

Listening to a Complex Story

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The twenty something man who comes to see me about his sexuality does not fit easily into categories of gay and straight. He is a celibate young man who is in love with a young woman from his church.

This young man is sexually attracted to his girlfriend and recognizes that he is also same sex attracted. The simple approach may be to tell him he really is gay and that he needs to face up to that reality. Conversely, he could be told that he is straight and he needs to just disregard these other desires. Yet the labels, gay or straight, come nowhere near approximating the complexity of his sexuality and his hopes and desires for the future, and his desire to lead a godly and obedient life.

The woman who ends up in bed with a female friend could be read simply as a woman who has finally discovered her true identity. Yet for her it was a surprising and regretful event. She did not want to have sex outside the confines of a marriage between a man and a woman.

The man who has had numerous sexual partners on beats and in clubs in Sydney, who comes to church, owns the title Christian. He feels caught in an addictive cycle with his sexual attraction to men. He is straightforward in his acknowledgement that how he is living does not fit into his faith. He is not naïve. And he does not own the title “gay”. He knows his behaviour is clearly homosexual, yet his primary identity is not his sexual expression, rather it’s his relationship with Christ.

The middle aged man who has felt sexual attraction to men since his teenage years can easily be classified gay in our culture’s terms. When we find out that he has been celibate all his life due to his Christian faith we can read him as an oppressed individual who has had his real identity denied him by a repressive church. And then when he fell in love with a woman at his church and married and ended up in a sexually satisfying relationship with his wife, what category do we put him in then?

If these four stories were reported in the press I would be surprised if the nuance would be reported without resorting to labels. The labels make shallow these people’s identity. They don’t see themselves as gay, they see themselves as Christians who are working through living a godly life. They don’t want to embrace a lifestyle where a label is attached to them, which declares their sexuality as their primary identity.

But our culture can’t deal with complexity. Has the church drunk of this simplification of identity? Do we define people according to their sexual behaviour as if that says something of them beyond what they do with their bodies? Do we define people according to their desires, even if they don’t act upon them?

Our identity is that we are saints (1 Cor 1:2). As soon as we have another title or identity that overwhelms the description of us as saints it is a denigration of the

holiness that has been given us by the grace of God.

In the complexity of our sexuality and identity we deeply desire acceptance. One of the beauties of the church is its ability to accept others in all their complexity. We all come to Christ with flaws and weakness, for that is why we need Christ. The question for us as church communities, is will we accept others who have struggles with their sexuality?

Acceptance does not mean that we can or will agree. To always agree would be impossible. Yet we need to search for a model of being in our church communities where we can open the conversation about sexuality under the word of God; engage with the scriptures and move forward as a godly community.

The experiential truth of so many Christians is that their sexual desires do not make them. Same sex attraction is for many not a core identity, merely a part of their sexuality. Instead they want Christ's wholeness in their desire to live holy and obedient lives. It is a neat label to somehow bundle up someone's identity with a tag like gay or bi or straight. It is the niche marketing language of a consumerist culture.

What has consumerist culture done to our faith? What is the impact of living in a culture where the traditional virtue of patience is seen as an irrelevance? Why not get satisfaction now? What is the impact on our chastity when we are told that we should live out our sexual desires without limit?

What if our desires are not our primary motivators, but something larger, something more virtuous, something godly? In our culture it is hard to hear that our natural desires may not be the measure of the virtuous life.

One of the most challenging aspects of the discussion about sexuality in our cultural context is listening to people's stories of change. There are many people who have had an identity which is GLBT (gay, lesbian, bi or transsexual) and are now living radically different lives.

If our sexuality is completely set at birth and there is no escape from that orientation it is a very neat and easy story. Yet so many people have a different story to tell. People in and out of the church have made decisions about their sexuality, to not act on same sex desire. For some that has led them to heterosexual relationships, and for others it has led them to a life of celibacy.

And for the many Christians who choose celibacy as an option? In such a sexualized culture it seems anathema to say that some live without having sex, yet for so many Christians that is the reality of their lives.

Celibacy is the calling for the grand majority of believers at some time in their lives. Most will be celibate at several points in life - that is normal.

Celibacy is not a disaster. It is not a failure. It does not mean that we are worthless.

Jesus was celibate. St Paul sees it as liberation from marital distractions (1 Cor 7:8-9, 25-31). Celibacy is not an aberration but a choice many wise and godly Christians have made over the centuries.

And what of those who make a decision but fail in its execution? Those folk join the endless line of all those who know they need the Lord Jesus. We not only have a Lord but we have a Savior who is the harbinger and deliverer of forgiveness into our messy and broken lives. Our failure to live the lives we want to live does not mean though that we just change our standards. It means that we recognise at every point our need for Christ; our dependence upon Him; and His limitless love for us.

Questions:

1. Has the church drunk of a simplification of sexual identity? If so how?
2. Is it appropriate to define people according to their sexual behaviour? Or according to their desires, even if they don't act upon them? How does that impact how we relate to people?
3. Are we part of an accepting church where people can be open with their struggles? Is our church open to repentance and all its implications?
4. What is the impact of living in a culture where the traditional virtue of patience is devalued and we are told to live out our sexual desires asap?
5. How seriously do you take the option or calling of celibacy?