



The Missional and Pastoral Challenge of Sexuality in Church and Society Today

Background:

The New Zealand Baptist Assembly Council asked Laurie Guy, Marilyn Withers and Grant Harris in July 2010 to become a think-tank on sexuality issues and produce a paper as a resource for Baptist churches. Issues relating to sex are huge; so this document could cover several massive tomes. While touching on wider issues of sexuality, the committee authors of this document have decided to focus primarily on the missional and pastoral challenge of sexuality. Laurie Guy was primary author of much of the material, Grant Harris of the material on pornography, and Marilyn Withers of the material relating to young people. However, the document as a whole comes with the support and input of all three members of the group.

The issue in a nutshell:

Traditionally Christianity has understood all sexual relationships outside of marriage to be sinful. Until recently western society has at a public level reinforced this viewpoint. This is now no longer the case. The traditional view is seen as idealistic (and not realistic), as unnecessarily negative and restrictive, as discriminatory (especially of gay and lesbian relationships) and as out-dated. The emerging view may well go as far as to argue that sex is to be expected long before marriage, and not to do so is to be unfair (perhaps even 'immoral') to the relationship. Sex is now perceived as a pleasurable activity that will (perhaps even must) occur on an ongoing basis for nearly all adult people whether they are in a marital relationship or not. The only social/legal restriction is that there should be mutual consent. Sexual right and wrong is assessed not according to the gender and marital status of the partners, but whether the relationship is an expression of 'love' (and perhaps commitment).

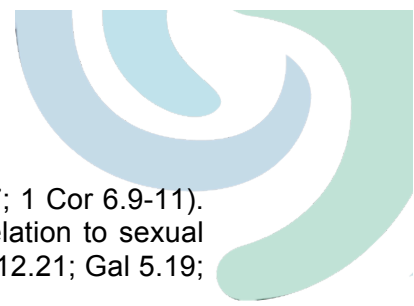
This puts the traditional Christian perspective on sexuality at huge variance from society.¹ It means that Christianity's position in relation to sex (as traditionally understood) will be a stumbling block to some potential converts embracing the faith (as money was a stumbling block to the rich young ruler). It will also mean that sexuality pastoral issues will become increasingly complex and that there will be people within our congregations who do not fully accept the traditional Christian sexual ethic. And it may also lead some exiting the back-door of the church because their desires/practice/understandings no longer coincide with those of the church on issues of sex and marriage.

Biblical material:

The Bible directly and indirectly has a lot of discussion about sex. It is not a subject to be avoided as too difficult to discuss. The overall message is that sex as part of creation is good (Gen 1.27-28, 31; 2.18, 21-25; 1 Tim 4.3-5; Heb 13.4). At the same time, Scripture, taken overall, gives sanction to sexual union only within a committed, lifetime, male-female relationship and not elsewhere.

The blanket New Testament word for illicit sex is *porneia*, which is a broad term for a variety of sexual wrongdoing. It appears to cover adultery, fornication and homosexual acts, all of which are otherwise directly or indirectly condemned or

¹ On this see Karen Pack, 'Single and Sexual: The Challenge of Holiness for Unmarried Christians', *Crux*, 46, 2, Summer 2010, 13-18.

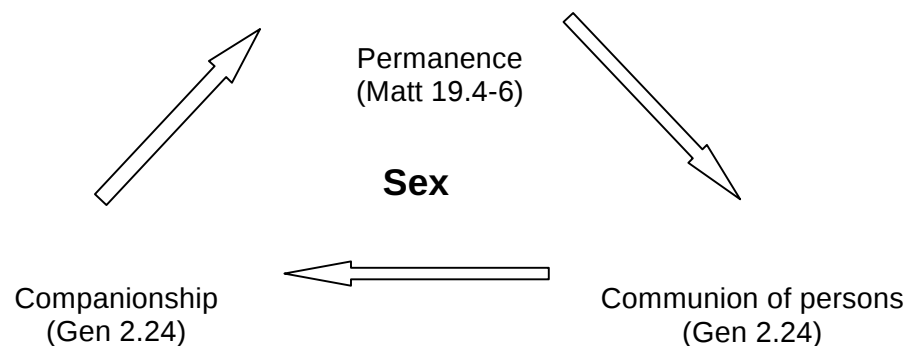


viewed negatively in the New Testament (Matt 5.27-29; Rom 1.26-27; 1 Cor 6.9-11). There is clearly very significant concern in the New Testament in relation to sexual immorality (*porneia*): Acts 15.20; 1 Cor 5.1; 6.13-20; 7.2; 10.8; 2 Cor 12.21; Gal 5.19; Eph 5.3-5; Col 3.5; 1 Thess 4.3-5; 1 Tim 1.9-11).

The Old Testament material is not as clearly condemnatory of premarital sexual relationships. Adultery is clearly condemned (Exod 20.14). Homosexual behaviour is condemned (Lev 18.22; 20.13).

However, in our briefly touching on the biblical material, we recognise that it is important in today's context to identify not simply the 'what' of biblical precepts but also the 'why' of such precepts. Christianity is not reducible to a set of rules – legalism. It is vital to be able to give biblical values a non-biblical justification such that they make sense beyond appeal to biblical texts ('the Bible says'). We need to be able to say: 'The Bible restricts sexual activity for the following good ... or to avoid the following evil ...'

Jesus brought the heart of sexuality issues back to the creation story in Genesis 2 (Matt 19.4-6). That biblical material suggests that the key qualities of sexual relationship/marriage are (1) permanence, (2) union and (3) companionship, as the following diagram illustrates:



For reflection:

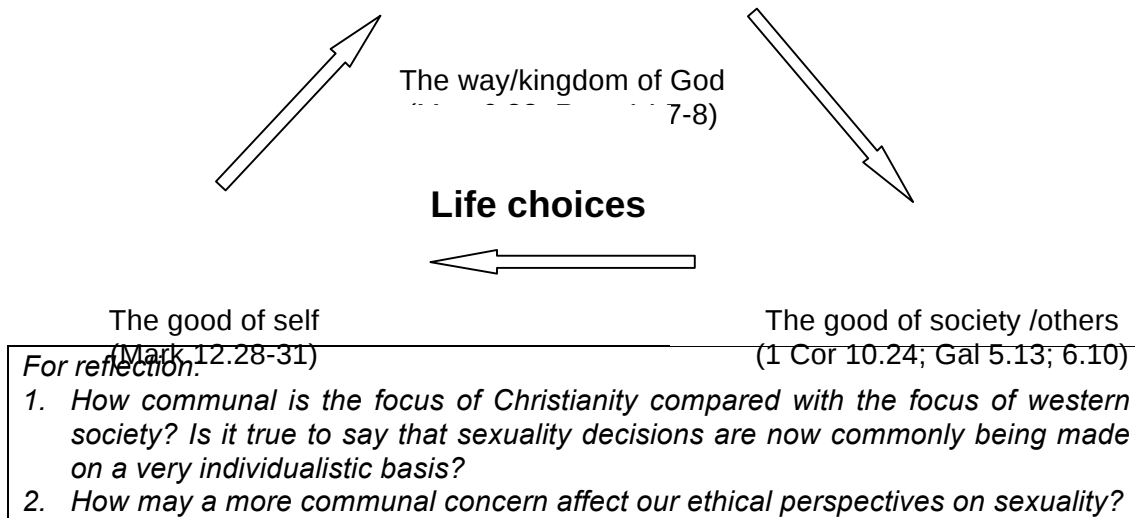
1. *Why does the New Testament have significant concern about sexual immorality? What relevance does this have today?*
2. *How do we live today in a world which has strikingly different sexual values from those expressed in the New Testament?*
3. *Where do issues of grace, forgiveness and love fit into the whole picture?*

Ethical reflection:

We live in a society which is extremely individualistic. This intensifies our 'old Adam' natural tendency to self-centred decision making, making decisions on the basis of 'what's best for me' – rather than decisions based on the good of society, the good of the other/s etc. The intensified individualism of society deeply affects attitudes to sex and marriage. Decisions on these matters are often made on a very individualistic basis. Traditionally, the communal aspect of marriage was earlier much stronger. Hence one of the traditional affirmations as to the purposes of marriage: 'marriage was ordained *for the welfare of human society*, which can be strong and happy only as the marriage bond is held in honour'.

We face an ongoing struggle to get even our Christian communities to think communally, to think in terms of *societal* wellbeing, to live life in the context of what is

best for *others*. There is a need for ongoing reminder that we Christians do not live simply for ourselves, but for God and for others, and that it is in that context that we develop our understandings, adopt our ethics, and express our behaviour.



Shifts in society:

Sexual immorality has always been common in society. The power of the sex drive and the desire for intimacy and pleasure fuel this. What has changed in the last half-century is that where earlier public societal attitudes gave significant support to a conservative sexual ethic, now to a significant extent public societal attitudes ignore, dismiss or even oppose such an attitude. Up into the 1960s, the outlook of church and society was largely in harmony on these issues. The two following statements indicate this:

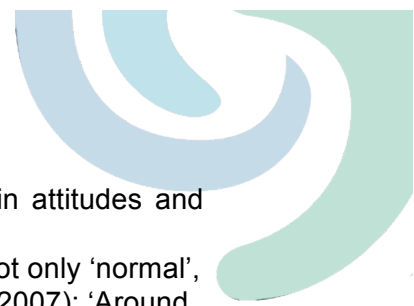
- Department of Health material (1955): 'Sex can be a very beautiful thing, but it is very easily spoilt. It is only in the sanctity of marriage that it can be enjoyed freely, unashamedly, and with the sanction of society.'²
- Historian Eric Olssen's comment on sexuality between 1900 and the 1950s, that it was 'clear [in society] to all but the unregenerate . . . what behaviour was tolerable and right'.³

In the period around the 1960s a sexual revolution took place. This revolution was linked with a number of societal changes: the advent of the birth control pill (breaking the strong mental association between sex and pregnancy), globalisation (including television and international travel – such developments fostered the spread of a greater diversity of competing mental and ethical outlooks), the rise of youth culture (linked with increasing education, affluence and concepts of freedom and autonomy) and protest movements (involving a strong sense of challenging and breaking with many aspects of the past). It may also be linked with a more 'spending' society (responding to needs and desires now), in contrast with the previous 'saving' society (which was linked with valuing discipline, restraint, delayed gratification etc).

According to leading New Zealand psychologist, James Ritchie, 'we got with sex in the sixties'.⁴ It was a revolution not simply of behaviour but also of ideas, a revolution

² New Zealand Department of Health, *Sex and the Adolescent Boy*, Wellington, n.d. [1955], 5; also New Zealand Department of Health, *Sex and the Parent*, Wellington, n.d. [1955], 5.

³ E. Olssen & A. Levesque: 'Towards a History of the European Family in New Zealand', in P.G. Koopman-Boyden (ed.), *Families in New Zealand Society*, Wellington, 1978, 1-25 at 19.



'not in bed but in the head'.⁵ Those ideas have led to huge shifts in attitudes and behaviour:

- ☐ Sexual activity outside of marriage is now not only common, not only 'normal', but even expected. Demographer Ian Pool and others stated (2007): 'Around 80% of the young are likely to cohabit as a first union, and this has been the proportion since the early 1980s.'⁶
- ☐ Homosexuality is now largely normalised. The dominant societal outlook is that such behaviour is not 'abnormal' or 'sinful' but 'different'. Anybody querying this may be labelled a 'homophobe'.
- ☐ Youth pastors anecdotally indicate that in most evangelical church youth groups there are high levels of sleeping around, concealment of this, living in split worlds, and feelings of contradiction and guilt.

The following ideas are now common or dominant:

- ☐ Consensual sex is good unless someone is harmed.
- ☐ Sex is a normal and necessary part of adult life. Not to be engaging in a sexual relationship over a long period of time is strange ('queer').
- ☐ Marriage is simply one option amongst others in terms of living and sexual arrangements. 'Partnership' rather than 'marriage' is increasingly 'normal'.
- ☐ People are heterosexual or homosexual (or perhaps bisexual), just as people are blue-eyed or brown-eyed (or perhaps green-eyed).
- ☐ Homosexuality is core to a gay person's being. It is an identity issue.

Society is now very significantly sexualised, with strong messages pervading our society:

- ☐ at a visual level (movies, DVDs, internet, billboards, advertising, dress – or its lack). A recent scientific study at the University of Montreal searched for men who had never looked at pornography – but couldn't find any.⁷

via school values. The 1990s Family Planning Booklet, *Affirming Diversity*, which has been widely used in schools, states that there are three orientations (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual) and that young people should find out which one they are.⁸ The booklet is still promoted by the New Zealand Educational Institute today.⁹

For reflection:

1. *What are the commonly held views of society today in relation to sexuality? How do they mesh with, and how do they differ from the New Testament view of sexuality?*
2. *What can we say to adult Christians today who for whatever reason are not able to have sexual expression that has the support of the New Testament texts?*

⁴ J.E. Ritchie, 'Morals and Social Habits: N.Z. in the Sixties', *NZ Listener*, 16 January 1970,

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⁵ Danielle Moreau, 'Living with the Pill: Oral Contraceptive Use in New Zealand, 1960-1975', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1997, 120-21; L. Grant, *Sexing the Millennium*, London, 1994, 18, 60.

⁶ Ian Pool, Arunchalam Dharmalingam & Janet Sceats, *The New Zealand Family from 1840: A Demographic History*, Auckland University Press, 2007, 285.

⁷ *NZ Herald*, 8 December 2009, A10.

⁸ Sally Liggins & Others, *Affirming Diversity: An Educational Resource on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Orientations*, 1994.

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<http://www.nzei.org.nz/Membership+Networks+Menu/Membership+Networks/Rainbow.html>
accessed 6 July 2010.



Hermeneutical challenge to traditional biblical application:

Whenever there is major variance between societal values and church values, liberal revisionism will commonly seek to reconcile the two, typically by revising understanding of Christian truths to bring them more into harmony with 'modern thinking'. Thus traditional Christian understandings of sexuality now face liberal Christian hermeneutical challenge. Initially the challenge was at the level of exegesis – what the text says in itself. Most biblical scholars accept that the biblical (especially New Testament) text operates in a framework of understanding that views sex as legitimate within marriage only (and ruling out homosexual sex); some of those same scholars challenge the significance of those texts in today's world.¹⁰

While exegesis (the original intent of the first-century text) may be clear, liberal (and even some evangelical) Christians still raise the issue of hermeneutics (how the text applies today). This point was strongly made by gay Christian, Pim Pronk.¹¹ Various liberal Christians have argued:

- Everything must be assessed in the context of the supreme law of love. Love trumps text.
- There is an issue of justice for gays (assuming homosexuality as a fixed identity).
- Biblical principles remain, but the biblical context is different from today's context; so its teaching on sexuality doesn't apply in direct fashion.
- The Bible is an ancient book and on many issues is not a guide to today's world.

Relatively few Baptists have adopted such liberal positions. However, in a post-modern world, with weakened congregational knowledge of scripture, and with a sometimes weakened sense of its authority, there is the possibility that an increasing minority of Baptists may gradually move towards views along the lines of those indicated above. For the direction where this could go, see the divergent discussion between Tony Campolo and his wife Peggy Campolo on <http://www.bridges-across.org/ba/campolo.htm> (also in *Sojourners*, May-June 1999, 28-33).¹²

For reflection:

1. *How do you view the notion that issues of love may over-ride what seems to be otherwise clear New Testament texts on sexuality? How do we hold together the great commandment to love and the more specific discipling instructions of the New Testament?*
2. *Is the Bible position on sexuality modified for Christians today in a context of birth control etc via the 'pill' and condoms?*


Options for Christian church response:

Conservative church values are now more recognisably contrary to the tides of society in relation to sexuality than to anything else. One consequence is that some people will therefore not link up with church/Christianity, or will leave church/

¹⁰ William Loader, *Sexuality in the New Testament: Understanding the Key Texts*, London: SPCK, 2010, 7.

¹¹ Pim Pronk, *Against Nature: Types of Moral Argumentation Regarding Homosexuality* (transl. J. Vriend), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993, 279.

¹² There is extensive discussion on the internet regarding the differing approaches of the Campolos in relation to homosexuality up to the present time.



Christianity, because of the issue of sexuality.¹³ There are at least three choices that could be made:

- ☐ 'Beat them': oppose (albeit winsomely) the social and values changes
- ☐ 'Join them': go along with the social and values changes
- ☐ 'Keep your mouth shut': don't give a lead (it's too dangerous to say anything)

Responses of some churches to issues of sexuality:

- ☐ More liberal Christians have largely accepted society's views in relation to homosexuality on the basis of identity and justice. This has, however, led to major internal tensions and/or splits within their denominations.
- ☐ More liberal Christians have commonly accepted sexual expression outside of marriage (while trying to avoid encouragement to promiscuity). Thus an occasional paper, 'Human Sexuality', issued by the Joint Methodist-Presbyterian Public Questions Committee in 1998 suggested that prostitutes be provided for people 'whose emotional or physical make-up means that it is unlikely they would ever be able to enter a mutually acceptable and honest physical relationship with another person' and that 'to deny such people any opportunity to express their sexuality physically seems almost inhuman'. The paper also stated: 'When considering singleness the church can no longer simply lay down moral rules requiring no sexual activity outside marriage; but neither can it suggest that there should be complete freedom from external standards or limits'.¹⁴
- ☐ Almost all Baptist churches maintain a traditional sexual ethic which is seen as stemming from the Bible. However, many of our members are not well equipped to articulate a Christian sexual ethic outside of the biblical material (and this is true also of some of our pastors). Some of our churches are saying almost nothing on issues of sexuality and marriage. A very small minority of our churches may be starting to say that what happens in the bedroom is private and such churches may be starting to accept into leadership people in cohabiting and homosexual relationships.

For reflection:

1. *What are the strengths of each of 'beating them', joining them' and 'keeping your mouth shut' in relation to sexuality issues (see above)?*
2. *Which out of the three options above is the best choice? Why?*

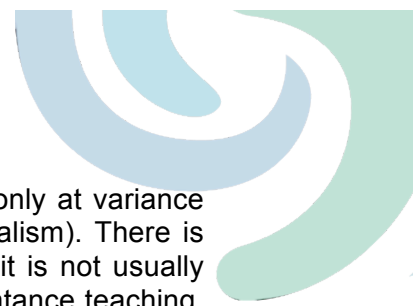
Thinking missionally:

The nature of the Christian message is such that it must be preached (1 Cor 9.16), and preached in its entirety (Acts 20.27). This does not necessarily mean that it is to be preached in its entirety at the *beginning* of a new Christian's journey. Scholars have commonly distinguished *kerygma* (gospel proclamation) and *didache* (comprehensive teaching), the one preceding the other. Within the New Testament there is recognition of instruction ('milk' or 'meat') at a level appropriate to faith development (1 Cor 3.1-2; Heb 5.11-6.2).

This perspective may significantly affect how the gospel is first presented and how basic principles are instilled in new converts. Not all issues are necessarily raised at

¹³ Philip Hughes et al., 'Dropping out of Church: The Australian Perspective', in Leslie 'Joining and Leaving Religion', in Leslie Francis & Yaacov Katz (eds), *Joining and Leaving Religion: Research Perspectives*, Leominster: Gracewing, 2000, 167-94 at 182.

¹⁴ At pages 16, 17.



the point of conversion. Take another issue where society is commonly at variance with the Christian gospel – namely attitudes to possessions (materialism). There is major emphasis on this issue in the New Testament. Nevertheless it is not usually addressed in any significant way as part of initial, foundational, repentance teaching. There is probably a sense that this issue can be addressed progressively further down the line, as the believer is able to receive it. The whole of Christian teaching must be given. But when and how this teaching is given needs consideration.

Because Christianity is so markedly at variance with society on the issue of sexuality, it may well be best for sexuality teaching to be fully and sensitively delivered not at the immediate point of first response but as part of major foundational teaching given subsequently. This could well be in an extended period of catechetical instruction (discipling) of new converts prior to baptism. Such teaching will not only indicate the biblical 'what', but will also reinforce this biblical 'what' with reasoned 'secular' argument.

Mission in many ways is 'messy'. People don't always fit into tidy boxes, and this is often particularly true in relation to sexuality/marriage. Early missionaries in Africa required new polygamous male converts to put away all wives but their first one. The disastrous consequences of this for the women led to later recognition that polygamous converts should 'remain as they are' in relation to their wives. Sexuality issues don't seem to have been a barrier to sexual sinners embracing the gospel in the ministry of Jesus (Matt 21.31). It would be very interesting to know the content of later conversation of Jesus with the women at the well in regard to the current man she had who was not her husband (John 4). It would seem that Jesus was quite direct in laying down principles of sexuality (Matt 5.27-32), but was pastorally gentle in dealing with transgressors (John 4.1-43; John 8.1-11).

The early church initially held the view that new converts should come under all the obligations set down by traditional Judaism, including circumcision, which was seen as a required mark for the male people of God (Gen 17.9-14). This came under challenge as the church continued to reach out to Gentiles. After much controversy and debate, the church felt guided by the Holy Spirit not to burden the new converts with the traditional Jewish requirements (Acts 15). In the changed social situation of today's world we need to be willing to re-evaluate, to discuss and debate together, to seek afresh the guidance of the Spirit for today on sexuality issues.

For reflection:

- 1. How do you respond to the view that sexuality teaching should not necessarily be given immediately to a new convert but given as part of a discipleship process that precedes baptism?*
- 2. Do you agree that Jesus was clear on principles of sexuality but pastorally gentle in dealing with transgression?*
- 3. In the changed social situation of today's world do we need to seek afresh the guidance of the Spirit on any aspects of sexuality?*

Sexuality and youth:

Major societal shifts in attitude and behaviour, mushrooming visual messages from the media regarding sexuality, the rise of the internet, innate sexual desire, peer pressure and delayed marriage all operate to put increased pressure on young people and take them in the direction of premarital sexual encounter. However, the issues are much more widespread and complex and the answers far less clear cut than they were in the past, and many youth pastors and leaders are struggling to find



the way ahead in knowing what and how to teach young people in this critical area of their lives. There is little guidance given to young people and young adults, and many are taking their main cues from the media and culture, notwithstanding their Christian faith. This is especially the case in the general absence of a clearly expressed and integrated approach to sexuality issues from the church.

Many youth pastors express their uncertainty about the application of Christian truth in the whole area of sexuality, and uncertainty about the church's position on sexuality issues. Some of them express their own uncertainty with how they are 'meant' to handle such issues as gender confusion, and homosexual orientation. '*What is the church saying with regard to such issues?*' they ask. A good question. They are also highly aware of the impact of changing societal values in areas where truth used to be much more easily defined. Things look much greyer in today's world than previously.

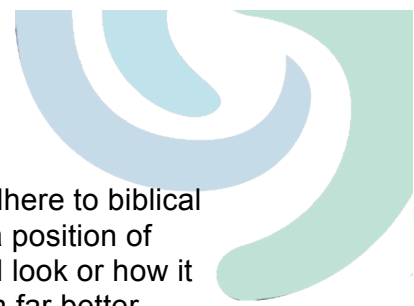
There is a clear and definite need for a good solid theology relating to sexuality issues for youth pastors, and clear relevant teaching for young people themselves. Many feel a lot of issues they face are 'swept under the carpet' or ignored, and they want much deeper dialogue and in-depth Biblical and theological input. Such issues need to be included and expanded on in an in-depth discussion of youth and young adult sexual ethics and their missional challenge.

Some key issues:

- There is a much greater sense of societal acceptance of people today with regards to sexual orientation, gender identity, and sexual expression. Frequently the attitudes of the church are perceived as outdated, out of sync with accepted societal norms, and in many cases, as unkind or judgmental in their expression. A pattern of young adults living together is seen as 'normative' and even desirable before committing to marriage; relationships tend to become sexual much more quickly in today's climate; teenage pregnancies, while not desirable, are not seen as anything wildly out of the norm; and homosexual orientation and practice are generally well tolerated by many non-Christians (*and even some Christians*). There is a distorted view of sexuality in our culture for young people, which has been described variously as 'sex for recreation' and a 'contraceptive culture'.
- The issues of sexuality, and particularly sex, are much more 'messy' among youth and young adults. Frequently, many teens and young adults see themselves as living in 'split worlds' – where they might know in theory what is acceptable Christian practice, but they actually live out something different. The biblical framework is seen as just one of *many* lenses young people use to make decisions about sex and relationships. They live in an environment of many choices, and many competing views about sexuality – and in the face of these views, the church is too often silent. Youth pastors anecdotally indicate that in most evangelical church youth and young adult groups, there are reasonably high levels of premarital sexual encounter, concealment of such behaviour, and feelings of contradiction and guilt. In a world in which chastity is becoming increasingly rare, the average Christian is spending more time on the marriage market than ever before, and making more sexual compromises along the way than previous generations. Many young adult Christians are making peace with premarital sex – some because they want to, but many because they feel they have little choice. To delay sex puts the relationship at risk.



- Youth and young adults also tend to see sex as a much more fragmented whole, and often struggle to find a consistent definition of what constitutes sex. For example, oral sex or heavy petting is often not seen as 'real' sex, and it is therefore acceptable and permissible. This can often lead to situational sexual ethics rather than one overarching sexual ethic, where certain behaviours and practices are acceptable and 'normalised' in one or more contexts, but not in others.
- *Attitudes towards sex.* Many non-Christian young people are quite blasé towards sex: it's seen as just a physical thing, or mere casual fun you have. Their perception is that everyone else does it (whether they do or not) – and whether they should or shouldn't be sexually active doesn't even register on the radar for many. *It's just not even an issue they think about.* Some just want to 'practise' and be 'good at it' before it 'means anything' – and yet many are deeply hurting from bad sexual encounters and unhealthy relationships. Even a number of our Christian young people fail to make the connection between a biblical standard of sexual behaviour and their Christian commitment. It's like a 'disconnect' occurs which allows them to be sexually active on occasion, but it doesn't seem to register as being wrong or having any effect on their Christian life – it's like their actions and beliefs can exist in parallel universes. Other Christian young people know in theory it is wrong, but still act in ways that are biblically unacceptable. *They deal with it though by keeping quiet.* One youth pastor says that there is almost a 'conspiracy of silence' – he said he could name many in his youth group who had experienced sexual encounters, but he had been asked to keep it quiet. There is a fear that they have committed the ultimate sin, and many feel they could never talk to parents about it.
- Many young people also acknowledge addiction to internet pornography sites, and struggle in silence – not feeling they can particularly talk about it, but not knowing where to go for help either. The impact of pornography has been huge on young people with its ready availability, addictive nature, and the rise of 'virtual' sex partners.
- A number of our young people struggle with some level of homosexual feelings or orientation. In a world where the church is often perceived as rating homosexuality as the 'worst sin in the world', and making little differentiation between practice and orientation, many young people are put in an invidious position. This issue goes largely unaddressed in any depth in our churches, and is marked by a level of prejudice and ignorance in many cases which is highly detrimental. The church typically does not deal well with homosexual orientation, let alone practice, and a number of our churched young people, many of whom are committed Christians, are suffering in lonely silence and with deep feelings of alienation and hopelessness. Some have even thought of ending their lives in the despair of simply not knowing what to do. *We must do this better.* We must find ways of addressing this issue with understanding, biblical truth, empathy, support and Christian love – not by sticking our heads in the sand and optimistically pretending gay young people don't exist in our pews. *They do, and they deserve far better from us than they have had to date.*
- A number of youth pastors and leaders have expressed the difficulty they experience in walking the fine line between holding to truth, and operating out of openness and grace at the same time. They want to keep the lines of communication and relationship open, yet don't want to condone behaviour they see as wrong. They are aware that young people are on a journey, and



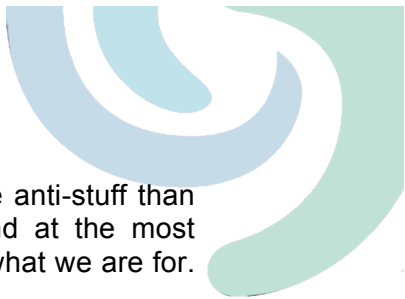
they need to keep the doors open to them – but also want to adhere to biblical standards. To use Paul Windsor's model, they want to hold to a position of 'high grace, high truth', but are not always sure how that should look or how it should be worked out. As church leaders, we need to give them far better guidelines as to how this should play out. Many are all too well aware that while the world tends to largely operate on a 'low grace, low truth' model, the church has frequently opted for either the 'high grace, low truth model' or its opposite – the 'low grace, high truth' model. *Neither has worked well for us:* the permission giving and loving approach of one model denies a biblical standard of truth, but its opposite denies a biblical standard of love, compassion and starting again.

- Another issue one youth pastor raised was the link between 'expressions of sexuality' for youth / young adults and issues of identity: 'At a stage of life where youth sub-cultures form and are often clearly visible through appearance and dress, expressions of sexuality can become entwined with fashion and identity issues. Young people can be especially susceptible to "trialling" various identities and all that goes along with them, and thus run the risk of unwittingly adopting their expressions and expectations of sexuality. This often seems to manifest itself amongst young women in their dress and manner of interaction with males, and for young men in their objectification and sexualisation of women, and their language with reference to women. The trialling of these identities, especially when combined with split worlds and situational ethics, can lead to sudden changes in expressions of sexuality, and a constantly shifting foundation upon which to try to build a godly identity.'

Traditionally, anything to do with sexuality has been taboo – but in recent decades, society and the culture have now turned that on its head. But the church has failed to keep pace, and though youth leaders may dedicate the occasional session to teaching sexuality, there is no real integrated or systematic approach, and we are suffering the consequences. The church is giving little guidance to young people about sex and marriage, and the cultural messages are now so strong that once off-limits behaviours and attitudes seem much more acceptable. There is also a failure to look at all the surrounding issues also: what sets young people up for sexual encounters, an effective analysis of the culture, and helping young people to make good biblical decisions in the face of a cultural onslaught on Christian sexual values.

Churches need to be much more active in giving good guidance, and need to deepen and refocus the message about biblical sexuality as being positive and life affirming. Baptist churches desperately need a positive and profound biblical understanding and theology of sexuality which addresses the issues in our modern culture and context. We need to educate and shape young people in a deeper and true understanding of sex, and reclaim the Biblical understanding of sexuality and holiness.

Sexual ethics should not be presented as arbitrary rules, however, but as a way towards godliness, towards a good society, towards valuing and respecting others, and putting their needs before your own. Such teaching should, be delivered with grace and sensitivity, but without giving a sense to the non-compliant that they have to leave the youth ministry on these issues. In being realistic, we also need to be empathetic and compassionate. We need to be aware of the world young people face. They not only need good guidance, but also compassion, and an empathetic understanding of their struggles and temptations.



Too often in the public perception, churches are seen as being more anti-stuff than pro-stuff: anti-abortion, anti-homosexuality, anti-living together – and at the most basic level, we are often defined by what we are against rather than what we are for. *Too many of our young people are dealing with an unclear focus.*

We also need to create communities that lovingly support sexual restraint and responsibility for unmarried young adults (and indeed all adults), gay young people, single parents, and single pregnant young people.

For reflection:

1. *How can we best support and guide young people in the extreme sexuality dilemmas of today's society?*
2. *Tertullian, an early church father, urged delay in baptism until people were 'safely married'. What do you think of this idea?*
3. *How should 'high grace, high truth' work out in today's Christian youth scene?*

The issue of pornography:

The foundation of the English word 'pornography' is the Greek word '*porneia*' which is a broad term that encompasses 'sexual immorality' and 'sexual perversions.' *Porneia* is used as a blanket term in the New Testament to encompass all sexual activity outside of marriage (Eph 5.3-5) and included sexual thoughts (i.e. sexual lust/fantasies).

Pornography is seldom a focus of preaching in most of our churches despite research showing that up to 1-in-3 men have some degree of addiction to pornography and 1-in-5 women also confess to regular use of pornography (in various forms). Significant shifts in contemporary New Zealand society have resulted in a proliferation of pornography for personal pleasure at an endemic level. The increasingly sexualisation of our society through mass media, the proliferation of film and image in many varieties and its availability on an increasingly large range of electronic devices, combined with a general decline of historical Judeo-Christian values, all contribute to pornography being available and accessible to a greater range of people of all ages. However, this is not a new issue, in fact quite the opposite. The biblical narrative repeatedly talks of sexual misconduct outside of the boundaries that God deemed appropriate. Sexual permissiveness is not a unique problem of today's western world. It was the world also of the early church.

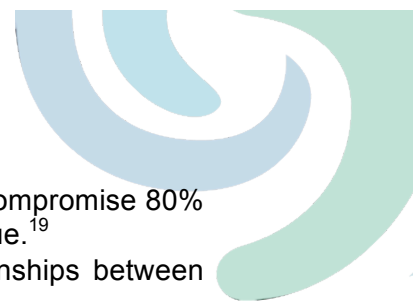
Data on pornography (recognising that the figures may be dated because of spiralling increase) shows the depth of this problem in our western society:

- ☐ 2.5 billion emails per day are pornographic.¹⁵
- ☐ 25% of all search engine requests are pornography related.¹⁶
- ☐ The most common ways people have accidentally reached pornographic content on the web are pop-up windows (55%), misrepresented links (52%), misspelled URLs (48%) and auto links within emails (23%).¹⁷
- ☐ 70% of 18-24 year-old men visit pornographic sites in a typical month. 66% of men in their 20s and 30s also report being regular users of pornography.¹⁸

¹⁵ Pornography Statistics 2003. Family Safe Media. www.familysafemedia.com, 2003.

¹⁶ *Internet Pornography Statistics: 2003*, David C. Bissette, Psy.D. www.healthymind.com, 2004.

¹⁷ *Fifty Percent of Workers Spend Nine days a Year on Personal Surfing at Work*. Cerberian Inc. and SonicWALL, 20 July 2004.



- Half of all hotel guests order pornographic movies. These films compromise 80% of in-room entertainment revenue and 70% of total in-room revenue.¹⁹
- 40% of adults surveyed believe that pornography harms relationships between men and women.²⁰
- Recently scientists at the University of Montreal searched for men who had never looked at pornography – but couldn't find any.²¹

Biblical evidence would support a view that God identifies the effects of exposure to inappropriate sexual material and practices as being damaging both to our relationship with Him and our relationships to others. In writing to Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul writes (Romans 13:13): *'Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.'* To the Church in Corinth he writes (1 Corinthians 6:18-20): *'Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.'* To the church in Ephesus he writes (Ephesians 5:3-5): *'But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.'* The weight of biblical evidence is clear that sexuality and spirituality are tightly linked, and trying to solve one without the other will prove futile. Understanding the problem from a biblical perspective allows us to put in place a solution that is also centred around our faith.

The missional challenge for our churches is to acknowledge the depth of the issue and to also understand that the feelings of shame and guilt that are evident in the lives of those affected by pornography are often so great that it prevents them from getting the help they need; these people therefore maintain a sinful lifestyle in a society that is permissive in so many of its values and that advocates a strong message that 'if it feels good, do it.' Maintaining a Godly attitude to healthy sexuality will be an increasing challenge and is one that leaders need to understand personally and model spiritually within their own lives to the best of their ability and with the help and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

For reflection:

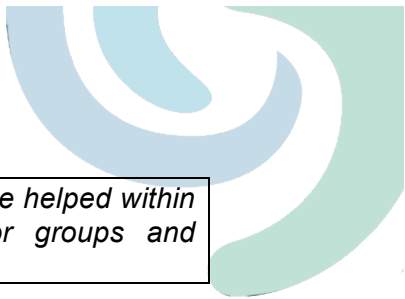
1. *Images affect both character and behaviour in the long run. In the light of Phil 4.8-9 how can a Christian know what is good to see and what is not?*
2. *Are there movies and DVDs as well as patently pornographic websites that ought to be avoided by Christians? Are there other things that should be avoided?*

¹⁸ *First-person: the culture of pornography*, R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Baptist Press, 28 December 2005.

¹⁹ *Sex-Film Industry Threatened With Condom Requirement*, Nick Madigan. The New York Times, 24 August, 2004.

²⁰ *No Consensus Among American Public on the Effects of Pornography on Adults or Children or What Government Should Do About It*, Harris Poll, 7 October 2005. www.harrisinteractive.com.

²¹ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 December 2009, A10.

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3. *How can a Christian with struggles in the area of pornography be helped within the Christian community? Should accountability mentors or groups and voluntary computer checks be available for such people?*

Cohabiting attendees:

Societal changes mean that within most of our congregations will be people in cohabiting partnership arrangements that are not legal marriages. The National Association of Evangelicals in the United States discussed the issue in a booklet, *A Theology of Sex*, in 2010:

Increasingly, cohabiting couples come from Christian homes and profess Christianity.

Church leaders have challenging choices: They can embrace a couple and disregard their choice to cohabit; embrace a couple while encouraging them to move toward marriage; or refuse fellowship to a couple as long as they continue to cohabit.²²

In facing the issue it is good to remember that marriage is not necessarily a 'state' (government) concern, though this has been the norm in the West in recent centuries. In earlier medieval Europe there were not always clear-cut guidelines or standard practice as to what constituted marriage. Historian Joseph Lynch commented:

Not every cohabiting couple was married. There were sharply conflicting views of what constituted a valid marriage: was it parental consent to the union? Was it the consent of the man and woman? Was it sexual consummation? Or was it some combination of consent and sexual relations? Was a religious ceremony necessary to a valid marriage? Or could two families or even two individuals arrange a marriage without outside participants?²³

By the thirteenth century the church had decreed that the fundamental element constituting marriage was the exchange of consent (so clandestine marriages were possible). Gradually, by custom, most marriages were celebrated in the church. The parish register became a record of valid marriages and this was eventually replaced by state registration of marriages.

In modern Papua New Guinea marriage typically involves a clan or wider family arrangement. Marriage occurs through payment of bride price. An associated church service is common, but few marriages are registered.

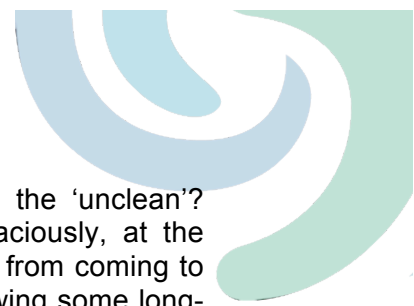
Example of variations in entering marriage in different time-periods and different cultural contexts encourage us to be willing to re-examine marriage in the actual context of today's world.

New Zealand society seems to be in a state of flux in relation to sexuality and marriage. For most people there seems almost a continuum (rather than sharp distinctions) between casual relationships at one extreme and marriage at the other, with 'partnerships' and 'engagement' in between. Often the exact status of the relationship is ill-defined. This type of situation spills over into the church, bringing with it greyness, uncertainty and 'mess'.

In the past this would immediately raise issues of standards and perhaps church discipline. In today's society this may call for a more low-key approach, particularly when it is recognised that the church ought to be a welcoming place, and a significant location for Christian conversions. This raises questions: Is the church to be only a haven for the saints or also a 'hospital for the sick'? Is it to be a perfect

²² http://www.naegeneration.com/images/content/ToS_-_BW.pdf, 18, accessed 14 January 2011.

²³ Joseph Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History*, London: Longman, 1992, 289.



society or to be like Noah's ark, a place for both the 'clean' and the 'unclean'? Missionally, this may encourage the church to be, wisely and graciously, at the welcoming end of the response spectrum. This may mean refraining from coming to judgment regarding attendees' 'marital' status. It may also mean viewing some long-term partnerships (partnerships that have characteristics of permanence, fidelity and commitment) as 'marriage', albeit irregular marriage.

Should such a more spacious approach apply, however, to Christian leaders? Such people may have a significant role in modelling the gospel and Christian ethics and influencing others. A number of scriptures suggest that a higher standard is called for with regard to Christian leaders (James 3.1; 1 Tim 3.2). In terms of sexuality this suggests that church leaders should either be celibate single people or in a faithful married relationship.

For reflection:

- 1. Discuss the notion that the church is to be a hospital for the sick, rather than a haven for the saints. What difference does that make?*
- 2. What should 'welcome' for those who are in sexually irregular situations look like?*
- 3. What do you think of the notion that a differentiation should be made in our churches between leaders and rank-and-file and that there should be greater strictness for the former such that those engaged in significant public ministry or leadership should either be celibate single people or in a faithful married relationship?*

Homosexuality:

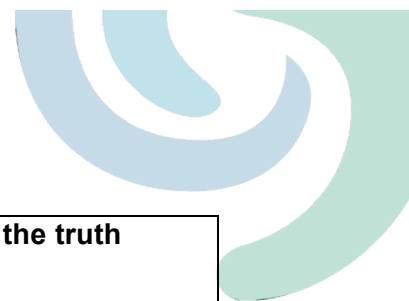
Traditionally churches have been opposed to all acts of a homosexual nature. In the last half century, churches of a more liberal tendency have moved towards not only welcoming homosexuals but also accepting their sexual activity if it occurs in a context of relationality and long-term commitment (akin in some ways to marriage). This has been done on the basis that homosexuality is a more or less immutable identity and that it would be unjust and unloving not to endorse behaviour which (they believe) expresses the core person (identity).²⁴

Evangelicals strongly opposed this perspective in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes unwisely, sometimes harshly. More recently, evangelicals have tended to emphasise the need for loving attitudes, while continuing to declare homosexual behaviour against God's will. See a 2006 New Zealand Salvation Army discussion paper as typifying a current evangelical stance:

http://salvationarmy.org.nz/uploads/Discussion_Paper_Homosexuality.pdf.

Homosexuality is a particularly difficult issue to address because it involves tension between Scripture, modern understandings of sexuality, and societal perspectives. In both society and church, misunderstandings and misinformation abound. This is indicated in the following table:

²⁴ For liberal and conservative cleavage on these issues see Walter Wink, 'Sex and the Bible: To Hell with Gays', *Christian Century*, 5-12 June 2002, 32-34; Robert Gagnon, 'Gays and the Bible: A Response to Walter Wink', *Christian Century*, 14-27 August 2002, 40-44. The debate is online at <http://www.robgagnon.net/Reviews/homoWinkExchanges.pdf>.



Commonly held conservative Christian viewpoint	Commonly held view in society (often drawn from gay perspectives)	Towards the truth
Gayness stems from environmental factors (commonly an absent father, or over-dominant mother, or perhaps earlier sexual abuse etc). Gayness also stems from personal choice.	Gays are born that way. It's a fixed state from birth or early post-birth. Gayness is explained by biological determinism. There is no choice.	There is often a biological dimension to homosexuality but this is not a total explanation. ²⁵ Gayness is likely a combination of biological, environmental and personal choice factors. ²⁶
Gay people can leave behind their gayness once they become Christians. Some form of (reparative) therapy and the support of organisations like Exodus Ministries will make this happen.	Change of orientation is not possible. To attempt to change people's sexual orientation is damaging and unethical.	Ex-gays do exist. This fact caused pro-gay advocate, psychiatrist Robert Spitzer, who led the 1973 American Psychiatric Association struggle to remove homosexuality being classified as a mental disorder, to recognise in 2003 that some highly motivated homosexuals had changed orientation (though change might be rare and some homoerotic aspects might persist). ²⁷ Conversation with Exodus Ministries' personnel suggests 30% who seek change achieve this in significant measure. ²⁸ Others would view 30% as an optimistic figure. Even accepting the 30% figure, this would suggest that change is possible for some but realistically may not be possible for many others.

Here are some guiding viewpoints in this much debated situation:

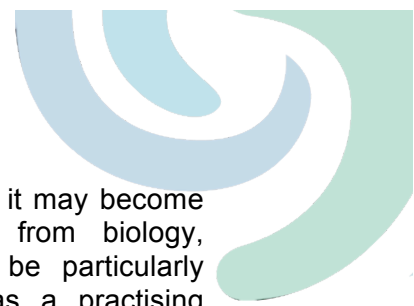
1. By way of preliminary comment, it is helpful to note that homosexuality is significantly different for men and for women. In the case of women there is no anal intercourse, the relational dimension is often much stronger, and the sexual dimension is often much less central. Women often seem freer often to move from homosexuality to heterosexuality and vice versa. The distinction means that one often cannot make statements that equally apply to male and female homosexuals.

²⁵ L. Ellis, & L. Ebert (eds), *Sexual Orientation: Toward Biological Understanding*, Westport, Conn., 1997.

²⁶ J.P. De Cecco & J.P. Elia, 'A Critique and Synthesis of Biological Essentialism and Social Constructionist Views of Sexuality and Gender', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 24, 3/4, 1993, 1-26; Michael J. Engle et al., 'The Attitudes of American Sociologists toward Causal Theories of Male Homosexuality', *The American Sociologist*, 37, 1, Spring 2006, 68-76.

²⁷ Robert L. Spitzer, 'Can Some Gay Men and Lesbians Change Their Sexual Orientation? 200 Participants Reporting a Change from Homosexual to Heterosexual Orientation', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 32, 5, 2003, 403-17; discussion 419-72.

²⁸ Others would put a much lower figure than 30% and some deny any real change of orientation at all.



2. Homosexuality is not fixed from birth for most homosexuals, but it may become deeply embedded in many (through influences stemming from biology, environment and choice). This deep-seated embedding will be particularly pronounced if the person has for a lengthy period lived as a practising homosexual.
3. There are significant health risks associated with anal intercourse (undertaken by 80% plus of male homosexuals,²⁹ and by many heterosexuals). The risk relates strongly to Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), including AIDS. A book by two gay experts (a urologist and a psychologist) in the pre-AIDS era, stated: 'The fact is, the typical homosexually active male will get venereal disease ten times more often than the typical male whose activity is exclusively heterosexual.'³⁰ A 2008 New Zealand survey of Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) indicated that 10% were diagnosed with an STI in the previous year.³¹ In addition, anal intercourse may on occasion lead to sphincter exhaustion or decomposition (failure of the anal muscle, leading to incontinence) or to tearing of tissue.
4. Significant orientation change is possible for many male homosexuals who seek change, perhaps 30% of that grouping, but there may well be some level of residual homosexual desire.³²
5. We need to acknowledge that not all homosexuals seeking orientation change will succeed in doing so and we need to have an understanding and pastoral heart that accepts the struggles of the 70%-plus of Christian gays who may want at some level to change but experience change as impossible.
6. The gospel is a gospel of hope for homosexuals too, even for those who find it impossible to change and who fail to remain celibate always. For some, hope lies in eternity, healing through the resurrection of the body.³³
7. We should be genuinely welcoming churches for homosexuals, but not 'welcoming and affirming' churches (in terms of affirming lifestyle/behaviour).
8. We should not withhold membership from sincere, non-cohabiting, homosexual Christians, even though they may still 'fall'.

²⁹ P. Saxton, N. Dickson & A. Hughes, *GAPSS 2008: Findings from the Auckland Periodic Sex Survey*, Auckland: NZ Aids Foundation 2010:

http://www.nzaf.org.nz/files/100928web_ready.pdf accessed 18 January 2011.


³⁰ Robert Rowan & Paul Gillette, *The Gay Health Guide: A Complete Medical Reference for Homosexually Active Men and Women*, Boston: Little, Brown, 1978, 3. Also Rick Sowadsky, 'Health Concerns for Gay Men', <http://www.thebody.com/content/art2282.html> accessed 18 January 2011. Note that some of the data in these studies is now dated.

³¹ P. Saxton, N. Dickson & A. Hughes, *GAPSS 2008: Findings from the Auckland Periodic Sex Survey*, Auckland: NZ Aids Foundation 2010:

http://www.nzaf.org.nz/files/100928web_ready.pdf accessed 18 January 2011. See also Royal Gee, 'Primary Health Care Issues among Men Who Have Sex with Men', *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*, 18, 4 (2006), 144-53., which indicated a United States hepatitis B rate of 17%, a Chlamydia rate of 7.2%, new cases of gonorrhea in eight major cities at 23%.

³² For one example, see Anonymous, 'The Road to Healing', *Christianity Today*, April 2007, 57-61, expressing gratitude to God 'for how far he has brought me' and how his struggle had lessened considerably, while acknowledging that his road to recovery from homosexual attraction was not quick and easy and might well be a lifelong battle.

³³ Richard Hays, 'Awaiting the Resurrection of Our Bodies', in Jeffrey Siker (ed.), *Homosexuality and the Bible: Both Sides of the Debate*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994, 3-17.

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9. A line should be drawn in relation to the leadership of the church because of the modelling image and influence it creates (James 3.1). Active homosexuals and heterosexuals sexually active outside of marriage are not suitable to be placed in church leadership (1 Tim 3.2).

This stance leaves open a door for active mission/ministry to homosexual people. At a relational level there must be warmth towards gays and lesbians. They are fellow human beings, who with us are made in the image of God, flawed though that image may now be in all of us – we *all* are fellow sinners. Despite a warm welcome, however, the reality is that many spiritually concerned homosexuals may not find their home in our churches because we cannot fully endorse homosexual relationships. We must do the best we can while remaining in the tension between being missionally and pastorally inclusive on the one hand and biblically and ethically faithful on the other.

For reflection:

- 1. Is there a tension between being missionally and pastorally inclusive on the one hand and biblically and ethically faithful on the other? What should we do about any such tension?*
- 2. What is the Christian good news for homosexually oriented people? Do you agree that for some their life may involve lifetime struggle in relation to sexuality? How best can they find pastoral support and encouragement?*

Conclusion:

Sex is a wonderful gift of God. It is also an area of major ethical and missional challenge. It is not a time for defensiveness but rather a time of opportunity to present a wonderful but costly alternative way in our fallen world. It calls both for flexibility of thinking and also for faithfulness to the ways of God and the gospel as revealed in Scripture.