

HOT TOPICS

Speaking To Them Without Getting Burned

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Presented to Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, August 30, 2015

Recent polls report that only 2 to 3 percent of the nation experiences same-sex attraction. But homosexuality affects 100 percent of the population. It's an issue that is increasingly in the social spotlight, and it will not be leaving for some time.

Many of us have friends who identify as gay or lesbian, or know of someone who is homosexual. And we see same-sex relationships portrayed as normal behavior on television, in interviews, and in public. Not only is being gay or lesbian acceptable, it's practically a non-issue for the younger generation. Kids are starting to ask an important question: "Who cares who you love?"

Celebrities have commented about the hypocrisy practiced by some Christians, and are wrestling with the relationship between the Bible and hate-speech toward gays and lesbians. Most of us have probably read news articles about overly zealous Christians with a hefty case of foot-in-mouth disease, who have attacked homosexuals, both verbally and physically.

As I suggested last weekend, culture is not the problem; sin is. Culture is like the air we breathe. We can't escape from it, and when it's impure, we can't just hold our breath and avoid it. We can only do our best to purify it, or to guard ourselves (and others) with a filter (a mask).

As the debate continues around topics like same-sex marriage, homosexuality, or abortion, the arguments on both sides can sound convincing. For that reason, *before* you engage with others in the conversation (and I hope you will), you need to think about what you believe and why, and make sure you are able to explain your faith and convictions clearly and respectfully.

Such topics are usually fueled by emotion, as much or more than reason, which is why we call them "hot." On both sides of the issue. Nearly every decision we make is first made from our emotions, unless we have trained hard to overcome that. This is not a faulty mechanism; it is the way God wired us.

However, God also wired us with conscience and reason—making us uniquely human, and godlike. If we only operate out of our feelings, we are no different than animals. But if we attempt to operate from reason alone, we will become—well, unfeeling. And that would be distinctly non-human.

In an age of rapidly increasing knowledge and technology, this tension between the relative values of human feeling and reason spawned one of the longest running television series—Star Trek, centered in the characters of Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

In human society, both feeling and reason are necessary, not merely as components, but also as the energy that drives decisions. Finding the proper balance is the real-life challenge, for people and circumstances are fluid.

Even if we lean on reason for a particular conclusion, it can only remain human if we do not lose the emotional aspect. That is why our justice system does not rely on a single judge, but invokes the testimonies of witnesses and the arguments of lawyers and the deliberation of 12-person juries to reach a conclusion. And then the judge weighs the factors or merits of the specific case to impose a suitable judgment. Do we get it right every time? No, because we are broken people in a broken world. But it is still our best shot at doing it right.

In fact, most, if not all, of the decisions you make are rooted in your emotions. It is only after a knee-jerk reaction, or a noticeable inclination that your reasoning may enter into the decision-making process. Reason may trump emotion in decision-making, but it requires intentional effort. From past experience, you may habitually trust reason over feeling in certain situations; in other situations, the reverse.

When it comes to belief—your faith—which is the primary director, emotion or reason? Most of us know it *should* be reason, as tutored by the Word of God, but it often is not. And not because we don't believe the Bible, but because emotion is deep and strong, and our Biblical thinking may be underdeveloped.

If faith relied primarily on reason, you could have no faith until you had taken a reasoned journey through the options. As it is, we find people everyday who express a settled faith, a certainty that guides their choices and behaviors—whether about God, or science, or things good for you, or things bad for you—who cannot adequately explain their position in reasonable terms beyond assertions like, “That’s just the way it is!” or “I just know it’s so!”

Your personal experience is unassailable. Your interpretation of your experience, however, which is largely emotional, can be adjusted by persuasive reasoning. This is what we commonly call education, or therapy, or preaching, or brain-washing. The best, or most effective, in any of those practices, are those that weave emotion and reason together to create a profound impression.

And they all take time. This must be thoughtfully considered when you take up Jesus challenge to “*go, and make disciples of all peoples*” (Matthew 28:19). Impatience will not produce the change you want. On average, it takes six clear and varied presentations of the Gospel, before

a firm decision for Christ will be made. Even more, if the appeal is primarily logical. People are a stubborn lot!

For instance, how long did it take you to come to a settled viewpoint on the matter of homosexuality? Probably not overnight, and your viewpoint may yet be unsettled. Therefore, recognize that other people's views on such topics and homosexuality will not change or solidify as the result of a single conversation. It could take a year, or ten years!

What Does Scripture Say?

I want to take a few minutes to look at five Scripture passages that deal with homosexuality (two in the Old Testament, and three in the New Testament). They are frequently misinterpreted or misapplied.

The first, and most often referenced verse is in the book of Leviticus, which is the third book of the Bible's Old Testament. The first book, Genesis, describes the beginning of all things, including God's covenant relations with humankind. The second, Exodus, describes the formation of the people of God, through trial and deliverance and testing. Leviticus, introduces in some detail, the application of the Law that was given to Moses, and the worship that was to be given to God.

The general subject of sexual sins arises in chapter twenty, and the passage reads as follows:

Leviticus 20:10-13 (NET)

¹⁰ If a man commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.

¹¹ If a man has sexual intercourse with his father's wife, he has exposed his father's nakedness. Both of them must be put to death; their blood guilt is on themselves.

¹² If a man has sexual intercourse with his daughter-in-law, both of them must be put to death. They have committed perversion; their blood guilt is on themselves.

¹³ If a man has sexual intercourse with a male as one has sexual intercourse with a woman, the two of them have committed an abomination. They must be put to death; their blood guilt is on themselves.

Subsequent verses in this same passage refer to sexual relations with animals, one's sister, a menstruating woman, a man's aunt, or sister-in-law. Thus, you can easily see that the theme is broad, and homosexual practice is but one instance of violation. The sentence for most of these infractions is death, explained in verse 14 as, "to wipe out such wickedness among you." Here are deeply emotional sins, met with highly logical responses.

It is worthy of note that the verse referring to homosexual practice, does not address same-sex desire or attraction or orientation. Nor does it judge the character of the people involved;

it judges their BEHAVIOR. Some have misread and misapplied this judgment, saying, “God hates homosexuals.” He does not. He loves people with same-sex attractions, just as much as husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, and everyone else. But He hates homosexual practice, just as He hates adultery and incest and bestiality.

The next reference is in the Bible’s fifth book, Deuteronomy, which is a rehearsal of Israel’s 40-year course in faithfulness to God, reviewing His laws of social behavior and worship and His covenant of mercy for repentant law-breakers. Here, the reference is more narrowly applicable, as we will see.

Deuteronomy 23:17-18 (CJB)

¹⁷ *“No woman of Isra’el is to engage in ritual prostitution, and no man of Isra’el is to engage in ritual homosexual prostitution.*

¹⁸ *Nothing earned through heterosexual or homosexual prostitution is to be brought into the house of ADONAI your God in fulfillment of any vow, for both of these are abhorrent to ADONAI your God.*

The focus is on a religious practice of pagan nations, that included sexual relations with temple prostitutes, as a part of their common practice. Since such religions relied heavily on emotional energies as expressions of so-called worship, sexual energy was ritualized.

You may have noticed in reading the brief passage, once again, that the character of the people themselves is not judged or addressed. But their practices, whether heterosexual or homosexual, and their earnings were absolutely unacceptable to the Lord God.

As we turn to the New Testament, we find two comments by Paul and one by Jude, the brother of Jesus, on the theme of homosexuality.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (NLT)

⁹ *Don’t you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don’t fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality,*

¹⁰ *or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God.*

¹¹ *Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Again, homosexual practices are addressed in the midst of a lengthy list of similarly contemptible sins, including idolatry, adultery, larceny, greediness, drunkenness, abusiveness, and cheating.

There are actually two distinct terms referring to homosexuals (“male prostitutes” and “practicing homosexuals”). These two expressions seem to specify the two partners in a homosexual relationship: one passive, the other dominant.

Of particular note, is that this passage is addressed to Christians, members of the church in Corinth. *“Don’t fool yourselves,”* suggests that some of them were dabbling or engaging in some of these practices. While they had not been thrown out of the assembly, Paul wanted to be clear that they were in danger of losing their eternal standing in Christ.

“Some of you were once like that,” demonstrates the power of repentance and faith. A clear change in their behavior, as well as their standing, had transpired.

Paul’s stance was evidently seen by some as license to sin for awhile (and repent later), so he continued:

1 Corinthians 6:12-13 (NET)

¹² *“All things are lawful for me” — but not everything is beneficial. “All things are lawful for me” — but I will not be controlled by anything.*

¹³ *“Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food, but God will do away with both.” The body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.*

One cannot escape the spiritual consequences of sinful behaviors, and there is no hiding behind permissiveness. Paul also emphasizes that we are not essentially sexual creatures (like mere animals). We are essentially spiritual creatures (unlike animals), made in the image of God, for fellowship with and service to God.

Why does God care so much about our sexual behaviors? If we are not essentially sexual, aren’t such behaviors peripheral, and therefore less important? On the contrary.

Sexual energy may not be our core, but it is very powerful. And it is capable of huge distraction to our essential purpose in life. Remember, we begin life as “dead toward God, because of sin.” That means that our spiritual core is shut down and needs to be awakened and engaged, so that our destiny may be fulfilled. Misuse of sexual energies hugely inhibits that awakening and continued engagement.

Next, Paul addresses the purpose of the Law, and in so doing, the sin behind these offensive behaviors.

1 Timothy 1:8-11 (NLT)

⁸ *We know that the law is good when used correctly.*

⁹ *For the law was not intended for people who do what is right. It is for people who are lawless and rebellious, who are ungodly and sinful, who consider nothing sacred and defile what is holy, who kill their father or mother or commit other murders.*

¹⁰ *The law is for people who are sexually immoral, or who practice homosexuality, or are slave traders, liars, promise breakers, or who do anything else that contradicts the wholesome teaching*

¹¹ *that comes from the glorious Good News entrusted to me by our blessed God.*

Here, again, homosexual practice is but one of a broad list of sinful behaviors. But underlying all of these is a common attitude: irreverent rebellion. This is what the Law of God confronts, so that we might recognize it for what it is and repent to God.

Jude concurs.

Jude 1:5-7 (NET)

⁵ *Now I desire to remind you (even though you have been fully informed of these facts once for all) that Jesus, having saved the people out of the land of Egypt, later destroyed those who did not believe.*

⁶ *You also know that the angels who did not keep within their proper domain but abandoned their own place of residence, he has kept in eternal chains in utter darkness, locked up for the judgment of the great Day.*

⁷ *So also Sodom and Gomorrah and the neighboring towns, since they indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire in a way similar to these angels, are now displayed as an example by suffering the punishment of eternal fire.*

Sodomy is a word derived from the name of the ancient city, Sodom, because of the commonly accepted practices of its inhabitants. Sodomy generally refers to homosexual practice.

There was a common sin that lay behind the unfaithfulness of the wandering Israelites, the angels who fell, and the people of the region of Sodom and Gomorrah. It was not their behaviors, which varied, but their inner attitude. I think it is described most clearly in the case of the angels, *“who did not keep within their proper domain.”*

The Israelites had a “proper domain” of exclusive allegiance to Jehovah.

The angels had a “proper domain” of faithful obedience to Almighty God.

All people have a “proper domain,” especially in the area of emotional and physical desires, defined by the social behavioral boundaries established in the Bible and affirmed by the Holy Spirit, and, in many cases, by the laws of the land.

“Pushing the envelope” of one’s proper domain, which is a naturally human thing to do, eventually leads to crossing the line.

What Did Jesus Say?

Jesus only addressed the subject of sexual perversity in broad terms. He did not single out homosexuals; probably, because they were no more common in his day than in ours.

Matthew 15:16-20 (NLT)

¹⁶ *“Don’t you understand yet?” Jesus asked.*

¹⁷ *“Anything you eat passes through the stomach and then goes into the sewer.*

¹⁸ *But the words you speak come from the heart—that’s what defiles you.*

¹⁹ *For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, all sexual immorality, theft, lying, and slander.*

²⁰ *These are what defile you. Eating with unwashed hands will never defile you.”*

He plainly warned that all such practices have a major negative spiritual impact on the one who practices them. Defilement isolates people from fellowship with God. One may practice such things and still find religious feelings occasionally stirred, but growth in God will not occur. Spiritual growth is stunted by such behaviors.

We also know how he treated a woman who had been caught “in the very act” of adultery. He did not dismiss the Law of Moses, but He raised the bar: *“Let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone”* (John 8:7). By this act, Jesus showed that judging oneself and doing what is right outweighs judging others and punishing wrongdoing. There’s also that story about a speck in the eye.

Finally, it’s best to say only what God has said. Don’t put words in His mouth. When He is silent, it is for a reason. Trust Him. Don’t get caught up by social media hype or fads. Pay attention to what the Holy Spirit is doing.

Talking About It

Hot topics like this are challenging, because everyone has, not only an opinion, but a *weighted* opinion—weighted with emotional investment. Many will simply try to avoid them. Some should.

But one on one, in a genuine relationship, where there is respect and love, they can be addressed. And, if you ask, the Holy Spirit will show you the time and place to begin. And if He doesn’t, don’t push it. God knows how to handle people with love.

Here are five tips for hot topic conversations, if the Spirit of God directs you there.

1. Set Up a Conversation for Practice

Do your prep work with one or two trusted friends. To keep it real, base the conversation on the words of someone who is on the other side of the issue—perhaps a newspaper editorial, or a television interview, or a book, or a video.

2. Start a Conversation for Real

Don't be afraid to start a conversation on a hot topic! But do it out of sincere interest. If you're just hungry for attention, stick to song and dance routines. If you're looking to make a point, use a pencil sharpener. These conversations are only for loving hearts.

Avoid trite clichés, and don't turn the Scriptures into cliché one-liners. These turn sincere people off, reveal your own unoriginal shallowness, defeat real relationship, and betray the glorious mystery of God.

Ask open-ended questions that seek to understand your friend's point of view; that is, seek to know *what* they think and *why* they think it—what circumstances and experiences led them to their point of view. Listen. A lot.

3. Sustain a Conversation Carefully

Don't drop a bomb and walk away! Instead, sow a seed, water it with prayer, and come back to tend it frequently.

Don't over-react! Expect your friend to say some things that contradict Scripture, or make you uncomfortable. If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. (I know, I'm using clichés, but they are fitting.)

Don't be judgmental! God didn't send you to "fix" or change anyone. He sent you as a witness. This is your "proper domain." Leave the transformative process in God's hands.

Don't be afraid to reference the Bible—appropriately, without threatening.

4. Suspend a Conversation If Necessary

If the pressure becomes too heavy, give it a little relief, to avoid an explosion. It's okay to change the subject and take a break. After a certain point, pushing against the door will close it, instead of opening it further. Give people time to process, at their own pace.

5. Support a Conversation Repeatedly

Besides meeting from time to time, you can keep the conversation going indirectly, by offering resources—other people with a pertinent testimony, relevant films, video clips, books, or articles.

Don't overload them. When they ask for a drink of water, don't turn the firehose on them. Again, time for processing is just as important as your persuasive efforts. Remember, *they* set the pace, not you.

Your loving patience and faith will be rewarded.