

Homosexuality – A Christian Perspective

by Robert Griffith

Please Note: This message was written and presented over 12 years ago. A postscript has now been included at the end for those who are interested.

I come to this very sensitive issue as a sinner, saved by God's grace. I do not presume to know everything there is to know about homosexuality. Nor do I presume to have a direct line to God on this issue. However I do believe you will hear the voice of God in what I say in this message. I understand that I take a huge risk in addressing one of the most controversial issues in the church and in our society. In so doing, you may not like what I have to say and you will need to decide how you react to a view which may be contrary to your own.

You can reject it, attack it, switch off when you hear it so you hear nothing else from that point in time . . . or you can be open to God's leading and allow time to pray through what I say and seek the Lord's wisdom before you react or respond in any way.

Some will think I am too soft on the issue. Some will think I am too harsh and judgmental. Some will think I fail to take a decisive stance and waver in my convictions. I understand all those views and respect your right to hold one of them. However, you need to know that it's not my purpose to please those whom I teach.

My purpose is to speak prophetically to the needs and issues of today, under the anointing of God's spirit – whether accepted and received well or rejected outright. For too long, our church pulpits have been largely silent on such controversial issues as divorce, abortion and homosexuality . . . to mention just a few. It's time that we tackled these issues head-on as we seek the heart of God.

All I ask is that you suspend judgement on what I say in this message for one week. That's right, I want you to wait a week before you decide how you feel about this issue. During that week I want you to study this message, with the Word of God open before you, and pray at every opportunity. Ask the Lord to show you His heart and lead you to see this and all issues that face us today, through His eyes and from his heart. Will you do that for me? Will you do it for yourself? Will you do it for God and His glory? I hope so.

OK, lets take a deep breath and launch into what is one of the most important sermons I have ever written or preached in my lifetime.

Many, many years ago, as a young man of 14, I sat in the lounge room of Peter and Sally (not their real names) as Peter led me to Jesus Christ. What a wonderful night that was! My relationship with Peter was never the same again. We shared an intimacy and a closeness from that night on. This man took me by the hand and led me into the throne room of heaven and I praise God for him.

I had been invited to a BBQ at the local church of Christ by a friend at school. As it happened, they were forming a youth group that night and Peter and Sally were going to lead the group. Within two weeks, their lifestyle and their words had been used mightily by God and I came under the conviction of the Holy Spirit and the rest is history, as they say.

It was at this time also that I started to seriously contemplate my future and being married and having a job. Peter and Sally were a perfect couple as far as I could tell. They loved the Lord and each other and I spent lots of time in their home. The birth of their first child was a great thrill for me. Sally was in the same hospital room as my mother, in fact. My youngest sister and Peter and Sally's daughter have been friends ever since!

To my distress, Peter got a new job in Sydney and they left Orange. I kept in touch for many years. I got to see two more children enter the world through these wonderful parents. After I met and married my wife, she got to know Peter and Sally too and we stayed in their home and spend time with them now and then. Peter was M.C. at our wedding reception. In so many spoken and unspoken ways, I believe we modelled our marriage and our child-rearing on these two wonderful people. As you can tell, they had a profound effect on me. Well, our lives all got a little hectic and the gaps between contacts grew larger until there were only Christmas cards and the occasional call.

Then the unthinkable happened. We received a Christmas card with only Sally and the children's names on it ... but not Peter's. We were to soon discover that Peter had moved out. That first shock was nothing in comparison to the next one. Given our topic here, you've probably guessed the scenario. Peter had left his wife and children and moved in with another man and was living in a homosexual relationship.

My whole world seemed to spin for a while – not knowing what to do or think or say. I contacted Sally and expressed my love and concern for her and the kids at such a terrible time – without wanting to get into any of the details. But it took me quite a while before I was strong enough to contact Peter. What would I say? I had never encountered homosexuality before among my family or friends. I was in uncharted waters and it was frightening.

A battle raged within me - between the accumulated prejudice and condemning tones of the church that all of a sudden came into my mind ... and the love and respect I had for this brother in the Lord. I used to sit and watch as this man read from God's word – with tears rolling down his cheeks as the passion and reality of his relationship with God overwhelmed him and those around him. And now he'd thrown it all away – his marriage – the church – everything! How was I supposed to respond to that?

Well, I believe it was the Lord Who answered that question and gave me a picture of Peter one night. He was standing in the middle of a huge crowd of people – all people that he had known and had relationships with – mostly in the church. The tragic part of the picture was that everyone had their backs to him. No one would look at him, talk to him, love him or care for him. He was in agony. It would be better if he was totally alone – than in a crowd of people who ignored him. I sensed the Lord asking me whether I was going to be part of that judgemental, cold crowd of Peter's former friends – or whether I was strong enough to be the friend I used to be.

I telephoned Peter the next day and we spoke at length. I told him that I neither understood nor condoned the choices he had made, but I was still his friend and his struggles and bad choices were no different to mine – regardless the attitude of society. I stressed that I wanted to love him and help him – not judge him. He broke down and wept. I later found out that I was the only person from his past that had made any positive contact with him up until that point. He had received many letters and calls which condemned him and dealt with him harshly, but I was the only one from the hundreds of people who called him a friend who had made any positive approach to him.

Some time later, when we were studying at Bible College, the conviction to do something more substantial resulted in us inviting Peter to dinner one night. We prayed our hearts out and decided it was Peter our friend who was coming to dinner – not Peter the homosexual! What a revelation that was. Simple, but mind-blowing. So we didn't put the kids to bed early and batten down the hatches – we just acted normally and prayed that the Lord would give us a chance to minister to our friend.

Peter came and after the initial tension, he could feel that we were not there to judge him or condemn him and so he relaxed and later in the evening, he talked openly about his whole journey. Before going to bed, our children talked with him. He nursed them and played with them and I saw the dad that I always admired and wanted to imitate. He cried when the children went to bed and said that we were the first people in seven years, who had let him anywhere near their children.

He went on to tell us of the judgement and condemnation that had come from the church and former friends in the church. He was bitter – no doubt about it – but he was broken-hearted too. His best friend, an elder in the church in which they both served for years, cut Peter off the moment he heard of his homosexual orientation. He even had his phone number changed to a new silent number so Peter couldn't call him.

The sad fact is this: when people heard that the marriage had broken down – there were many in the church who rallied to help and encourage and pray for reconciliation. Peter had many of his friends, including this best friend, come to his side to help him. But the moment Peter decided to tell them the whole story – they ran like scolded cats and never came back.

His best friend suffered a fatal heart attack a year or two later and his dying words - the last thing he spoke to his wife as he drifted into eternity - was "*Don't let that bastard come to my funeral.*" When he died, Peter didn't try to attend the funeral, but sent flowers to his friend's wife instead. Her heart was so hardened towards Peter that she actually went to the trouble of sending the flowers back to him. Such was the hate and the fear and judgement of the church – from Peter's perspective.

That was the first time I remember feeling embarrassed and ashamed for being part of the church. I can't describe the pain and the grief I felt as I saw and heard how Christians treated a brother in need, thinking that their sin was so much less offensive than his. If this message helps someone like Peter to find a Christian who cares and will love them back to life and wholeness, then it will have been worth it.

I always wondered why the Lord put me through all that – why was I exposed to Peter's pain and my own in such a way. I have always believed that nothing is an accident in God's kingdom and everything has a purpose. Many years later I was to discover the reason as a young man in my church came to see me as his Pastor and told me of his life-long struggle with homosexuality and how he couldn't fight it any more and was planning to leave his wife. He did leave her – but after much prayer and patience and loads of unconditional love and grace – this man was healed, his marriage restored and he now serves as a Pastor in the church. After the pain of processing Peter's struggles – the Lord blessed me by letting me witness a happy ending. But for Peter and thousands of others – the pain continues.

Few issues are so deeply emotional or politically polarised in the church and society as the issue of homosexuality. It is an identifying issue. Just as a self-identified homosexual person is likely to be treated as if that were his or her whole identity, so a person who takes a stand on one side of the issue or the other is open to becoming so identified with the issue that no other conviction or commitment will be heard. For this reason, many churches and many Christians refuse to take any stand, preferring silence to the labelling and condemnation which accompany this issue on both extremes.

It is a legitimate choice, because sexuality is personal and private. A church is well within its rights not to take a stand on the question but to leave such matters to the autonomy and individual conscience of the community members. Sadly, in a polarised context where debate is so oversimplified you are branded as either for or against with no middle ground allowed, reasonable people are forced to join one extreme or the other or be silent.

Therefore, a question that must be answered up front is: can meaningful discussion on this issue happen? Can we trust one another enough to question, research, listen, open our minds and hearts to be changed by God through the honest search for truth? Perhaps every individual must answer that for himself or herself. But if we enter a debate with minds so closed we are searching for ammunition rather than information, the debate will be decided by prejudice rather than truth and by power rather than persuasion.

Some would argue on either side that there is no room for debate on an issue that is already clear. They would say there is no room for discussion because all forms of homosexuality are a sin. Or on the other extreme they would argue that all arguments against homosexuality are homophobic, judgmental, and un-Christian and totally devoid of the unconditional love and grace of God. I would suggest that the mere presence of these two extremes in society and among Christians makes the debate both necessary and legitimate. I believe it is possible and courageous to reject the pressures from either extreme while listening to all sides and to make up your own mind on the issue as you are led by the Spirit of God.

Christians in our nation are deeply divided over the question of what is the appropriate stance the church should take toward homosexuality and homosexuals in our midst. I think it is really important that we become informed about this sensitive issue so we know how to respond to all involved.

So what is homosexuality? Homosexual persons have been treated by the church and the society the same way other minorities have been treated in the past. They have been linked to one another by a single factor, their sexual orientation, assumed to behave exactly alike, and all alike condemned. They have been the subject of stereotypes which are only occasionally true.

Much of the debate regarding homosexuality reflects the ignorance of this prejudice and stereotyping. For instance, there is no such thing as 'the homosexual lifestyle,' or 'the homosexual agenda,' because there are as many homosexual lifestyles, behaviours, and agendas as there are thousands of heterosexual lifestyles, behaviours and agendas. A 'practicing' homosexual is the same as a 'practicing' heterosexual - he or she may engage in any number of sexual behaviours from chastity to promiscuity. So what is the truth about homosexuality?

Homosexuality is, in a sense, a modern issue. The word was not coined until the 1860's when modern Western medicine developed an interest in the topic. It refers to an internal predisposition and attraction to persons of the same gender, male for male or female for female.

The much quoted Kinsey report on human sexuality estimated that ten percent of the general human population are constitutionally homosexual. More recent, more reliable studies with larger samples have suggested the number is more like 2 or 3 per cent. This is still a significant number of people identified as being exclusively homosexual in orientation. We do not understand what causes this orientation. The old Freudian view that homosexuality is caused by a dominant mother and weak father has been widely discredited, though it is still a popular myth.

Developmental psychologists suggest that most persons go through a homosexual stage in their psychosexual development: typically, boys prefer to be with boys and girls with girls in preadolescence. Most people discover heterosexual attraction at puberty, but some do not. We do not know why.

Increasingly, psychologists have found that people are somewhere on a continuum where it comes to sexual orientation. They are not all simply either homosexual or heterosexual. We all have aspects of both genders in our spiritual, psychological, and physical being. Physiologically, males have some female hormones within their bodies; these increase with age. Females have some level of male hormone as well. Many people have occasional feelings of sexual attraction to members of the same gender.

Some people act upon those feelings as they do upon their heterosexual feelings, often during adolescence. These experiences then create shame and fear which may feed the hostility with which they react to homosexual persons later in life. And there are those people on outer end of the scale who never have anything but heterosexual attraction or homosexual attraction during their entire lifetimes.

Some people clearly choose homosexual behaviour. As sexual adventurers and experimenters, they engage freely in all kinds of behaviour. Other people are lonely and unable to find someone of the opposite gender to meet their need for intimacy, so they become involved in same gender relationships. Others because of a history of abuse have rejected heterosexuality. Some women cannot trust themselves with any man because of the abuse they have endured, and therefore choose a lesbian relationship to meet their intimacy needs. People like this are heterosexual in orientation but for whatever reasons have chosen homosexual behaviour. They should be treated with compassion. They can be healed of their hurts. They can be changed back to healthy heterosexuality.

What is increasingly recognised by researchers and therapists on both sides of the issue is that homosexuality as a psychosexual orientation is not a simple choice for some people. We don't know why it is so, but a small percentage of people enter adulthood with an exclusive sexual attraction to their own gender, regardless of whether they are sexually experienced or not. It is a mistake to speak of their homosexuality as a 'preference' like choosing a career or a car. Deep down I believe the majority of them would prefer not to be homosexual because of the condemnation and in some cases, persecution, with which they must live.

Not all gay men are effeminate; some are. Not all lesbian women are masculine; some are. And not all effeminate males or masculine females are homosexual in their orientation. I know some men who have been persecuted much of their lives because they are a little effeminate and people assume they are homosexual when they are happily married with children and have no homosexual urges at all.

Homosexual behaviour, like heterosexual behaviour, takes a variety of forms. It includes a wide range of behaviour: words of affection, acts of support, supportive glances, through to more physical expressions and full-on sexual encounters. Not all homosexual persons engage in all forms of homosexual behaviour. Some homosexual persons have no partners, some have multiple partners, some have single partners in long term relationships. Partners may be active initiators or passive recipients or both, the same as in heterosexual behaviour and relationships.

Scientific studies of homosexuality continue to reveal great differentiation in the sexual drives and behaviour of homosexual persons, and some significant differences between female and male homosexual persons. More studies are needed.

Yet some people still argue that homosexuality is a choice, because God can change the homosexual person who is willing to repent. Groups have formed to support 'recovering homosexuals.' People share testimonies of deliverance and most of these are genuine. But it is too simplistic to say that all those who struggle with their sexuality will be healed in this way.

As biblical Christians we certainly believe God can change a person. But God does not always do so. I can ask God to change my appetite and help me control my eating, and my will cooperating with God's will may see that change in me .. but it may not too. I can ask God to heal me of a disease I have had since birth – and He may do so, but He may not.

I once watched a leg grow over an inch right before my eyes as we prayed over a young girl who had been born with one leg shorter than the other. I heard bones cracking in her hip as the Lord rearranged her bodily structure – so I have no doubt that God can heal anything. But I also must accept that this young girl did not choose to have one leg shorter than the other and I must accept that for every person that God heals in this way – there are a hundred He doesn't.

Many homosexual persons would gladly choose not to be homosexual in orientation because of the struggle and abuse they face in the church and society. There are testimonies of many Christian homosexual persons who have prayed with deep devotion over a long period of time, and found their orientation unchanged. Are we to take this as the will of God?

Let us all understand here that every last one of us is born into a sinful, lost world. We have the stain of sin on us the moment we emerge from our mother's womb. That original sin ... that sinful condition can and will manifest itself in many different ways in many different people. Our fallen, sinful nature may lead us to a life of crime – it may lead us into sexual promiscuity with a member of the opposite sex – or it may lead us into an active homosexual lifestyle.

Simply put: we are born broken. The flaws we bring into this world can manifest in thousands of different orientations, character traits, passions and desires. Can God fix them? Yes He can. When we come to the Lord Jesus and accept His gift of new life – when we are born again into the kingdom of God – we are a new creation. In God's eyes – that stain of original sin has been washed away by the blood of His Son. In the eternal spiritual realm of God's kingdom – where we shall dwell forever – we are whiter than snow and all has been made well.

However, back down here in this cause-and-effect kingdom of darkness, we still carry around this sinful bag of bones and as such we will continue to battle the flesh and our fallen human condition for the rest of our days. The Lord will help us in that battle – but the battle will remain.

So before I go on, I want to stress one thing: we need to forget about the simple answers. There are none. We are fooling ourselves if we think there are. There are certainly no simple answers as to how or why someone finds themselves in a homosexual reality. The debate still rages as to whether it is caused by genetic or environmental factors. The two are not mutually exclusive. There is evidence that there is a genetic linkage with homosexuality, but the same studies indicate that genetic factors alone are insufficient to cause a person to be homosexual.

The issue is very complex and many of us are content to rest on our simple answers, whether they are informed or not, while the rest of us stay very quiet about the issue because we just don't know what to think.

Regardless of our opinions, we need to accept right up front that we are all sinners, standing on level ground before the cross of Christ, in need of a Saviour. There is no hierarchy of sins. Different sins have different social implications and consequences, but the fact remains that sin is sin and as far as our relationship with God and each other is concerned, there is no difference between homosexuality and gossip, or coarse talk, cheating, lying, stealing etc. ... they are all the same. The harsh spirit of judgement that rises up within us against certain sins is not from God. It comes from the pit of hell and that's where it belongs.

We need to try and understand that God can and will heal us and deliver us from any number of flaws and sicknesses in this life, but He may choose not to. It is too simplistic to label everything as simply our choice. God can heal a person born with spina-bifida – this disease is not normal. It is not the way God intended for us to live. But to say that it is the person's choice that they are inflicted with this disease is the cruellest thing imaginable.

In much same way, there are sinful habits and orientations that can manifest in us over which we have very little control. God can, and often does free us from these burdens – but at times He doesn't.

So we live with the ongoing tension within us to yield to this sin or this orientation. The choice we have is to yield or not to yield to something that has become part of our human condition. To be told over and over again that the condition itself is a result on our choice – is torture in the extreme. Sometimes it is our choice, many times it is not.

The 'conservative' response that the church has given to this issue goes something like this:

The Bible clearly teaches that homosexuality is a sin. Therefore, what homosexuals need to do is repent (change) and receive the forgiveness of God. Even if they do not have the power to change their sexual orientation, God does. If gay people just come to God in honest confession and faith, God has the power to grant them the gift of repentance.

There is much to commend this view. Those who hold it do so because they hold a high view of biblical authority and of God's life-transforming power. However, I believe in the end this approach falls short. It is just too simplistic. Of course, God does have the power to change a person's sexual orientation. God has the power to cure diabetes too, but He often doesn't. The only 'moral' alternative left is for the homosexual person to live a completely celibate life. Some homosexuals and heterosexuals can do this, but most cannot.

Now the 'progressive' Christian answer goes something like this:

We should not just take what the Bible says about homosexuality at face value. Though the Bible always speaks about homosexual acts in a very negative way, it actually says very little about homosexuality. Certainly the biblical writers didn't know as much about constitutional homosexuality as we do. It should be noted that Jesus didn't mention the subject at all.

When Peter was given a vision of a sheet of unclean animals descending from heaven, he heard the voice of God telling him to "rise, kill, and eat." Peter objected. His Bible (the Old Testament) told him this was sinful but the heavenly Voice said, "*Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean.*" Peter took this vision to be divine authorisation for him to take the gospel to the 'unclean' Gentiles. The vision forced him to the conclusion that what his Bible said was not necessarily so.

Perhaps we should re-examine homosexuality in the light of this. Are we not all created by God? If we are gay or straight, it is because God has made us this way. We should accept and rejoice in the gifts God has given us. Our sexual orientation is ultimately of no more moral significance than skin colour or left handedness.

That is the progressive view and it has much to commend it also. It is compassionate. It rightly points out that we should not be superficial in our use of Scripture. (I would note that even the most ardent fundamentalist preacher is not a complete biblical literalist on this subject. I have heard none of them advocating that all homosexuals be stoned to death.) The 'progressive' arguments about interpretation of Scripture have weight. In the end, however, I believe this view is very dangerous and it is also too simple and just doesn't work in reality either.

It fails first in the area in which it most wants to succeed. It is not pastorally sensitive enough. To tell a gay person, "*God made you that way,*" is often met with the response (inwardly, if not verbally), "*What kind of cruel trickster is God?*" For the truth is, many gays would prefer to be otherwise. Some even pay thousands of dollars to psychiatrists and spend years in therapy trying to change their sexual orientation only to find they cannot.

Some 'progressive' Christian therapists try hard to convince their gay clients that they should accept their homosexuality as a gift of God. This usually requires a hard sell. The gay person cannot easily escape the deep heartfelt feeling that life, or fate, or God, or someone has played a cruel trick on him or her. We are definitely working against the grain when we try to convince a gay person otherwise. I believe we are not really taking their pain or situation seriously. We are trying to make things too simple.

Also, I can find no warrant or foundation whatsoever to say that being gay is a gift of God. There is certainly absolutely no biblical warrant for this. It seems to be based solely on the assumption that whatever we are is what God has made us. This denies the reality and consequences of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden.

Are babies born blind because God intended them to be that way? Is everyone's sexual orientation a gift of God? What about paedophiles? (Please do not misunderstand me here. I am in no way suggesting a link or moral equality between homosexuals and paedophiles.) Paedophiles do not choose their sexual orientation either, nor can their orientation be easily changed. Should we say to them: *"God made you a paedophile. Rejoice and be glad in it!"*

The truth is: all of us, straight or gay, know fundamentally that the natural purpose of sex, though not the only one, is biological reproduction. There is no getting around that. The homosexual knows that in light of that most basic fact, his or her sexuality is distorted, and he or she grieves over that. They grieve that they will never be able to know the full complementary love of a person of the opposite sex. They grieve that they can never have children the way God intended. We should grieve with them.

The 'moderate' Christian answer goes something like this:

We do not believe that God ever intends any of His people to be homosexual. We believe people are gay not always because they choose to be so, but often because all of nature is fallen and out of sync with God's highest purposes. We recognise that God does not always remove the thorn in our flesh or psyche no matter how fervently we pray for Him to do so (though sometimes He might). Though the thorn is a 'messenger of Satan' we, like Paul, can ultimately be thankful for it because it teaches us to rely more on God's grace. Our practical advice for the gay Christian is change your orientation if you can. If not, be celibate if you can. If not, be as moral (i.e. monogamous) as you can.

Many will reject this 'moderate' view because it is a path of tension. They will prefer either the conservative or progressive view. These positions have dealt with the tension by denying it. But there is much to commend this moderate view. It takes both Scripture and the situation and the pain of the gay person seriously. It recognises the difficulty of a person's changing his or her sexual orientation. It also recognises the difficulty of living a celibate life.

However, this view also sounds better in theory than it works in practice. It encourages a gay person to have a monogamous gay relationship if necessary; however, it does not recognise the difficulty of doing so. If you haven't noticed, heterosexuals seem to be having a tough time living in monogamous relationships too. This is the case even though we have great ecclesiastical and civil support systems for the institution of heterosexual marriage. Think how hard it must be for a gay person to live a purely monogamous life without the blessing of, or any support from the church and most of society.

All the church's answers are too simple. Until we all recognise this we will never be in a place to truly minister to the homosexual. Given that, what should the church do?

A passage in the book of Acts has gained a new perspective for me. The passage doesn't mention homosexuality, but I cannot read this story now without thinking about this issue. It is contained in Acts 8:26-40. The story is about an Ethiopian eunuch. To be sure, a eunuch, a man who has been castrated, and a homosexual are not the same thing, but there are similarities. Neither can function fully as a heterosexual person. Neither has chosen their 'orientation.'

This eunuch, a high Ethiopian official, is riding down the road in his chariot, reading from the prophet Isaiah. Why? Why is he even reading the Bible? A eunuch was not even allowed in the Temple in Jerusalem. The Old Testament in Deuteronomy 23:1 declared: *"No man who has been castrated may be included among the Lord's people."* Can you imagine what that is like? To be excluded from the people of God? To be disallowed from even entering the church?

The passage the eunuch is reading says: *"He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, like a sheep before its shearers is dumb. He didn't open his mouth. Justice was denied him. He has been cut off from the land of the living. Who is going to declare his posterity?"* What posterity? This man has been 'cut off.' He will have no posterity, no descendants. He is like the eunuch. He will have no children, no family.

The eunuch asks Philip, whom God has sent to meet his chariot, *"Who is this man of whom the prophet speaks?"* He wanted to know desperately. I am sure he also knew the passage in Isaiah which says: *"The days will come when the foreigner will no longer say, 'The Lord will separate me from his people.' The days will come when the eunuch will no longer say, 'O I am just a dry stick.' The days will come when the eunuch who loves me and my house and my covenant which shall be better than a thousand sons and daughters and will be remembered forever."*

Could the man the prophet is talking about be the one to bring in this new day when even a eunuch could be a part of God's family? After hearing Philip tell the story about Jesus, the eunuch asks Philip, "*Can I be baptised? Can I be a part of this new family of God?*" Philip says, "Yes." (No doubt he was thinking, "*Boy, am I going to get in trouble for this.*" He had already found himself in trouble with some in the church for previously baptising some Samaritans.) As I noted before, this passage does not mention homosexuals, but can we truly say that it has absolutely no application to them?

Is homosexual love distorted or perverted or abnormal? Yes, but all human love is to some degree distorted and perverted. That goes along with the fact that we are all sinners. It is just that our love is perverted and distorted in different ways. Gay love also can be fulfilling and admirable. How can one not admit this after seeing a gay man compassionately care for his companion who is dying of AIDS?

Should gays have all the civil rights and protections as other people. Yes, most definitely. I would also say that for the sake of those whose sexual orientation is still being formed (a process of which we are still largely ignorant), society needs to somehow express its clear preference for heterosexuality without denying the dignity of any human being on the basis of their actions. I do not pretend to believe this will be easy. But somehow we have to be Jesus to people and Jesus always looked past the sin and dealt with the real person inside, knowing that if He could connect at the heart level and begin His transforming work of grace in there . . . that the flaw, imperfection or sin would be dealt with, in time.

Can the church handle this issue in a way that is compassionate and true to the biblical teaching that sexuality should be fully expressed only in a lifelong monogamous heterosexual relationship? I believe the answer is Yes. The church already has demonstrated that this is possible in the way that we have learned to deal with the issue of divorce and remarriage. Not long ago the church told its members that they should never get divorced. If they did get divorced, they should not marry someone else while their divorced partner was alive. To do so was to live in a kind of legal adultery. The church believed that this was most clearly the biblical position.

The church, like Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew (but not Mark and Luke) allowed an exception in the case of marital infidelity. We have loosened on this considerably. We have recognised the complexities which lead to the break up of us married heterosexual sinners. The church ultimately decided that compassion would not allow it to require divorced Christians to live a life of enforced celibacy, sexual frustration, and loneliness.

The church, or most of the church that is, decided that, though it could never see divorce as anything but a failure, it could and would welcome divorced and remarried people into the life of its community, just like it welcomes all other sinners.

Ultimately, the message the church has to give to homosexuals or anyone else is not, "*I'm ok, and you're not ok.*" Neither is it, "*I'm ok, and you're ok.*" Our message is ultimately, "*I'm not ok, and you're not ok. But that's ok – because Jesus is going to make us both ok.*"

Ultimately, the church has no simple answers for homosexuals or anyone else. In the final analysis, the only thing the church has to offer is the only thing it really has, Christ crucified, the Lamb that was slaughtered.

The cross is no simple answer either, not even for God's Son. He is there on the cross for all, feeling their pain and bearing their sin. His word to all is, "*I forgive. Do the best you can in your struggle with sin, and trust My grace for the rest. Just know that the punishment for that sin has now been fully metered out – it fell upon me – once and for all.*"

To those struggling with homosexuality I say this:

There are no simple, easy answers for you. Of course, you already know that. You can choose to live in the closet always in fear of discovery. You can choose to come out of the closet and risk being ostracised, totally or partially, by your family, your friends, your church, and your employer. To come out of the closet may mean your expulsion from the rest of society into a gay ghetto.

You are the most ostracised people in our society. Blacks may be discriminated against in housing and employment, but at least they can count on the support of family, friends, and church. You cannot. You have no simple choices. The church has no simple answers for you either, but we do grieve with you.

Jesus invites you to come to the foot of His cross. The cross is the place you can come when you have exhausted all the simple answers. (Indeed, does anyone come to the cross any other time?) Christ is there on the cross for you. He will not turn you away. That is what Jesus will do with you. I don't know what the rest of us gathered there on Calvary are going to do with you. I really don't. But I hope we will choose to welcome you with open arms as one sinner to another.

To those of you who until now have adopted a harsh attitude towards homosexuals, or worse still, one of indifference, I plead with you in the name of Jesus to repent of that indifference or that judgemental spirit. It may be the hardest road you ever travel, but it is possible to love and accept people without condoning their choices or their lifestyle. It is possible to make it clear to a practicing homosexual that their lifestyle is contrary to God's creative purpose for them and that they are inviting Satan to sow seeds of pain and destruction into their lives. It is possible to make that clear BUT at the same time give them a hug and tell them we love them in the Lord and accept them just as they are and will relate to them no differently than we do all the other imperfect, flawed people in the church.

Did God ask you to clean up your act and fix what was broken in your personality, attitude and life before He accepted you and brought you into the kingdom of light? Of course not. You'd still be lost in darkness if that were a pre-requisite. So why do we expect homosexuals to change their whole psychosexual makeup before we can stand beside them in worship and laugh and cry with them in home group and preach the gospel with them to the lost.

You may be feeling very uncomfortable at present and want to cry out: "*NO. This is different. You can't allow practicing homosexuals into the church.*" Well, friends, if that's the line we take then I would ask those who struggle consistently with the sin of gossip to get out of the church too ... and those who laugh at the filthy jokes and tell a few of their own now and then - you can go too ... and those who struggle with lust and pornography and wouldn't dare admit it - God knows who you are and you may as well leave too. If a clean life is to be our criteria for acceptance in the church .. then lets close all churches now.

Having said all that, let me say that there should be no place for a practicing homosexual in leadership or positions of authority in the church. The social and pastoral implications of their particular struggle are far too serious to expose them or those they lead to the attack of Satan, should they become a leader. Yet I would say exactly the same thing about a person who was a chronic gossip ... or a person who had a major deficiency in their relational skills and just walked all over people when it suited them .. or a person who had major problems in their marriage and family. I wouldn't let them take a leadership role in the church either. They are a sinner, saved by grace, and as such they are as welcome in the body of Christ and any of us are and they will be loved and cared for in the same way. However they are a sinner, whose current struggles with sin, preclude them from a position of significant influence in the church.

Somewhere, we have to allow the marriage of truth and love. Jesus is only one I know that can do that completely and consistently, which is why the Bible says He is "full of grace and truth". The church seems to have the 'truth' side nailed when it comes to dealing with homosexuals, but we have failed dismally when it comes to grace. Jesus is the only one who can confront sin head-on and yet not destroy the sinner in the process. The woman caught in adultery had no doubt as to Jesus' view on adultery. Yet she also had no doubt about His love and acceptance of her as the unique child of God she was.

Jesus is the only hope for homosexuals and every other broken human in this world. If we desire to be channels of life and power of Jesus to those around us, and if we really begin to manifest His grace, love and compassion - then be warned - God will send homosexuals to us and into our church. God will send us adulterers and fornicators and every size and shape of sinner you can imagine. God is desperately seeking churches where He can send these hurting, confused, needy, broken people. Sadly there are very few from which to choose.

There are gay churches that love the people but fail to confront the sin or offer any hope of healing and relief. Then there are the conservative, self-righteous churches who do a great job of confronting the sin, but miss the compassion boat by a hundred miles!

If you truly desire to be Jesus to the world around you then we should pray that God would see your church as a safe haven for those who struggle with their sexual orientation. You should pray that your church would be a place where people could come and be accepted as they are - loved unconditionally AND . . . a place where they can be introduced to the power of God that can support them, strengthen them and even heal them, restore them and lead them to wholeness in every area of their lives.

As I close I want to remind you of a powerful verse in the Bible which we should never forget. In 1 Cor.15:10, Paul said these simple words: *"But by the grace of God I am what I am."*

Paul's life had been transformed from that of a murdering, Christian-bashing, church destroying Pharisee to the greatest Apostle who ever lived. Where he once spoke words of hatred and condemnation, he now spoke the gospel of grace, mercy and peace. Where he once drove Christians from their homes and meeting places, he now planted churches – attracting thousands and eventually millions into the kingdom of God.

As Paul looked at where he was now and where he had come from he said: *"By the grace of God I am what I am."* He was saying several things in one. He was saying: *"I didn't do this. No human being has the power to make these sorts of changes. My whole life and direction and purpose has been turned around - God did this. I stand in the glory of His grace."*

He was also saying that anything is possible for God. Our greatest challenge is no match for God. Nothing stands against God's grace. His grace is sufficient for every need, Paul says in 2 Cor.12:9.

What is your need right now? God is here and His grace will meet that need.

Do you need forgiveness for your narrow, harsh attitude towards those who struggle with their sexual orientation? God is here now and His grace will meet that need.

Do you need the strength to support that friend or that family member who may be homosexual, loving them unconditionally whilst not condoning their lifestyle? God is here now and His grace will meet that need.

Are you someone who struggles with this issue personally and need the power of God to touch you at the deepest level and release you to be who God created you to be? Do you want to be free from the torment and the pain and the guilt and the alienation you feel from friends, family, the church and the society at large? God is here now and His grace will meet that need.

Everyone reading this sermon right now has a need of some kind in relation to the sensitive issue. I pray that we will all throw ourselves on the mercy of God and ask Him to release the life and power of Jesus in us to meet those needs today and in the challenging days that lie ahead.

How then shall we live?

By His grace – for His glory!

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SEE NEXT PAGE FOR SOME UPDATED
COMMENTS FROM ROBERT

It has been 12 years since I first wrote and presented this message at an evening service in a relatively conservative regional Baptist church. It created a lot of interest then and it has been read by hundreds of thousands of people on various websites all around the world since.

So have my views changed over that time? Do I still stand by what I believed and presented publicly over a decade ago? After now connecting with hundreds of sincere Christians who believe they were homosexually oriented from birth ... and hundreds of conservative Christians, Pastors and church leaders who have criticised me for not taking a harder line against this sin in our society ... do I feel any different 12 years later? I think the answer is yes ... but more in the area of how we deal with this issue than the specifics of what is right or wrong, Biblical or not. Allow me to explain.

So much of the tension within the Christian church on this issue is created by theological debates and various interpretations of Scripture .. most of which seems to be rooted in Old Covenant theology which is being dressed in New Covenant clothes (sometimes) and forced upon us as the voice of God for today.

This is a problem with SO MANY issues facing the church today. The misuse and abuse of the Bible is breath-taking and people's ignorance of what Jesus Christ actually did through His life, death and resurrection is truly astounding. We need a fresh dose of the gospel of God's grace in Christ!

I grieve when I read blog after blog and sermon after sermon which are full of 'burn-them-at-the-stake' judgements on this and many other issues. We can forgive the un-churched world for their confusion when looking at Old and New Covenant teachings in the Bible ... but I get a little cross when prominent Christians and people in positions of influence in the church start ramming Leviticus down our throats without so much as a reference to the 'all things new' realities of life this side of the cross!

Having said that, there are still some New Testament references which are problematic for practicing homosexuals. So putting the OT references back in their context does not stop the debate, but it at least takes a lot of the unnecessary heat out of it in my opinion.

There is a lot I could say here about how we need to interpret the Bible on this issue, but I am choosing instead to say that the most pressing issue here is not a theological one. The real debate among Christians needs to centre first around pastoral and sociological realities.

For example, let me operate on the premise here that we can explain away the condemnation of homosexual practice in the New Testament (not suggesting we can or that I have ... just playing hypotheticals here to make a more important point).

Even if we remove the Biblical mandate against homosexuality, as many suggest they can, we need to look at the practical realities in our society today and not bulldoze our way over the majority of people who are just not ready for this 'enlightenment'.

From a pastoral point of view, within the church, I would say without any hesitation that the vast majority of Christian church fellowships are just not ready for active homosexuals in their midst and certainly not in their leadership. I am not talking about the minority within that majority who are narrow-minded bigots who are not interested in ever changing their position. They will be with us always, God love 'em! I am talking about the majority who are not totally closed to new thinking and fresh ideas. They need to be given the respect that is due and treated accordingly.

We can rant and rave and criticise them and call them old fashioned, uninformed, brain-washed, old school, intolerant, judgmental or a number of other names, all of which may be true, or not ... but at the end of our rave, we are still faced with a very practical reality, which, I believe is far more important than theological debates. How do we deal with this elephant in the room?

What some leaders do is force their views on their churches and we see more and more militant pro-gay lobby groups emerge within the church and the blogs and on-line forums go wild and the majority of sincere, Godly believers in churches are demonised by the minority and either intimidated into accepting something they cannot accept yet ... or they are forced into a confrontation which splits the church and damages our ministry in the world.

Alternatively, people just quietly leave that church or denomination and find one in which debates like this are not occurring (yet). None of these results are acceptable ... and I believe they are largely avoidable with a more mature, measured, pastorally sensitive response.

Let me digress for a moment and use women in ministry as an example. I'm not equating the issues in any way, I am just identifying the underlying principle which is the same. I have personally held my foot in the door over three decades to gradually see women released into ministry and into leadership within the church. I can clearly and convincingly deal with all the NT passages which are used to stop women from exercising their God-given gifts and stand on level ground with men before the cross of Christ. I have been applauded by many women and even more men for championing this cause over many years.

However, in spite of all the above, I would be the first one to oppose the appointment of women to ministry and leadership positions within certain churches and certain denominations if the prevailing view was strongly opposed to the idea. I would personally feel those people were wrong, based on my many years of prayer, research and experience ... but I would never force that view upon a local church or even a whole denomination for I would be committing a far, far greater sin than the sin of intolerance of women in ministry.

I watched with sadness as the Anglican church in Australia found themselves in a grubby, public court battle over this issue and the pro-women in ministry people won a great victory .. so it would seem .. but at what cost? The price was far too high in my opinion and had they waited and prayed and worked behind the scenes and slowly brought more and more people into the light on this issue, the damage inflicted on the church would have been far less. Being right does not give us the mandate or the right to force that view on others – especially when the net result leaves others in a worse state overall.

After that 'victory', there were still hundreds of Anglican churches across our nation who were not ready for women to lead them and there were some very badly hurt women over the coming years who were placed in churches who basically rejected their authority. If they had waited even ten years longer, the tide would have turned significantly .. perhaps even enough to have a very small fallout. We can win battles and lose wars if wisdom, patience and careful thought are sacrificed on the altar of 'rights' and expediency.

Now I am not at the same point personally with homosexuality as I am with women in ministry, however a growing number of my colleagues seem to be and to them I simply issue this plea: PLEASE BE CAREFUL when sharing those views and PLEASE BE PATIENT with your many brothers and sisters. If, and it's still a big IF in my mind, you are correct and God is actually bringing this new tolerance and acceptance into play, then we need to trust Him to do that in His time and His way and the God I know and love and have served for nearly 40 years will not fracture and debilitate His Body on earth over this issue.

If that happens, WE will be to blame for our impatience, arrogance and lack of wisdom .. and it won't have anything to do with theology. It will have everything to do with a lack of pastoral care, compassion and our responsibility to ALL believers, not just the minorities who may have been marginalised and oppressed in days past. In addressing that injustice, let's not marginalise and condemn everyone else in the process.

Stepping outside the church now, this is also a huge sociological issue. The society of which I am a part has come a long way in its attitude to homosexuals in terms of understanding, compassion and fair treatment of all people. That is to be applauded by everyone on both sides of this debate.

However, there are still a LARGE number of people in our current culture who remain silent but are just not ready for the 'reformation' which is happening around them. Many of them do not see it as a positive maturing process or a necessary evolution, but rather further evidence of the decay and destabilisation of our society. They may be right .. or they may be dead wrong. Either way, they need to be respected and not demonised by the militant gay activists inside and outside the church.

I have copped condemnation from hundreds of pastors and church leaders from around the world for going 'soft' on homosexuals in the above sermon. Some of the emails I have received would curl your hair. However, many pro-gay Christians and non-Christians consider me the enemy! In fact, when I was a candidate for the 2004 Federal Election I was actually dragged before the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal and charged with 'Inciting hatred towards homosexuals'.

What was my sin? I supported the Howard Government's decision to confirm that 'Marriage' in the 1961 Marriage Act was referring to marriage between 'a man and a woman'. A militant gay activist in Sydney read my views on my website and I was front page news at home and around the nation in gay journals for weeks.

Months after the election was over, I sat alone before the Tribunal in Sydney. My accuser attended with three lawyers, a gallery of supporters and a huge media contingent. I clearly stated what I truly believed to the four member Tribunal, showing them my record of compassion and interaction with homosexuals.

Several hours later, the case was thrown out and I was given an apology from all four judges for being dragged into what they believe was a totally unnecessary hearing and we all went home ... but not without a GREAT deal of stress and fanfare for many months and a further strengthening of the extreme views on both sides of the debate.

Ironically, there were dozens of quiet, private, non-confrontational homosexuals who contacted me during the many months I was in the media to apologise for the treatment I had received and to clearly state that this man did NOT speak for them and it was people like him who were setting their cause back many years. Ironically, I ended up with more support from within the gay community than ever before.

This experience and many others over the years have proven to me that a vocal, critical, overly sensitive minority, on either side of a debate, will always do far more damage to their cause than they realise.

Now I am very aware of the horrible condemnation and judgment which has been heaped upon homosexuals and others all in the name of 'decency' or 'God' or whatever banner people wave and hit others with in their ignorance, anger and judgment. However, the human species is well known for over-reacting and we need to be careful we don't try and force an opposite agenda on the majority in order to correct the wrongs of the past. It can and will backfire in years to come and the very people we are trying to love, understand and care for will be in a worse position than before. I truly believe that.

So in wrapping up this postscript, I would appeal to both sides of this debate inside and outside the church, to stop and take a step back, breathe slowly for a while and decide what it is you really want to achieve here. Then examine your actions and accept that perhaps a little less aggression and dogma, a little less speed in the 'reform' process and a LOT more respect for what the Bible is and what it is not ... will all go a long way towards finding a measured, God-honouring response within our much loved church and nation.

And never forget: **It's what we learn after we know it all that really counts!** The greatest lack I see in scholars and leaders inside and outside the church today is a *teachable spirit*.

If we hold our views firmly, but not too firmly and always remain open to the possibility that we are wrong ... then we may just see renewal, reform and even revival come to this great southland.

For our God can do more than we ask or even imagine through people with a teachable spirit.

By His grace – for His glory,

Robert Griffith

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