounting one same-sex-attracted individual’s story, Tylee shares “I like to see the church as my family, even though I don’t always feel very included. A lot of the ways that people get to know each other in church are through things like parents and

⁷⁰ Ibid. 45-46.

⁷¹ Al Hsu, *The Single Issue* (England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997). 143

toddlers' groups, and young mums' Bible studies... courses for engaged couples and marriage-building... there doesn't seem to be much for long-term single people, to help them, to build them up and encourage them to make the most of it"⁷² Tylee shares that one of her struggles in leaving the gay scene and entering the church has been that amongst the gay community she felt free to express herself, while "back at church, where people so often find it hard to be real with one another, the masks were back on, and I was once again in the secret minority."⁷³ This experience stands in sharp contrast to the richly familial language of the New Testament. The question remains then, how does one go about embracing same-sex-attracted individuals in a way that draws them further into the family and points them to Jesus?

When questioned about how they go about addressing 'the problem of homosexuality' in the USA, a randomized study of over 1000 people returned only one response of "love".⁷⁴ Concurrently, above and beyond the innate hardwiring of all humanity for intimacy (Gen 2:18), this present generation of young adults displays a far greater proclivity toward relational connectedness than many before them.⁷⁵ If a young, same sex attracted person enters the church and subsequently struggles to find intimacy in some manner, there is every chance that they will seek to find it in some place other; and the gay community is well versed in opening its arms to those who have been burned. In regards to this, it is evident that many well-intentioned people are struggling to

⁷² Tylee. 100.

⁷³ Ibid. 103.

⁷⁴ Kinnaman and Lyons. 101.

⁷⁵ David G. Benner, *Sacred Companions: The Gift of Spiritual Friendship and Direction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002). 75.

discern what is appropriate or helpful when it comes to relationally engaging those who are same sex attracted- the very legitimate concerns of emotional dependent tendencies and the blurring of boundaries often appear to be insurmountable barriers in the context of ministry.⁷⁶

To this end, this framework echoes Wesley Hill's call for a vital rethinking of *friendship* in the context of the Church, developing and nurturing an intimacy, which fosters mutual concern and care but is not predicated on or on a trajectory toward sexual expression.⁷⁷ For same sex attracted people, the tendency to view with suspicion any close, same-gendered friendship serves to painfully alienate and stigmatize what for them is a vital component of the Christian walk.⁷⁸ And yet, the Bible is replete with examples of such friendships and provides rich depictions of what this might look like.

The intimacy between David and Jonathan provides perhaps the primary exemplar of such a relationship in the Old Testament.⁷⁹ Having met on the field of battle, the two young men form a covenantal bond based on a deep, mutual love (1 Sam 18:1-4, 2 Sam 1:26). So strong was their love for one another that Jonathan, at great risk to himself was willing to warn David of impending danger and save his life. Upon Jonathan's death, David subsequently laments "I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was

⁷⁶ Tylee. 129-130

⁷⁷ Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2015). Ch 1 (Pages unnumbered)

⁷⁸ Ibid. Ch 1 (Pages unnumbered)

⁷⁹ Ibid. Ch 3 (Pages unnumbered)

wonderful, more wonderful than that of women” (1 Sam 1:26)⁸⁰ David is here borrowing seemingly spousal language to describe a partnership that is “more intense, more committed and irrevocable than most moderns consider friendship to be.”⁸¹ Similar friendships can be seen in depictions of Ruth and Naomi, and Jesus and Lazarus- all of which describe their bond in terms of great love and commitment.

If intimacy is an innate human need, then surely friendships such as these are rightly conceived of as vital for those in the church who would seek to remain celibate and yet, in some manner, whole. Benner suggests that the two driving desires for such intimacy are a sense of freedom, and an unreserved honesty.⁸² In understanding this as such, “the honesty that characterizes genuine and deep friendships is not just the honesty of words. It is the honesty of being. Friends feel sufficiently safe with each other that they can relax and be what they are. Since I am already known and loved for who I am, pretensions can be set aside and I can be myself.”⁸³ With such honesty and vulnerability amongst friends, the ability to grieve loss and find satisfaction amongst deep pain is made vastly more plausible; the deep-seated desire for sexual intimacy is somewhat mitigated by a profoundly different intimacy; and the prospect of facing a life of aloneness no longer equates to a life of loneliness.

⁸⁰ Against the clear reading of this passage which highlights the depth of friendship of the two men, some have sought to sexualize this relationship and suggest a homoerotic reading. For a clear refutation of this, see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice : Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2001). 146-154.

⁸¹ Hill. Ch 1 (Pages unnumbered)

⁸² Benner. 71.

⁸³ Ibid. 71.

The church has both the responsibility and the privilege of partaking in such friendships with its same-sex-attracted young people. There is, of course, a need to do so wisely and with caution to ensure that unhelpful relational dependencies do not occur, however this should not leave the church fearful or hesitant. Rather, with the growing numbers of sexually broken young people within its pews, the church is now at in a place where its leadership and laity must think creatively and boldly about how such friendships can be facilitated and fostered. There is an increasing body of literature aimed at helping the church to do just this, and those who would seek to pastor well have a responsibility to ensure that they are well engaged with these voices.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ See for example the works of Wesley Hill, Ed Shaw, Vaughan Roberts, Alex Tylee and Sam Alberry. All of these people describe themselves as same-sex attracted and speak powerfully into the pastoral needs of those in their situations.

Coming to a conclusion

“The stories we have explored around the theme of reconciling homosexuality with a Christian life are stories of young people facing life-threatening struggles that tear at the very core of their being. In the main they face the worst of these struggles without any of the supports that young people generally have from family members and other supportive adults. Often help cannot be sought from families and friends because the risk to the relationship is too great. Help sought from spiritual advisors is often the catalyst that pushes them to the most dangerous parts of their personal journey.”⁸⁵

This conclusion, drawn from the secular research of Hillier et al. ought to cause those who love God’s people to take seriously the pain of the journey to date, and the dire need of pastorally nuanced and theologically grounded engagement with these issues into the future. Having swept briefly through the current climate of society and church, it is readily apparent that more work is needed in preparing church leadership and laity with an adequate framework with which to minister to young people struggling with same-sex-attraction in the transition to young adulthood.

During these years of transition, the call for a broader theology of sexuality and celibacy is vital for both the demythologizing and de-idolizing of marriage, and likewise for the reassertion of singleness as a divinely endorsed life. Within this, a strong stance against the sexual essentialism of the modern West must hold forth the distinction of sexuality and personhood, affirming the fundamental

⁸⁵ Hillier, "I Couldn't Do Both at the Same Time': Same Sex Attracted Youth and the Negotiation of Religious Discourse." 90.

identity of the Christian as united with Christ.

With this theology as a firm grounding, the pastor must be prepared to engage with those struggling with same sex attraction from an informed understanding of the presence of loss and its subsequent grieving process. It is only once these are seen in conjunction with the young adult's identity dissonance that rounded care can be given. And finally, in line with the Biblical understanding of God's people as both the body of Christ and as a spiritual family, the church must be prepared to engage in intimate friendships with same-sex-attracted young people in new and creative ways. This is vital if the losses they are experiencing are to be mitigated and for those who struggle in this regard to experience acceptance and inclusion within the church. Whilst it is clear that more work needs to take place, it is encouraging to see a growing body of literature engaging healthily in this area- perhaps this is a sign of good things to come.

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