

Sexuality and Humanity



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“Paul this is all irrelevant. I could never be a Christian. What would I say to my gay friends?”

The resurrection may or may not be true, Jesus may or may not have died for her sins, but to Sarah it didn't really matter. What mattered was *“What would I say to my gay friends?”*

In some ways I could understand her point: how would I feel if my gay friends thought that they could tell me that I shouldn't be with my wife? Sarah along with most of our generation find the historic Christian teaching about sexuality at best strange and at worst positively offensive.

Nevertheless, I find I cannot bring myself around to that way of thinking. You see the disagreement Sarah and I have is not just about people's sex lives, rather we are disagreeing about the whole Christian teaching about what it means to be human. I can understand that too. After all what Christianity says about the nature of humanity is diametrically opposed to what our culture says about what it means to be human.

I know only too well that most of my friends of a secular bent believe that men and women are a just another type of “shaved ape”: a species only remarkable for purportedly being on a trajectory of irreversible improvement in all areas of life and existence and inclined by nature to grab as much as we can before we die. And after death they believe there is nothing at all. They certainly don't

believe that after death an account of how we've lived is demanded by God.

The Bible on the other hand teaches that we are:
beautifully made *and* tragically broken *and* expensively rescued *and* called to die *and* promised a glorious reward.

As Sarah and I have come to understand our profoundly different takes on the world it has become obvious to us why we haven't yet been able to reconcile our differences on issues of human sexuality, which is after all but one aspect among many of the humanity we all share.

So this is how I see things, I'll leave it to Sarah to present her best case for the alternative.

Beautifully Made

There is now a scientific consensus that the world had a defined beginning and few people have not been caused to consider that the world in which we live was *made*. When we see a new born baby, the Milky Way or a thing of beauty it resonates deep within us that these things are not a fluke but meant. The Bible opens with that beginning and that Creator. The very first words of all the thousands in that book are, "In *the* beginning *God*". And as he made the world God kept saying "This is good," but marvellously, after God made humanity, he paused and declared, "This is *very* good." The assertion that men and women are not just good but "*very* good" is made because of the Bible's insistence that amidst all of creation humans alone are made in the likeness of the most magnificent being to have ever existed: God himself.

If we accept that, then we can do nothing other than stand in awe of our fellow human beings: they are capable of profound relationships, intricate design and stunning generosity. We are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). C.S.Lewis commented " There are no ordinary people.....it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit...."

Equally this understanding the unique significance and design of humanity will always spill over into speaking to one another graciously and gently, not least when we disagree about deeply personal things. The Bible says you can't praise God and curse those made in his likeness (James 3:9). Language that degrades another human is an attack on God, because it is an attack on someone made in his image.

My more secular friends believe that if you disapprove of gay sex you are stripping a group of people of their dignity; but no-one's dignity is based on my approval, it is based on their creation in God's image. No-one thinks more highly of anyone than Christians do; whether or not we approve of their behaviour. *We are all beautifully made.*

Tragically Broken

Behind the post office in my village stands a huge crumbling brick tower. It is all that remains of one of the greatest English palaces. It is grand and impressive. It is boarded up and falling down. It is a glorious ruin; as the Bible tells us we are.

For sure, there is so much about us that remains awe-striking but it is tainted by so much that is heart-breaking. We get old, we get ill, we die. And, worst of all, we find a maelstrom of harmful desires at our core. I find myself wanting things and tragically doing things that I know will hurt me, my family and my planet. Don't you? The mirror-image of God in us has quite literally been crazed.

Every human being throughout the whole of time has been the same - save for one: Jesus Christ. That gives him a unique perspective to declare, as he is recorded as doing in Matthew's historical account of his life:

... out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

Look at the papers. Look at yourself. Jesus was not wrong, in fact he was spot on.

It is remarkably common nowadays to hear people say, "I do it because it's just how I am" or "I'm only being true to myself" or even "if this is how God made me what else can I do". But there's the rub: we are not now how we were designed to be: *we are all tragically broken*.

I can't just follow my heart and trust it to lead me to what's good. I can't argue, "I want it. It must be right", because some of the things I want are wrong. That applies to me sexually as much as it applies to anything and anyone else. Me, my mind, my body, my heart telling me I like sex of a particular type or in particular circumstances does not make it right

We cannot look at a crumbling tower in a field and say, "That is just what the architect wanted." To understand what the architect wanted I need to see the original plans. To understand what God made me to be I need to listen to him as he explains how he made us in the beginning, before the brokenness came in. Even more so I need him to physically show me what it looks like: and he did - in Jesus Christ.

Jesus, when he was confronted with questions about sexual ethics, showed us how to determine whether our deepest instincts do in fact conform to God's intentions for us. In Jesus' culture the hot debate was about divorce. Could a man kick his wife out of the home if she burnt dinner? Some people said "yes", some people said "no". Jesus reduced it to one simple question: "What was it like at the beginning?"

... at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female" and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh." (Matthew 19:4-5)

God created one man for one woman so they could give themselves to each other and become one. Sex is an act of self-giving unique to that context. This is beautifully expressed in the traditional wedding vows: "With my body I honour you, all that I am I give to you, all that I have I share with you." It's about becoming united: economically, emotionally and physically. Any other type of sexual relationship, however deep the feelings from which it arises, falls short of that.

I say it again, we *all* find desires inside us that run contrary to God's beautiful design. I do, and all Christians will (Galatians 5:17). We are *all, without exception* tragically broken and we mustn't look down on anyone simply because their temptations are different to ours.

How has this brokenness happened? The apostle Paul explains in Romans 1,

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. (Romans 1:21)

God gave us a good world that shouts at every point "A good God made me! Worship him!" We've shut our ears and rejected the one who has given us everything. We've tried to shut him out of our universe. God's response to our rebellion has been to hand us over to domination by our desires; that is why we find ourselves wrestling with all sorts of temptations, including sexual temptations.

Paul lists many other symptoms of our brokenness ("They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful"). He doesn't say that there are some humans who are all of these things, but rather that all humans are some of these things and so human society is characterised by all of these things.

Paul goes on to say that men's sexual desire for other men and women's desire for other women is one result of humanity's rebellion against God, some people will have this desire, but it's not what we were made for (Romans 1:25-27).

And just in case you (or I) are feeling morally superior to our society and thinking, "Well I'm not as bad as all that", Paul hits us too:

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. (Romans 2:1)

Smug judgementalism condemns us: it renders us what no one wants to be: a hypocrite and if we

don't even live up to our own standards, how could we begin to imagine we are living up to the standards of a holy and pure God? Without exception, *we are all tragically broken.*

Expensively Rescued

I was once asked "Do you think LGBT people can be Christians?" Again, the question is understandable but insufficiently profound: the brokenness of all people forces me to ask, "Can anyone be a Christian?" It's not just one group with one set of temptations who stand condemned before God. It's all of us. We were all beautifully made, but we all rejected God; God handed all of us over to our desires and now we are all tragically broken.

Is there any hope for anyone?

Yes, because it isn't about us. It is about being rescued from who we are. Rescued at immeasurably cost to the rescuer:

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (1 Peter 1:18-19)

God's love is lavish and extravagant. He didn't stick us on the rubbish dump and leave us. He became a human, took our punishment and died in our place. Now the door is open to everyone (1 John 2:2).

No-one was good enough to be saved without Jesus being tortured to death in their place, so no-one has any right to swagger about their goodness. No-one is bad enough that Jesus' death can't take their sin away, so no-one should walk away from him in despair. Even the purest virgins who waited until their wedding night to consummate their relationship as God expects are still so wicked that Jesus had to die in their place. The most violent terrorist locked in the most secure prison is still so loved that Jesus' death offers him forgiveness.

You're worse than you think, but you can't be too bad for Jesus. There is nothing you can do to make him love you more and nothing you can do to make him love you less. Jesus is recorded as saying in his death, "it is finished"- he had accomplished rescue there was nothing else left to be done and nothing more that could ever be done.

The apostle Paul was the author of many New Testament books, but before he became a Christian he had guarded the coats of the lynch mob that stoned Stephen the first martyr and he had hunted Christians down to throw them in prison. Why did God save him? Paul could only think of one answer:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

God saved Paul because he was the worst of sinners. God saved Paul so that anyone could approach God with confidence, knowing that there is no sin that shuts you off from God's grace.

Jesus said:

... whoever comes to me I will never drive away. (John 6:37)

I am convinced that absolutely anyone can become a Christian because *we have all been expensively rescued.*

Called to Die

Dr Rosaria Butterfield was an English professor at Syracuse University specialising in queer studies, sharing a house and mortgage with her long term female partner. Gradually she became convinced that Christianity was true, but she also realised that it would cost her everything: her job, her house, her relationship, most of her friendship circle. She agonised, "How could God ask me to make my life a train wreck?"

She went round her church asking people, "What has it cost you to follow Jesus?"

She knew that if Christianity was true, then it must have cost everyone in her church a great deal and she was right because Jesus calls all of us to come and die:

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. (Luke 9:23-24)

This theme has not been emphasised in some circles of western Christianity. I think this is one of the reasons why it has been so hard for us to respond to questions like: "Are you asking me to give up my sexual partner?"

We don't feel comfortable saying, "Yes", because we've forgotten that it's actually normal for it to cost us deeply to follow Jesus:

- the Christian at school who gets shut out of the cool clique, because she can't go along

- with everything
- the Christian at work who misses the promotion, because people don't like him talking about Jesus
 - the Christian who would love to get married, but the only nice guys she meets aren't Christians
 - the Christian who quits his fulfilling job to care for his terminally ill wife

None of those are imaginary people – they are friends of mine. How dare Jesus ask them to give up so much?

I can think of at least five reasons.

Firstly, Jesus already did it. We take up our cross to follow him. He left heaven where he was secure and worshiped by countless angels and became a baby in a peasant family in the province of Palestine. As an adult he didn't have a house and he didn't get married. His family thought he was crazy and he got tortured to death. Jesus isn't asking us to do anything he hasn't already done.

Secondly, Jesus owns us. Jesus made us so we belong to him, but more than that he rescued us at the cost of his own life. Jesus has the right to ask us to do anything; he owns us twice over.

"... You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body." (1 Corinthians 6:19b-20)

Thirdly, Jesus uses hard experiences to make us more like him (Romans 8:28-29).

Fourthly, life is brief, very very brief. When Paul is answering questions about sexual ethics he sums up his driving principle as, "What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short." (1 Corinthians 7:29) The length of our life next to the length of eternity is like one grain of sand next to all the sand in the Sahara. Following Jesus is costly: *we are all called to die.*

And because it is costly, you will want to hear my fifth reason, which is my final aspect of what it means to be human.

Promised a Glorious Reward

It is costly to follow Jesus, but it is not foolish, because we are promised an awesome reward: a world without pain, where we see God's glory as he wipes every tear from our eyes. A good friend talks of heaven not as harps, clouds and cherubs but simply as a world of no more hearses, no more hankies and no more hospitals. A restored, simply flawless, recreated world for restored,

recreated people.

A hero of mine, Jim Elliot who was brutally murdered in Ecuador. He was killed merely for trying to explain the things that I am now trying to explain here. Something he wrote in his journal just before he died taught me all I needed to know about this.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."

Let's go back to the life of that man Paul the Apostle. We are told that five times he received thirty-nine lashes, that he was stoned by a lynch mob, that he was beaten, shipwrecked three times, in constant danger and always impoverished. Having endured all that for many years he said something very similar thing about his life:

*... our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.
(2 Corinthians 4:17)*

So I think we should see ourselves as: *beautifully made, tragically broken, expensively rescued, called to die and promised a glorious reward* and I think that when we do it will completely change our perspective on sexuality and our humanity.

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