

Looking out to gay friends and their families
May 24, 2009

I was a youth pastor 17 years ago. One of our students was a well spoken, funny and intelligent guy. But this young man, we'll call him John, had problems at home. He argued with his parents, more and more. He became hostile to me as well. I met with his mother to find out what was going on. She told me she thought John was gay.

This was totally new ground for me. I had never met anyone gay before. I had never taken a course on how to minister to individuals and families facing this. I didn't know what to do. So I met with John hoping to open the door for discussion. He expressed frustration with my preaching. I explored this a little further. Finally, I asked him, "Why do these points bother you so much?" He responded, "Because I'm a homosexual. Your preaching shows no understanding of where I am at."

I thanked him for his honesty. Over the next couple of weeks I tried to minister to him. My primary approach was to show him one page out of a book which I thought clearly explained why he was homosexual. I probably referred to some of the Scriptures speaking to homosexuality. Naively, I thought he would immediately change.

Instead his hostility increased. He no longer came to church and gradually we lost contact with him. Things did not go as I hoped.

You know what has happened in the 17 years since that time? We now recognize same-sex marriage in this country. Churches have to define their religious convictions about marriage. There has been much debate about the issue. But this is much more than an "issue." There are real people involved. With more people coming out of the closet, I'm sure many of you have encountered people from the LGBTQ community . . . lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and "questioning" community. Today we will look at relating to friends from the gay and lesbian community. So can we hold onto what we believe to be the Bible's teaching AND still relate to members of this community?

Friends, perhaps some of you in this room right now come from the LGBTQ community. Others here have family members, relatives, friends and coworkers in this community. Our gay or lesbian friends, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, cousins, parents and co-workers wonder is there anyone from a conservative church like ours, who is not my enemy?

We cannot choose the world in which we live. We can only choose how we will live in the world we find ourselves in. So today, I want to present to you 17 years of reflection since my initial encounter with John. I want to share what I have learned and have done. This included time spent as clergy advisor to the New Directions for Life ministry in Ottawa; a ministry to gay and lesbians and their families. I also did a project for my doctorate that involved forming an open discussion group within the church. I asked the question “how have the churches you’ve been involved in responded to homosexuality and families affected by it?” I learned much from that discussion.

But this will not only be my reflection. We must carefully examine the Scriptures addressing this. So today, I hope you will leave with some understanding of the possibility of both maintaining Biblical conviction AND lovingly engaging folks dealing with this. Our aim is to pray for and look out with an authentic Biblically based humble attitude to people and families dealing with same-sex attraction.

To do this, I want to first make some general observations. Then we will look at Biblical passages, which speak to this issue.

Finally, I want to offer some approaches we Christians must adopt if we really want to make a positive impact on people around us dealing with same-sex attraction.

Observation #1. Many Churches and Christians have responded poorly to the issue of homosexual attraction, behavior and lifestyles. In our discussion group, many branches of the poor response became clear.

One is we haven’t spoken about it all. So we responded with ***Silence or Avoidance***. Some of the more senior members of this discussion group said they had never heard anything taught about homosexuality in their church, except that it was wrong. The only response the church offered to someone struggling was to condemn them. Some mentioned that the church’s silence left them to draw their own conclusions. Others assumed the church just didn’t want to touch this hot button. In other words, seeing a dangerous minefield, we avoided going in there at all.

Another poor response concerned the tone used. When some Christians chose to speak about homosexuality, they ***spoke in a mocking/judgmental tone***. I still remember hearing what amounted

to gay jokes in a sermon when I was in my teens. Most of the congregation laughed heartily. When the laughing stopped, we came down so hard on gay/lesbian behavior that we couldn't think of a much worse sin. No wonder my youth group member didn't want to go to a place where he might be made fun of. I am not saying that we should go easy on sin. But I am saying that we went particularly hard at this one while ignoring others.

A final poor response of the church identified by the discussion concerned the way Biblical truth was communicated. Many heard Biblical truths expressed with harshness and disrespect. We may be sure of what the Bible says about homosexual behavior yet present it without any thought of love. But 1 Peter 3:15 says *“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”* Sometimes the church has been more than willing to give answers but has often forgotten to be gentle and respectful.

These factors combine to leave same-sex attracted folks, their families and a majority of society with an extremely negative view of

the church's response. Rather than a source of hope, solution and support, we are seen as the enemy.

Observation #2. Most homosexuals do not wake up and choose their orientation. Now this is a very controversial point, but please bear with me.

Because of the conviction of many Christians and some non-Christians that people are not born with a gay gene, some have concluded the only alternative is “they chose this.” At some point, a person decided they would become gay. But I agree with James Dobson's comments in his book “Bringing up boys.” “Homosexuals deeply resent being told that they selected this same-sex inclination in pursuit of sexual excitement or some other motive. It is unfair, and I don't blame them for being irritated by that assumption. Who among us would knowingly choose a path that would result in alienation from family; rejection by friends, disdain from the heterosexual world, greater exposure to such sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and tuberculosis, and a statistically shorter lifespan? No homosexuality is not “chosen” except in rare circumstances. Instead,

bewildered children and adolescents find themselves dealing with something they don't even understand.”¹

So is Dobson saying people are born gay? No he's saying there are other possibilities. There has been fiercely debated research in the areas of genetics, brain tissue and brain plasticity.² But there is no definitive “gay gene.” Yet he writes, “This is not to say that there may not be some kind of biological predisposition or an inherited temperament that makes one vulnerable to environmental influences. But efforts to identify such factors are inconclusive.” Despite this lack of evidence, the gay and lesbian activists and their friends in the mainstream media (like Time, Newsweek, Oprah and Barbara Walters) continue to tell the public that the issue is settled. . . . In February 2000, 35% of people believed homosexuality was “genetic.”³ But there are hundreds if not thousands of people who have left the gay/lesbian lifestyle through the power of Jesus Christ and the support of loving and mature friends. I simply want to point out that it's not

either Gay Gene or Personal Choice. There are multiple factors involved.

Observation #3 – Sometimes, Christians paint all homosexuals with the “activist” brush. Certainly some gay and lesbian activists are aggressive and defiant just like some Christians. But many others simply want to live their lives in peace. I had one father of a lesbian daughter tell me that she left her church because it was way too activist and aggressive. She wanted to somehow connect with God, not hear another rah rah cry for the next rally. Yet it is easy for us to see a demonstration on TV and conclude every gay or lesbian person is part of that.

One of the New Directions for Life staffers writes this about common complaints his gay friends have about Christianity. “The most common complaint I heard from my gay friends was that Christians didn't bother to get to know them before telling them what to do. Many Christians had built-in assumptions about what they must be like, without bothering to see if it was true or not. One told me of being frustrated with Christians railing against homosexuality because of “promiscuous lifestyles” but the ironic thing was the individual was still a virgin. Others told of Christian friends and family members assuming their feelings must be

¹ “Bringing Up Boys,” Dr. James Dobson, Focus on the Family 2003, p. 115-116.

² Donald F. Calbreath, Ph.D. retired after 22 years on the Chemistry Faculty at Whitworth University, Spokane, WA, in *Is there a gay gene?*, Christian Research Journal, 31, no. 6, 2008, p.28-35.

³ Dobson, 116.

because of sexual abuse, or "just not having met the right guy/girl yet". All responses were tied to Christians not taking time to listen to the person's story, to understand them in the context of their lives, and left the individual feeling unimportant and unloved."⁴

With these observations in mind, let us now turn to some Biblical passages to help us respond in a loving helpful way without compromising our Biblical convictions.

How can Christians respond in a way that balances truth and love?

Response #1 - We must approach this issue and (more importantly) people with great humility.

Everyone in this room is a sinner.

We must guard against any attitude of superiority towards anyone who struggles with same sex orientation or has a different view than we do. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:1-5)

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ² For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. ³ "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴ How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.

⁴ You can't be a Christian. I don't hate you! Brian Pengelly
<http://www.newdirection.ca/content.xjp?id=585>

Now we must be clear what Jesus is talking about here. He says "do not judge," which means "do not be judgmental." We must not look at what another person does wrong and then conclude "we are morally superior to them. Therefore, we have a right to point out everything wrong in their life." He isn't saying we should ignore sin or lack discernment. If we failed to discern sin, then we would have no standard by which we could move towards holiness. So we are not to think of ourselves as morally superior. But this doesn't mean we then become completely ignorant of what is and isn't sin.

But more to the thrust of this text, we need to guard against categorizing certain sins as worse than others. I have heard several say "But it disgusts me," meaning the homosexual act disgusts them. But does greed disgust us? What about gossip? What about cliquish behavior or lying? Does pre-marital or out of marital sex disgust us? Does spiritual lukewarmness disgust us? If not, why not? Jesus is pretty clear on what He thinks about lukewarmness. Rev. 3:16. "So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." In other words, Jesus is disgusted with

apathetic Christians! We need to guard against any superior attitude towards anyone including those struggling with same sex orientation.

Response #2 - We must retain our Biblical convictions with careful study of relevant Biblical passages. To do this we must ensure we identify what the Bible says. Let's find out what the Holiness Code of Leviticus in the Old Testament says about Homosexuality.

The Bible does NOT use the phrase "homosexuality is a sin." It does say homosexual behavior is a sin." Leviticus 18:22 ²² "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable." ⁵

The Bible does NOT say homosexuals will die. It does say in the OT code that those who engaged in homosexual behavior were to be put to death. Leviticus 20:13 ¹³ "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." ⁶

The Bible does NOT say homosexuality is a greater sin than every other sins. It does teach that homosexual relations, whether between men or women, are against nature, because they are contrary to the

pattern placed within creation itself. It does say that widespread practice and acceptance of homosexual behavior indicates a society is on a downward spiral away from God and His intended order. Let's look at Romans 1.

Romans 1:18-32 – ¹⁸ *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness,* ¹⁹ *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* ²⁰ *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*

²¹ *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.* ²² *Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools* ²³ *and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

²⁴ *Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.* ²⁵ *They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*

²⁶ *Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones.* ²⁷ *In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.* ⁷

This is the most difficult passage for those arguing that the Bible affirms homosexual behavior. Here Paul lays out God's case

⁵*The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

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against the pagan society of the day. One Bible commentator writes (Stan Grenz,) writes, “His (Paul’s) purpose was to offer a corporate indictment of pagan society. He narrates the story of humankind. He offers a general sweep of the corporate downward spiral into an even deeper pit of sin. Humankind had even distorted basic sexual identity, which had been given in God’s created order as indicated by the Genesis story.”⁸

“For Paul then, the only proper model of sexual relations is that patterned after the creation story in Genesis 1-2. In keeping with the conjunctions of the Holiness Code (those passages we read in Leviticus) Paul concludes that this model is natural, for it alone was instituted by the Creator. Homosexual relations, whether between men or women, are against nature, because they are contrary to the pattern placed within creation itself.”⁹ Friends, we now live in a society that has decided it will affirm and legitimize that which is contrary to God’s original intention.

More confusing for Christians who struggle with same sex orientation is the fact that an entire gay theology has been constructed to Biblically affirm homosexual behavior. I have read some of these papers which go back to NT Greek for argument. I disagree with them but they are well written. I am sure some of these authors were motivated by their desire to comfort Christians struggling with same sex orientation. But ultimately it is harmful to the person struggling with same sex orientation. Why? Pro-gay theology can hide or blur God’s revealed will and encourages engagement in sinful acts.

The other major New Testament passage that speaks to homosexual behavior is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

⁹ Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul focuses on the sinful action. Those who actively pursue sin will not inherit the kingdom. So the Bible’s teaching on homosexual behavior is consistent. It was prohibited in the Holiness Code of Leviticus as a violation of God’s natural order. This teaching is picked

⁷The New International Version, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

⁸ “Sexual Ethics: A Biblical Perspective,” Stanley Grenz, (Vancouver: Word Publishing), 1990, p.205.

⁹ Ibid., p. 206.

up and affirmed in the New Testament. The Bible is consistent in its verdict that homosexual behavior is a sin.

So with the observations, the call to humility on our part and the Bible's consistent testimony about the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, where can we go from here? What hope is there for someone who struggles with their same sex orientation AND desires to go deeper with God? What hope and encouragement is there for families in this church who have children, close relatives, friends or coworkers who struggle with same sex orientation?

Well, hope starts with Jesus Christ. We tend to think that hope starts with changing your orientation. But it has to start with Christ. New Directions Mission Statement reflects this: "To see every gay and lesbian person in Canada encounter Christ through friendship with a Christ-follower"

Response #3: Talk about Jesus. But we can't just quote Bible verses. We must introduce them to Jesus. Brian Pengelly, former youth pastor and current staffer at New Directions for Life writes "For those who had not grown up in Christian homes, telling them what the Bible said had no more persuasive force than someone else trying to influence me by quoting the Quran, or the code of Hannurabi. What my friends were interested in was

Jesus. It was only as they got to know Jesus, and saw him reflected in my own life did they begin to care what Scripture said about sexuality.¹⁰

I could not continue in friendship with John because I wanted a quick fix to the tension and my own discomfort. I basically said to him "You need to change" instead of "you need Christ." There is no quick fix. There is a walk we are called to enter into with the people God brings in our path who are struggling with this.

So how do we reach out to those with same sex orientation and their family members?

We must BUILD BRIDGES TO them rather than FENCES AROUND them (From Wendy Gritter's presentation notes – Executive Director of New Direction for Life Ministries)

We must treat everyone with respect. Affirm their good qualities. Don't make fun of others or call names. Don't join in when others are making fun. Don't tell gay jokes. Allow others to have different beliefs and make different choices.

¹⁰ You can't be a Christian. I don't hate you! Brian Pengelly
<http://www.newdirection.ca/content.xjp?id=585>

We must see the person's status as a human being is more important than their sexuality. Where your friend is at with God is far more important than sexual orientation. We do not get into heaven by being straight. We get into heaven by saying yes to God who gives His life to us.

Be authentic in your own journey. How real are we about areas of sin we are dealing with? Do we empathize with the tremendous courage that is required to surrender such inherent parts of oneself?

We must avoid using terms like "they" and "them." There are many families in churches who have an immediate family member or close relative who is engaging in homosexual behavior. Several of you have told me of coworkers you have who have same-sex orientation. There are many who struggle with same-sex attraction but never act on it. It is time we talk about "We" and "Our" if we desire to seriously engage with and minister the Gospel to those among us.

Resist the temptation to let them know where you stand. This comes directly from New Directions material. It states "If you are part of a conservative church or denomination, your friends will probably have already assumed that you think homosexual behavior is wrong.

What they will most likely not realize is that you know that God loves them anyway and that you will treat them with respect. . . . If your friend asks you about your beliefs about God or homosexuality you can certainly do so. Avoid a mini-sermon. Say a few sentences and then stop. If your friends want more information, then they will ask more questions."¹¹

Brian Pengelly writes "Most of my friends had heard the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" a thousand times, but were hard pressed to come up with concrete examples of how a Christian had ever loved them. Most had found that Christians were afraid to help them or treat them kindly for fear of being perceived as "condoning their lifestyle". What finally broke down the barriers between us was my willingness to serve them where they were at. In my case it meant giving them rides when they needed it (whether moving them out of an abusive partners apartment, getting them home safe after a night of drinking, or a simple lift home after an event).¹²

Understand common contributing factors but uniqueness of each individual. There is not a "recipe" that explains exactly why every gay or lesbian person has that orientation. Our job may not be to sort that out. We may simply play the role of encouraging praying friend.

As we walk with our friends and family members, as we listen to them, as we treat them with respect we can offer hope for healthy companionship. We can share that with God all things are possible. Introduce them to Jesus. Share with them about an organization like

¹¹ From Key Articles #5 – "Someone I know is Gay or Lesbian . . ." New Direction for Life Ministries of Canada, 2003.

Flight ministries here in Edmonton. FLIGHT stands for “Finding Life in God’s Healing Touch.”¹³

There is a whole bunch we can do to reach out. And before we know it, instead of looking at our friends, family members and coworkers across enemy lines, we’ll be standing beside them together moving towards wholeness in Christ. To give us a glimpse into what this might be like, I want to close today by sharing excerpts from an article written by a same-sex attracted Christian. His name is Wesley. “A Few Like You”: Will the Church be the Church for Homosexual Christians?

By Wesley Hill

In 1947, the great English poet W. H. Auden wrote a letter to his friend Ursula Niebuhr in which he confessed: “I don’t think I’m over-anxious about the future, though I do quail a bit before the possibility that it will be lonely. When I see you surrounded by family and its problems, I alternate between self-congratulation and bitter envy.” The root of Auden’s fear of loneliness and his envy of the comforts of family is not hard to uncover: Auden was a homosexual

Christian. And this dual identity created a tension for him: As a Christian of a relatively traditional sort, he believed homosexuality missed the mark of God’s good design for human flourishing. But as a homosexually oriented person, despite his Christian beliefs, he craved intimacy and companionship with other men. Caught on the horns of a dilemma like that, what was he to do with his loneliness?

. . . Hill continues “I am drawn to these haunting confessions of Auden’s because I, too, am a homosexual Christian. Since puberty, I’ve been conscious of an exclusive attraction to persons of my own sex. Though I have never been in a gay relationship as Auden was, I have also never experienced the “healing” or transformation of my sexual orientation that some formerly gay Christians profess to have received. But I remain a Christian, a follower of Jesus. And, like Auden, I accept the Christian teaching that homosexuality is a tragic sign that things are “not the way they’re supposed to be.” Reading New Testament texts like Romans 1:26-27 and 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 through the lens of time-honored Christian reflection on the meaning and purpose of marriage between a man and a woman, I find myself—

¹² <http://www.newdirection.ca/content.xjp?id=585>

¹³ www.flightministries.ca

much as I might wish things to be otherwise—compelled to abstain from homosexual practice.”

As a result, I feel, more often than not, desperately lonely. In recent years I have made it a point to read as many biographies of homosexual Christians as I can find. (“We read to know we’re not alone,” as the characters in the movie *Shadowlands* say.) Invariably, they talk about loneliness. . .

With every year that passes, I realize more and more that I don’t want to live life on my own. More than anything, I would like to have a life partner. But I keep circling back to the conclusion: fulfilling that desire seems impossible, so long as I continue looking to Scripture to guide my moral choices. . . .

I know well-meaning Christians who often remind me, “God’s love for you is better than any love you might find in a human relationship.” While I believe this is true in an ultimate and profound sense, putting it this way seems to set up a false dichotomy. A statement more in sync with the drift of the New Testament might go something like this: “God’s love for us is expressed and experienced mainly *through the medium of* human relationships.” . . .

When I graduated from college, I had talked with no one else my age about my sexuality. One night shortly after graduation, sitting on the dirty carpeted floor of the bedroom of a dingy bachelor pad in a circle of guy friends, I came so close to breaking down and asking them for help and for prayer. A black light was glowing, incense was burning on a shelf, one of the guys was strumming a guitar, and we were shooting the breeze after a spaghetti dinner. Knees tucked under my chin, I listened as someone brought up the topic of homosexuality. I felt my heart start to pound and my palms grow sweaty. “Have any of you ever had a gay or lesbian friend?” he asked. Another one of the guys, Charlie, said yes, he had had a close friend in college who had wrestled with homosexuality. “He and I would go climbing together and talk about it,” Charlie said. “Mainly I listened. . . . And we would talk about the grace that God always held out to us because of Jesus.”

As I listened to Charlie describe his relationship with his friend, I heard what seemed to me at that time to be a rare compassion, understanding, and respect in his voice. A few weeks later I decided to take a risk and trust that that same sensitivity might be there for me.

After an anxious dinner at an Indian restaurant, I finally blurted out, “Could we talk about something before we head home?”

“Sure,” Charlie said. Did he wonder why my voice was shaking? He pulled off the road, parked his Explorer in an empty lot, and turned off the engine.

“There’s something I’d like you to know about me....” I began weakly. I told him that I knew I was gay. I had known since puberty or soon after and had probably experienced some foretastes of my sexual orientation even as a child. I told him I had prayed for healing. I said I just wanted Christian friends who would be there for me, who would help me figure out how to live with a tension and confusion that felt overwhelming.

We talked that night until we got too cold, then Charlie started the engine again, prayed for me, and drove me back to my apartment. It was the very first time I had shared my deepest secret with a peer, and I felt some relief. The burden of loneliness wasn’t quite so heavy that night as it had been before.

After that, I grew less timid. I began to take chances on my fellow Christians. I shared my story with other people I went to church

with and began a process of learning to wrestle with my homosexuality and loneliness in a community. If it weren’t for these few—how few...

In a recent reflection on contemporary society, novelist Marilynne Robinson posed the simple question: “will people shelter and nourish and humanize one another?” Read in light of the Christian Church’s relationship to its gay members, her question takes on an added poignancy. Will the Church shelter and nourish and humanize those who are deeply lonely and struggling desperately to remain faithful?¹⁴

¹⁴ “A Few Like You”: Will the Church be the Church for Homosexual Christians? Wesley Hill
<http://www.ransomfellowship.org/article/detail.asp?AID=506&B=Wesley%20Hill&TID=7>; Accessed May 20, 09.