

Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Spring 2021

True
Freedom
Trust



They cannot be my Disciple

One night last winter, I attended one of TFT's Support Groups that was meeting at a church building nearby. After the usual mix of fellowship, biscuits and witty banter, we said our goodbyes and headed home. I got in my car, switched on the engine, changed into reverse gear, started backing up, and... thud. I hadn't noticed the car parked behind me and bumped into it. I left a note for the owner explaining what had happened and ended up paying £300 to repair the damage to their car. I remarked to the group leader that it was the most expensive Christian event I'd ever been to, and I wondered if I would have gone that night if I'd have known what it would cost me!

Jesus encourages us to count the cost of our discipleship in Luke 14:25-35.

Christ uses illustrations to caution against being too hasty to follow him without fully appreciating all that the Christian life involves. The passage is refreshingly blunt, not just because the explicit instruction here breaks up a sequence of parables, but because we're not usually told the worst things about something before committing. No-one tells you upfront that the Smart TV you want to buy can't do Disney+ For those who are married, you probably didn't provide your partner with a list of your bad habits when you started dating. Jesus thinks it's important that we know what we're letting ourselves in for if we are to be his disciples. He outlines three types of people who cannot be his disciple.

1. The uncherishing

In Luke 14:26, Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father

and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple.” The word translated “hate” here is a Hebrew term that means “love less”. There’s an example of this towards the end of Genesis 29 where Leah is described as “hated” in verse 31, but in verse 30 we see that Jacob simply

“We’re not usually told the worst things about something before committing”

loved her less than he loved Rachel. Matthew 22:37-38 tells us that to love God is our first and greatest commandment. Second, we are to love our neighbours. The biblical narrative is clear that we aren’t called to “hate” others in our sense of the word, quite the opposite. But Jesus comes to “set a man against his father” (Matthew 10:35). Jesus can be a source of division in our relationships. I can think of several people who have been ostracised from their families for professing faith in Christ. To be a disciple, we must be prepared to prioritise our relationship with Jesus ahead of all others.

As a Christian who experiences same-sex attraction and is committed to singleness and celibacy, this verse reminds me that God has a design for human relationships. Where our love for Christ comes first, we engage in actions that are pleasing to Him. Our loving of others, as God defines love, is to love Christ. For Christians, the Church serves as our primary community. It is a community of eternal importance; they are the people with whom I will be in the age to come. Though I face the lack of a romantic/

sexual partner in following Christ, God has not left me lacking a source of community and intimacy.

2. The unyielding

Next, Jesus says, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:27). What does this mean? What does the cross represent? Our minds are likely to first go to suffering. It was on the cross that Jesus endured excruciating pain. It was a punishment reserved for the very worst offenders, people who went against what the state required of them. Some of us may encounter persecution for the beliefs we hold. It is God’s mercy if persecution is not a large part of our experience.

The cross also represents God’s will. God sent Jesus to die upon the cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays and asks God to remove the burden of the cross from him. He knows what is coming, and he is afraid. But the cross is God’s will, and is the journey the Father ordains for Him. We must put aside our will and be ready to follow the path that God has laid out for us. As we carry our cross, we follow Christ.

“When we expect our discipleship to cost everything, we should never end up overwhelmed by what we lose”

And we can find comfort knowing that He will not leave us behind. Sometimes we may fall, but we have others that can help us bear our burdens, just as Simon of Cyrene helped carry Jesus’ cross. I recently tried to carry a sofa out of my house. Unsurprisingly, I couldn’t get it out nearly as easily as I remember the

delivery people got it in. Of course, the delivery people are used to carrying that sort of item. They have experience with that particular 'burden'. I'm always encouraged by fellowship with others in TFT whose struggle is similar to mine. We can draw on one another's experience to help navigate the way ahead.

3. The unsundering

The last type of person whom Jesus tells us cannot be His disciple is the one who "does not renounce all that he has" (Luke 14:33). It's worth noting the totality of this statement. How do we count the cost of following Christ? We have to assume it will cost everything: all our possessions, all our relationships, all our plans. When we expect our discipleship to cost everything, we should never end up overwhelmed at how much we stand to lose.

Prepare for the great banquet

These are difficult verses, but the chapter does not leave us without hope. Immediately before this passage in Luke 14, Jesus tells the 'Parable of the Great Banquet'. The story alludes to the joyful fellowship with God that the Christian will enjoy in fullness in the coming age. It is to this place that the invitation to follow Christ leads. We must prepare ourselves to lose everything we know in order to gain more than we could possibly imagine. As Paul writes, "I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8).

By Simon

Simon oversees Operations & Outreach at TFT. When asked if he bumps his car often, he replied, "I've had fewer hits than The Beatles, but more than Christina Aguilera".

This edition of Ascend looks at the cost of being a disciple of Jesus. Simon, Ed and many of the personal stories focus on how every Christian needs to follow a life of costly obedience. But we can be greatly encouraged in this. Rather than the way of the cross being a 'downside' of following Jesus, the Bible calls us to "*endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children*" (Hebrews 12:7). So, our "*light and momentary troubles*" are in fact the crucible in which we grow in faith and in character: they prepare us for "*an eternal glory that far outweighs them all*" (2 Cor 4:17).

We also explore the matter of finding joy through self-control in several of the testimonies and book reviews. As Rachel explains, self-control is not about "must try harder" strategies of repression and avoidance, but about cultivating our desire for Jesus so it displaces our worldly desires.

On page 12, I explain how we have been overhauling our approach to membership at TFT. I hope to clarify the privileges and responsibilities of being a TFT member, and I am confident that these changes will strengthen us as a membership organisation for the future.

By Stuart, TFT Director



Dealing with Disappointments

Being asked to write an article called “Dealing with Disappointment” wouldn’t naturally be up there as something that I would love, and choose, to write. It would be preferable to write the article “How I Dealt with Disappointment”, as if I had gone through all the disappointment and come out the other side – “It’s in the past; just peace and joy from here on in.” Unfortunately, I would not be able to write that with much integrity.

I shared at the 2019 TFT National Conference about the intentional form of community that I have been part of, and trying to build. There are great examples of community and friendship in the Bible, whether the early church, in Acts, shared their possessions among one another, or the closeness of David and Jonathan in the books of Samuel. Navigating how to do community and friendship in our own lives is challenging. Amongst the joys and many blessings of being part of this community, there have also been disappointments: people moving on,

individuals choosing a different path, or just different expectations of what friendship and community looks like. All of which I struggle to navigate, as my default position is to carry every friend that I have all the way to the end – “You will all be my friends forever, please.” Disappointment has been a frequent visitor at my door, and it still is. The wrestle between disappointment and hope is a past and present one, and likely to be so in the future.

Below are some thoughts about what I have learnt along the way. Obviously this is not an exhaustive list, but I hope it gives you something to think about as you reflect on the community you have around you.

1. Be Present - The grass is often not greener. Be present with those who are already in your community, family and friendship groups. It can be easy to mourn the friendships we once had, or continually look for new or less complicated relationships in the new people we meet. However, being aware of those in your life right at this moment is important. Spend a moment

being thankful for the blessings they bring you, and consider how you can be a blessing to them.

2. Traditions old and new - Marking friendships can be really significant and can help communicate value. Whether this is celebrating Christmas, Thanksgiving, 'friendiversaries' or making up new traditions to celebrate with your friends, it can all be a great deal of fun, and meaningful too. Even marking the time you have journeyed with that friend in some meaningful way. I have Polaroid pictures hanging in my hallway of all my previous housemates that I take when they move out, and on, from living in my house. Initially, it can feel sad, but when I look back on the pictures, I feel blessed to have known them and been part of their journey. God seems to know that we need traditions to remind us of things: the Sabbath or sharing the Lord's Supper together are just two examples that many of us follow.

3. Reframe or reshape the relationship - If a friend moves away or gets married, or any other change, and you feel it's a friendship that is mutually life-giving, then have a conversation with them about this. Work out how the bond can be maintained despite the change in circumstances. Could you go for breakfast once a month with your newly married friend, or go on holiday once a year with the friend who has moved to a different city? I have a couple of friends that I am very thankful I had these conversations with before they moved on; these friendships have continued to grow despite a change in circumstance.

4. Seasons are normal - This is the point I like the least, and have been torn about whether to include or not. However, my experience tells me that

some friendships can be for a season. It can be natural for a friendship or community to 'run its course.' Wisdom is needed to know when to let these go, or when work needs to be done to rebuild/repair/renew.

"Work out how the friendship can be maintained despite the change in circumstances"

5. One person is not the answer - Look to build a range of balanced friendships so that your community is not based around one or two specific people. One sole person cannot be the answer to our intimacy and connection issues. Invest in a range of people. Remember, married people need others too, so a friendship with someone or a few people who are married can be a blessing to you both.

6. Friendships don't always have to be deep - I am at risk of wanting every friendship to be super intense and meaningful. However, I have found that it is good and life-giving to have friends that I purely play squash with, or go paddle-boarding with.

7. It's ok to feel sad - The default position when a positive thing happens in life, such as marriages or a new job/ house move, is to feel all the emotions surrounding it needs to be positive. The reality is that these changes can feel sad too. I think it is good to voice this sadness, although consider carefully with whom you confide.

8. We all need a cheerleader - Paul reminds the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:11) to encourage one another and build each other up. Sharing sadness

and disappointment with trusted friends is vital. When our eyes may be introspective and unable to see past the pain, sharing gives a friend the ability to speak truth and positivity into your life. Hopefully, at another point in time, you are able to be their cheerleader too.

9. Don't squeeze too hard - Charles Spurgeon said, "Hold everything earthly with a loose hand; but grasp eternal things with a death-like grip." The outlook or posture I am walking towards is an attitude of grateful balance. I hope to keep my arms out to embrace friendship and community, and to positively invest in it. However, my

"One person cannot be the answer to all our intimacy issues"

challenge is not to tighten my grip on it, to attempt to control it, or allow it to become my primary pursuit or focus. Good things can become idols or coping mechanisms too, and on reflection there are times when I have spent more time and energy seeking a better community than pursuing a deeper relationship with Jesus.

For the past ten years, I have intentionally had conversations about community and friendship with anyone that would listen. My desire to be connected and have a sense of belonging has spurred me also to be intentional about actively building community. I have felt I have been banging the drum for community for a long time now. However, I have learnt that main drum that we are banging, or rhythm that we are living to, shouldn't be one of community or relationship or career or whatever good and fulfilling thing in our life we are drawn towards. These things

are important, and we do need them to thrive. However, the overriding rhythm or beat we need to be listening to is seeking Jesus. If we continue the analogy further, community could be the melody in a band; the guitar or piano or saxophone will only be sweet and tuneful if played along to the rhythm of the drum, to Jesus' rhythm. His voice, His guidance and His path.

On reflection, learning the above things has helped me navigate a single life. I have been blessed immensely by those around me whom I am journeying with. However, even these things and people have not removed the disappointments and trials life can bring. I often have looked at King David's friendship with Jonathan and desired a similar friendship; however, it was to God that David wrote many psalms of isolation and struggle but also of thankfulness and praise. He turns to God as he knows that ultimately God is the only one who can truly sustain him. David reminds us that God has walked the path with His people before, and he will continue to do so. I will end with verses 1 and 2 from Psalm 62 for us to reflect on: "Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken."

By Tim

Tim is from "God's own county" (Yorkshire) where he works as a doctor. He enjoys paddle boarding, racquet sports, board games and loves a good pun. He also has a cocker spaniel who loves walking and getting muddy, but who unfortunately is less keen on paddle boarding.



Dealing With Disappointments

To explore the themes from the article “Dealing with Disappointments” in more depth, we interviewed Tim. In this podcast recording, he explains more how he has personally worked through the disappointments when people in his community have moved on or when important friendships have changed. To listen to this interview, subscribe to the ‘Ascend Higher Podcast’



truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts

BARNABAS GROUPS

We provide local support groups in our Barnabas Groups, which provide opportunities for TFT members facing same-sex attractions to share openly and enjoy encouragement in a safe space. To find out more about joining one of these groups, please contact paul@truefreedomtrust.co.uk or get in touch via our website.

South

Cambridge, Essex, Guildford, London, Southampton

North/Midlands

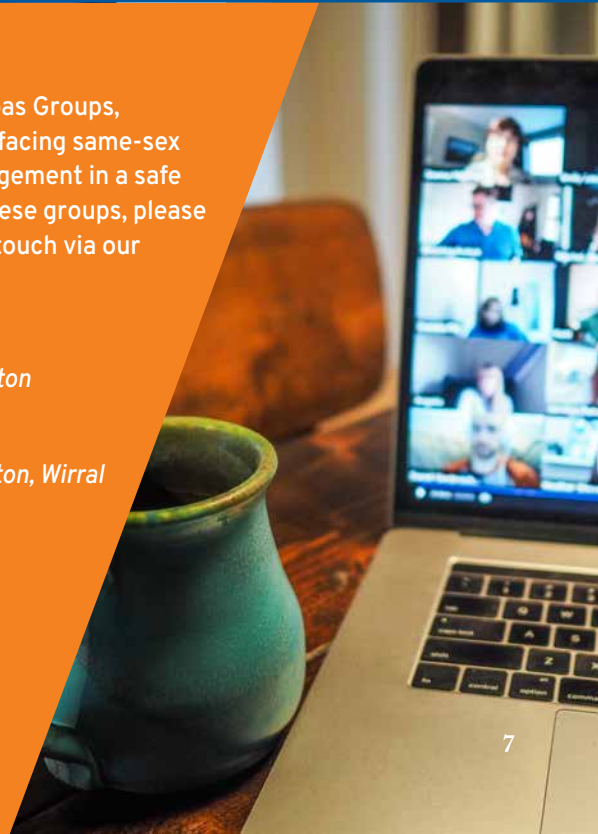
Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield, Preston, Wirral

Scotland/Ireland

Belfast, Dublin, Edinburgh

Online Groups

Men, Women, Married men



The Surprising Joy of Self Denial

I grew up in Scotland, in the privileged position of being the oldest of three children. My father was a GP and my mother a nurse. I was also privileged in that my parents were both Christians - my father in the Church of Scotland and my mother a Roman Catholic. I, therefore, grew up in a Christian environment, both at home and at school. They gave me a good education and I had ambitions for engineering, having a love of all things mathematical and mechanical. However, although I had the typical interests that boys have, I also felt, at times, I wanted to be a girl. In quiet times, I would fantasise about being a girl and wearing their clothes. Other than that, life carried on pretty much as normal compared to everyone else, up till the time of puberty and around the time of transition from primary to secondary school. Over the summer between schools, I found I had time on my hands at home. It was then, when no one else was at home, I would secretly act out the fantasies by putting on my mother's clothes. Each time it felt sexually exciting, but it would not then be long before I would need to take them off and carry on with ordinary life. I remember one time thinking, "What could be wrong with doing this?" However, I also remember one time that summer when, although I had some garments ready to put on, I said "No" to myself, and put them back. Later, I had a really peaceful feeling because of having said "No."

A double life

The summer passed, and I started at secondary school, with all the changes you would expect from that. Although I was not attracted to other males (and therefore not typically homosexual),

I began to regret intensely what I had been doing - it felt wrong. I really wanted to be one person, rather than live a double life. I wanted to be a man, as I had been created, and to have a girlfriend. About two years later, I heard a priest talk during the summer about King David of the Old Testament saying "sorry" to God for wrong things he had done. I realised that I also needed to say "sorry", not just to Mum, but also to God. I searched my previously unread Bible for the relevant passage and then prayed to God for forgiveness. Saying "sorry" to Mum came about a year later. A few months before, I had spoken to the priest about it and he thought it would be better not to tell Mum, but

**"The urge is stronger
when times are tough...
but there is always
some help available"**

keeping it from her became unbearable, and eventually it came out. It was initially very hard for her to hear about what I had been doing, but we soon reconciled. Also, Dad, who was always very patient, gentle and reserved, had a good little talk with me, and this really helped.

Choosing the narrow way

That was many years ago now, and much has happened since. Without going into detail, I did go into engineering (of the mathematical and computing variety). Despite thinking I would be forever single, I met a kindred spirited woman whom I married almost 30 years ago. It has been a turbulent marriage though, probably because

of our respective insecurities. About ten years ago, we separated, and even went through a divorce, but then came back together after a period of about 18 months. Although we now live fairly separate lives in the same house, regressing into our “old ways”, I hold in my heart that it was wonderful for a time when we came back together. It seems we must have been made for each other, because of our mutual support.

I have found that when times are tough, the old urges become stronger, probably from me wanting to find an escape. However, I have also found that there is always some help available: through godly friends and mentors; the Word of God; Christian music and reading; prayer; contemplation and worship; physical activities such as sports; or creative activities such as art, craft and design. Most of all, the thing that helps is humility rather than pridefully striving to have things exactly the way I want them. I love the joyful teachings of the American Baptist Pastor John Piper (desiringgod.org).

Over the years, I have come to a greater understanding of how our loving Heavenly Father wants the best for each of us. This help is not just to turn away from wrongdoing, but to live life to the full as beloved children of God. For me, that is in the body that He designed and

provided for me. I have also learned that He has provided all that I need to do this, as a child of God, and in wonderful brotherly fellowship with His Son Jesus, who made it possible through His sacrifice on the cross. His Word promises that I have all that is necessary through the power of the Holy Spirit, for, “His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue...” (2 Peter 1:3).

To summarise, I have a choice. I can either escape from my troubles by focussing on seeking my own pleasure and going against the design of my body, with all the isolation from God and others that would follow. Or, alternatively, I can embrace whatever difficulties I have and walk, limping and stumbling at times. If I choose this narrow way daily, I am fully equipped one day at a time to live life to the full as one of the Father’s many beloved sons and daughters.

By Andrew

Andrew works as a computer system and software developer. He is a bit of an academic, wanting to share his love of maths and computing through tutoring. He also loves cross country running and belongs to a local athletics club.





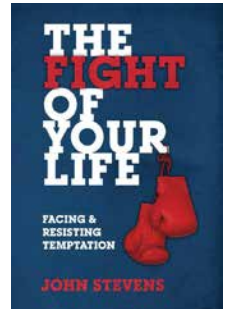
The Fight of Your Life VS Willing But Weak

Book 1: The Fight Of Your Life

Stevens is very clear about his purpose for the book from the first page: “to help and encourage Christians in their battle against sin, and to right biblical expectations of the *normal Christian life*.” He later says that this is “a *victorious life*”, and not one marked by introspection, guilt, failure and loss of hope, which cripple so many Christians. He says that the New Testament never promises freedom from all temptation, but it does not doom us to a hopeless fight against it.

He helpfully addresses the common confusion between ‘Temptation and Sin’ (chapter 1) and is very clear in his differentiation between *same-sex attraction* and *homosexual activity*. As he says, Jesus was undoubtedly without sin but was definitely tempted. Stevens explains thoroughly ‘Why are we Tempted?’ (chapter 2) and also includes the *how*, by expounding the many sources of temptation. It does *not* come from God, but He allows it as everything is in His sovereign will, and hence according to His promise He even uses it as part of our process of Christian maturing. ‘Can we Resist Temptation?’ (chapter 3) is mainly the theological foundations for his arguments. He distinguishes *temptation* from *testing* or *trials*. ‘How do we Resist Temptation?’ (chapter 4) will be the favoured chapter, as he

explains the practicalities, every one strongly backed up from Scripture. You could see how this one chapter broadly equates to the content of ‘Willing But Weak’. ‘What Should we do when we Sin?’ (chapter 5) is an encouraging addendum if we have not yet mastered everything in chapters one to four: “We need to ask what we should do when we fail to enjoy the victory that Christ has won for us”.



The Fight Of Your Life by John Stevens
(Christian Focus Publications, 2019) 160 pages
£7.99 paperback, £6.55 Ebook

Book 2: Willing But Weak

Williams makes his intent abundantly plain in both the subtext of the title and in the book’s opening statement, “A self-controlled life can enable us to make the very most of the one shot of life we have.”

His main biblical text is Titus chapter 2, in which Paul writes to Titus with behavioural instructions for various groups of people in the church. The only one common to all groups (and indeed the only one for young men!) is *self-control*. In other versions, this word is also translated as *sober*, *temperate* or *sensible*.

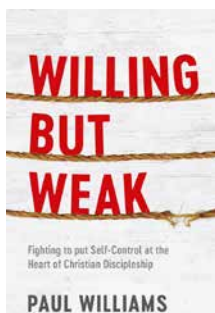
Self-control, Williams says, is like erecting a strong fortress around oneself (“Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control” Proverbs 25:28). Because of this, we may be “rescued from all manner of things that could harm and destroy us.” He doesn’t advise us just to *try harder*, or *leave it to God*, but reminds us it is *self-control*, while at the same time we have His Spirit within us. God gives us all the resources we need, and we are called to be conformed to His likeness.

Following this scene-setting in the introductory chapters, come ten short practical chapters of help for self-control in ten areas of life: Time, Growing in Wisdom, Reading Good Books, The Tongue, Drink, Sex, Anger, Screens, Money and Physical Training. You can simply mark off those which are of relevance to you, and read them in any order.

***Willing But Weak* by Paul Williams**

(10 Publishing, 2021) 112 pages

£4.99 paperback, £4.99 Ebook



The Verdict: ‘Willing’ vs ‘Fight’

As ‘Fight’ has only five chapters, and is fifty per cent longer than ‘Willing’, it is a slightly more challenging read. It does, though, have a very logical and sequential flow, and the chapters have plenty of sub-headings. ‘Willing’, however, is so simple and accessible, almost to the point of being like a workbook - Matt Fuller says of this book in his review: “Ideal to read with a friend and spur one another on.”

Both books are readable, very theologically based, full of practical help and of use both to the individual and the pastor. So, choose where you want to start - either with a focus on dealing with temptation, or a focus on becoming self-controlled. And then come back later for the other one!

By Paul

Paul enjoys travel and the countryside and is an avid reader with the most eclectic of tastes. He is also just discovering the pleasure of gin and tonic.





Strengthening our Membership Processes

In recent years, more of our services have become available to non-members. Anyone who approaches TFT can have access to our resources, one-to-one pastoral support, quarterly Ascend magazines as well as other mailings, and can attend many of our day conferences. We are pleased to offer these services to all.

What TFT membership involves

We reserve membership of TFT for those with a serious interest in progressing their commitment to the organisation and to discipling one another. We are a community of Christians, with each member having a stake. In terms of culture, we are more like a membership association than a service provider. Whilst TFT employs a small staff team, they are there to serve the interests of the members and to further TFT's charitable purposes.

Although they come from a range of church backgrounds, our members hold firmly to a common understanding of biblical sexuality, which the TFT Basis sets out. They also agree to abide by the TFT Code of Confidentiality, which ensures that support groups and conferences are safe spaces for members to congregate without fear of having their beliefs undermined or their confidences betrayed.

Membership gives the privilege of being able to join various closed groups, such

as Barnabas Groups, Book Clubs and online support groups. It also provides access to the monthly prayer newsletter and weekly WhatsApp prayer broadcast. While many of our day conferences are open to all, we restrict some events to members only, such as the annual residential National Conference where, during this weekend each autumn, we hold our annual members' meeting.

The primary benefit of being in membership is the ability to join the safe community of TFT members. Membership's primary obligation is to adhere to the Code of Confidentiality and the agreed rules of conduct at groups and events. We also expect members to pray for our work and, where possible, to support the ministry financially.

In order to guard the family of TFT members, it is important that we become more discerning in future about who joins as members.

Why we need to make changes

Firstly, memberships were originally lifelong, and we now have some going back over 40 years. In reality, we have had no meaningful contact with some of our members for many years. Having dormant members undermines the solidarity of us as a membership organisation. We cannot say, with confidence, that all of our members still hold to our Basis or have an ongoing interest in our work. We are therefore going to convert the dormant members



JOIN OUR MEMBERSHIP

Having read the article above about membership, would you like to join us? If so, please get in touch with our staff team to find out the date for the next online membership workshop.

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/membership

either into involved members or into non-members. This will strengthen the remaining membership, as we will grow in confidence that they still hold to our Basis of Belief and our Code of Confidentiality. Making sure all the membership is committed and involved will mean we are more united.

Secondly, with recent GDPR legislation, it is increasingly important that we only keep data about people where we have justification and permission to do so. It is essential to protect people's data by asking our longstanding members for fresh consent to store their information.

Thirdly, in 2020, an undercover journalist infiltrated one of our online groups and one of our Barnabas Groups. He came in on a false identity, claiming to be a Christian, but he was not involved in a church. He had a convincing story, but his true intention was to spin a story about how TFT was harming gullible Christians by practising conversion therapy. Of course, TFT is a pastoral organisation that does not practise any kind of therapy, and it offers its services to adults with their full consent. One sad irony of this journalist's infiltration was that it was his betrayal of members' trust that caused the real harm to their

wellbeing. So, we are now tightening our criteria for membership in order to safeguard our existing members.

What changes are we making?

The TFT membership is a family of like-minded Christians. For a person applying to join the membership, we will want to get to know him/her at a more personal level than if we were offering one-off pastoral support or providing information. This will involve the following changes to the application process:

- 1. We will tighten up our process for approving new applications for membership. This will include checks on identity, as well as attendance at an online membership workshop.**
- 2. We will reduce the duration of Individual memberships to five years. When this period expires, we will invite the person to renew their membership.**
- 3. Over the course of the coming year, we will contact all longstanding members (whose memberships exceed five years) and ask them to reaffirm their agreement to our Basis and Code of Confidentiality, and their willingness to continue in membership.**

What's not changing

These elements of membership are not changing:

- 1.** Although there will be tighter checks on new applicants (see the previous section), these will not apply retrospectively to existing members wishing to renew their memberships.
- 2.** We will remain a non-subscription membership. Although in future we will encourage all members to support us in prayer and regular giving, we will make no formal charge for membership.
- 3.** The meaning of TFT membership is not changing. We will continue to base it upon common beliefs around biblical sexuality and a commitment to confidentiality in groups and at conferences.

Summary

Although our application process is rigorous, it is not the intention to make it exclusive. We welcome people from diverse backgrounds and across denominations. We recognise that each person is at a different stage in their Christian maturity. We simply ask that each person is honest about who they are and what they are looking for and from TFT. Because we are a family, trust and personal connection are just as important to us as agreement to our codes of belief and behaviour.

If you have questions about these changes to the membership, please contact me at stuart@truefreedomtrust.co.uk I would be happy to explain the process and answer questions.

By Stuart, TFT Director

Are You A Longstanding Member?

Was there a sticker on the front of this copy of Ascend? If so, then you are a longstanding member of TFT who needs to renew your membership.

You can complete an online renewal request webform at secure.truefreedomtrust.co.uk/renew or you can call us on **0151 653 0773**

Please read through the Basis of Belief truefreedomtrust.co.uk/basis and the Code of Confidentiality truefreedomtrust.co.uk/confidentiality before you call. If you don't renew, your membership will lapse.

MEMBERSHIP ROLL

Taming our Desires

My first relationship to desire was to give in to it. As a teenager in the early 2000s, I believed that life was found by identifying my desires and rushing toward their satisfaction. I played this out in academics and especially in sexuality. My life beat to the pulse of Ariana Grande's chant, "I see it, I like it, I want it, I got it." The right response to desire was indulgence.

Unbeknownst to me as a non-Christian, the purity movement was running in parallel. Those who experienced that movement from the inside have spent recent months breaking down its excesses and missteps. Their conclusion (and mine) is that repression and avoidance are unbiblical responses to desire, no more Christian, perhaps, than my teenage, atheistic abandonment to it.

In the midst of these recurring public square discussions, the tension between libertinism on one side and repression on the other leaves most of us yearning for the middle way between failed extremes. In that space, is there a scripturally sound theology of desire?

Yes. I want to suggest that Christian asceticism, ancient though it is, offers a way forward. It uniquely treats God as the end, not the means, of desire.

It also circumvents the shortcomings of repression and avoidance. Here, I'm not talking about biblically wise

avoidance. It is stupid and unsafe to put ourselves in places where we know we will be strongly tempted to lust or sin. Temptation, while not sin, is not safe for us; Jesus commands us to pray that we would be kept from it. Similarly, Paul's admonition to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18) can't mean any less than this.

Pagan strategies

Instead, I want to point out that repression and avoidance have a Christian name but a pagan lifestyle. Both are tactical responses that centre around willpower. A person practising repression might attempt to ignore desire in a "pretend-it-isn't-there" way. Or he might avoid most contact with people he finds attractive. Others are unwilling to acknowledge their sexual feelings at all (especially if one happens to be female or same-sex attracted), because that acknowledgment might bring shame from one's community.

First, both of these tactics try to wrest reward from God through bribery. If you are sexually pure, goes the thinking, then God will reward you with a sexy, best-friend spouse. This so-called "sexual prosperity gospel" is unbiblical and untrue. Not only that, it's devastating to young men and women who work diligently to be faithful only to come up empty-handed. Like the uncured invalid at a faith healing, they're left to wonder if the problem is with them.

Second, repression and avoidance strategies are often motivated by a desire to conform to social expectation. But if pleasing pastors, friends, or parents becomes our primary source of motivation for sexual purity, we are

"Repression and avoidance have a Christian name but a pagan lifestyle"

deceived. Just because the end product aligns with God's commands doesn't mean we are practising Christian virtues.

This leads to a third indictment of repression and avoidance: One does not need Jesus Christ to practise them. Some Christians find that the right combination of carrots and sticks allows them to ignore their desire, or alternatively, they structure their circumstances so that desire rarely rears its head. Self-righteousness sets in and brings with it the impulse to advise others. Christ remains present in name only. He is seen as the one who will be disappointed at failure or who will dole out treats for good behaviour. He is viewed only as the Judge when he himself should be the prize.

In other words, a system that doesn't need Jesus is not meaningfully Christian. If his sovereignty is replaced by human authority, and if the goal isn't him but sex - or for silver medallists, virginity - would anyone even notice if Jesus slowly disappeared?

Here again, I need to caveat that within a truly Christian view of sexual desire, avoidance of temptation and distraction from desire can in fact be useful tools. However, when we rely upon them solely, they fail; like branches ripped from the vine, they wither.

Finally, there is a fourth way that repression and avoidance fall outside of authentic Christianity: They carve out a huge gulf between singleness and marriage.

If your main recourse to sexual desire is repression or avoidance, singleness is a trap. When you only ignore, punish, or avoid these feelings, you set yourself up for fatigue, frustration, and failure.

Many Christian singles feel this heavy yoke. Marriage, on the other hand, is treated like the Promised Land, the reward, the fulfilment of God's purposes. To be married is to finish the brutal race of repression and avoidance and to finally be blessed.

This false dichotomy between marriage and singleness is deeply unbiblical. It also fails to acknowledge that marriage is a training space for desire. Married people face loss of desire for their spouse, aroused desire for those who are not their spouse, and breaks from intercourse for myriad reasons. Sexual dysfunction and even abuse are a painful, routine part of our fallen world.

“A system that doesn't need Jesus is not meaningfully Christian”

Scripture proffers no false division: We see there that God honours both singleness and marriage. Jesus was a single man in a time and culture where marriage was functionally compulsory, and yet in Matthew 19, he affirms the goodness and honour of both godly singleness and godly marriage. Pitting these states against each other is profoundly un-Christian.

Desiring Jesus more

In the face of these four-fold failures, I see a simple alternative: We need a distinctly Christian vision for how to live as embodied desirers in a fallen world. To put it more bluntly, we need Jesus Christ himself. Where he is, there is always hope and life. Every desire should be considered in light of the treasure and person of Jesus Christ.

First, we must consider each desire in the context of what he has declared



good and evil. We are sinful and broken; we are not reliable judges. Just because a desire feels right does not make it right. God has been clear, and we honour him when we flee temptation by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we must consider that each desire presses us not only toward its obvious end but also reveals that God alone is the true end of every longing. So yes, our desires are often thwarted, but that fact doesn't doom us. Instead, even our unfulfilled yearnings can lead us toward the beauty and fulfilment found in God himself. He is the one who made us desiring creatures, because he, too, experiences desire. We are like him, and all our desires are ultimately pictures of what God-in-Christ longs to fulfil for us.

Some of our desires are disordered - warped by original sin. My own same-sex attraction is an example. Other desires are ordered in general but disordered by degree or distribution. A man's desire for women may be ordered on one level but out of order with lust, adultery, or promiscuity. Either way, the gift of Christ is to be able to repent of sin, seek the Holy Spirit in the face of temptation, and take joy in an obedience that flows from the belief that we are fully known and fully loved.

A better way

Repression and avoidance are ultimately human-centred responses. They stuff desire, suffocate it, banish it, and yet rarely succeed at engendering true

purity. By contrast, Christian asceticism reminds us that we are not stronger than desire and then invites us to cast our gaze toward the One who is. It asks the Christian to follow the sight line of desire—like looking down the barrel of a gun—and train it on what all desire is ultimately satisfied by: the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Let us destroy the bribery system by learning that God is the end, not the means. Let us learn to long for him, not purity for its own sake or satisfaction of sexual desire alone.

In the end, sex is a gift, but it's not the point. As Christians, we can mourn its loss or celebrate its presence. But when it moves to the centre of our vision, either through indulgence or repression, we end up pursuing "Christian" goals through un-Christian tactics. Jesus must be our vision, our great yes that balms the smaller no's. Until he is enough, no other yes or no will be sufficient.

By Rachel Gilson

Rachel serves on Cru's leadership team for theological development and culture. She blogs at rachelgilson.com and can be found on Twitter @RachelGilson.

A longer version of this article first appeared on ChristianityToday.com on 29th August 2019. Used by permission of Christianity Today, Carol Stream, IL 60188.

Original article: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/august-web-only/sexuality-sexual-temptation-repression-sure-fire-failure.html>



My Cross is Bigger than Yours!

The intention of this article is to help same-sex attracted Christians to get their particular burden in perspective, and to recognise that many other Christians also carry significant burdens resulting from their faith.

Jesus said to the crowd, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.” (Luke 9:23, NLT) Although Jesus’ cross has fully borne the weight of our sin, following Jesus is costly, and He calls each one of us to suffer for being His disciple.

Comparing the relative sizes of the crosses we bear with those of other Christians is an unhelpful exercise – my pastor has a phrase he repeats whenever any member of his household is feeling hard done by: “Comparison is the killer of joy!” If we judge that our particular burden is greater than that of others, it’s likely to fuel self-pity, resentment and pride. I intend the title of this article to be humorous rather than to encourage such an attitude!

However, the Bible never encourages us to dismiss or minimise the weight of our burdens. The Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 11: 16-32, catalogues his difficulties as a contrast to the comfortable lives of the false teachers in Corinth. He goes on in chapter 12:7-10

to describe something of his mysterious “thorn in the flesh”, which kept him humble and leaning on God’s grace. If we can respond well to them our sufferings have great value in developing our characters and our dependence on God. But we are not to be Stoics, struggling on alone. Paul exhorts the Galatian church (Galatians 6:2) to, “Carry each other’s burdens.”

Ed Shaw writes in ‘The Plausibility Problem’, “I’m most encouraged to obey what God says about sex by the costly obedience I see other Christians make in some totally different areas of their lives.” (pp. 70-71)

In the following accounts, several Christians write about how they have endured hardships resulting from following Jesus, such as persecution, rejection by family, discrimination or material privation. My hope is that these accounts help each of us to get our own individual burdens in perspective, and to recognise that wholeheartedly following Jesus will lead to experiencing hardship in some form.

~

John’s story of domestic violence

Low-level violence by my wife started soon after I married and got worse over time. I felt I had rushed into a marriage,

and it was nearly three years before I stopped putting myself under a cloud for having let God down. However, I decided not to divorce. This was partly for the sake of the children and partly because I thought that, as life hadn't worked out for me, I should make God my priority. Without being completely sure, I felt that He probably wanted me to stay in the marriage.

After our second child, my wife and I had no kind of sexual intimacy, so I have now been celibate for 20+ years. I think this would have been much harder if I had been younger.

My wife, who was suffering from depression, would spend days in bed, coming downstairs for angry outbursts. Her aggression was towards me, never towards the children, although they would have suffered neglect if I hadn't been there while she spent days on end in bed. She would rip or smash things: my clothes, computers, window glass, furniture, car windscreens, my glasses – anything not of value to her. I once needed stitches after she attacked me with a saw but, typically, scratches to my face were the only physical hurt I received. However, I was always on my guard to keep my wallet, phone and keys in my pockets at all times otherwise they would quickly disappear.

Sometimes she would get out a kitchen knife, but the police warned me not to waste their time calling them out. I realised I was on my own and had to make sure that it never escalated to that point, so I started leaving the house whenever she became violent. She would then try to lock me out and return to her bed upstairs. At night she often came to my room, working her anger up until she started a physical attack, so I was always ready to leave, keeping my keys attached

to my pyjamas and everything needed for work the next day already in my car. For five years, I spent about one night in four sleeping outside the house, in the car or elsewhere.

I tried to get rid of anger very quickly and was resolute in avoiding self-pity, although I remember going forward for ministry at the end of a church service and barely being able to speak through tears! I was so hungry for God. I started having unusual experiences of God that were very precious. Feeling sure of his love gave me the strength to be cheerful.

Eventually, social services got involved and police policy changed. With their intervention, the violence virtually stopped, and life got enormously easier. Twenty-two years after we married, she moved back to her country of birth. Today, I feel my experiences of discontent have left me peaceful and strong in the face of life's challenges.

By John

By featuring John's story, TFT is not advocating that a person remains in an abusive marriage. Please do get in touch with the staff team if this account has brought up painful personal memories for you.

~

Phil's life as a missionary overseas

Following Jesus for me has meant moving a great deal, living in five different countries on three continents in my adult life, learning (and then forgetting!) languages along the way, making friends and then sadly losing touch. I have lived among persecuted peoples, but I can't say I've suffered persecution myself. However, sometimes my moves were forced upon me, once by a government hostile to Christianity, and once by the risk of terrorist violence. It's so sad to think of people suffering so much where I used to

live, but the hardest thing personally is the lack of connectedness, the lack of people around whom I share a history.

Whenever I looked at the comfortable life I could have had, I thought it might have left me cold and drifting away from God. I felt that my faith wasn't strong enough to resist those temptations and that I needed a life that *forced* me to depend on God and trust in his promises in real, tangible ways.

I was single when I started my life overseas in mission, but 13 years ago I met my wife, and she joined me on the journey. We're so grateful to God for each other. We have been through even more challenging situations together overseas than I did alone before we met, and additionally childlessness has been a painful factor we've had to endure together. Again, this keeps us dependent on God.

We're now based in the UK, continuing our ministry at a distance. Whenever the temptation comes to put my comfort first or to compare myself with others who have achieved more, I have to remind myself that this life is short, and eternity is long.

I would say to any Christian who feels that their particular cross is too much to bear, you're in a good place even if it doesn't seem like it. That sense of powerlessness you feel, knowing that the burden you

bear is beyond your ability to carry, can take you into a much deeper place in your walk with God. It's those who sense no vulnerability before Him who should worry – “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14b).

God *loves* it when we cry out to Him as vulnerable children, asking Him to lift our burdens from our backs, even when we can't articulate more than a sigh in His direction. He *promises* that He will respond, “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). He is not limited by our tiny imaginations – His answer to your prayers might well be something you've never even thought of.

By Phil

~

A pastor's experience of persecution

Since India became independent from British Rule in 1947, it crafted for itself a democratic, secular constitution. It functioned by that constitution up until 2014 when the Hindu Nationalist party came to power with an overwhelming majority. Since then there has been quite a surge of violent opposition to Christians, mainly in the rural and semi-rural areas of the country. We've been trying to support people in some of these churches, but the fierce sporadic violence





has been increasing, unabated, in large parts of the country. The Constitution of India guarantees the freedom to practise and to propagate one's faith, but that is being sidetracked by what is called the Anti-Conversion Bills in the states of the union. These laws, on the face of it, seek to prevent forceable conversions. However, what typically happens is that trained militant outfits disrupt and attack a Christian gathering and beat up the pastor and members. They then take the Christians to the police station, where they are accused of forcible conversion. This is being played out in an almost systematic and ongoing manner throughout India. Within the cities, there is considerable protection; however, in villages and semi-urban areas, Christians are very vulnerable today.

These Christians who no longer have consistent protection from the police are going through very challenging times. Although we have been able to organise a team of lawyers who resort to legal relief, these Christians invariably spend some time in prison: typically 15 days, and sometimes one month or even more. By the time the case comes up, in most if not all cases, the charge of forcible conversion can't be proven. However, they have already suffered the damage, with church buildings burned down and people attacked. The justice system is holding up so far, but for how long?

It's quite amazing to see men and women of God boldly facing all these blows and turning emboldened to God in prayer. There are stirring testimonies of men and women of God going back to burned-down buildings in many places. I know one instance where a pastor, whose building was completely burned down, has seen phenomenal growth after this intense persecution.

Despite all this, there's an intensification of prayer here like never before. Christians are really finding hope in God. For the first time in many years, I heard this altar call at a leaders' meeting: "Which of you are willing to die for Christ? Come up." 90% of the people responded, saying they were willing to die for Christ. This altar call has been given in place after place, which is very heartening to see. I think the body of Christ in India is being equipped through challenge and also through being given support. Other churches across India are sending immediate medical help to those suffering by covering medical expenses. Sometimes, where people may not return to their homes, other Christian brothers and sisters are providing places of refuge where they can go.

Slowly but surely, the faith of Christians in India is being refined and deepened through these times.

By a Church Leader in Mumbai



God never gave up on Me

To tell you my story, I should really go back to the 1970s. I grew up in rural East Anglia. My family were Quakers and so, from my birth, they took me along to the local Friends Meeting House. The one thing I most remember was being interminably bored! When I was about six or seven, my father had a change of heart about his religious expression and carted us off to a different church which was much livelier. We were asked to agree to certain things which I think involved promising not to drink or smoke, which were tasks I managed reasonably successfully at that age! Within a short period, my father had developed a relationship with another married woman who attended the church. The effect this had on us as children looking on was to put us off organised religion. As well as his ongoing affair, my father showed very little affection or interest towards me. In fairness to him, it may have partly been a generational thing. I don't think he was necessarily a bad person, or deliberately set out to damage me. However, as a teenager, I felt isolated and insecure. I had friends with whom I played football but also experienced a degree of bullying at school. I also developed a hatred for my

father and his mistress. I can remember making up a plan to kill her with a spade when she came to visit the house one time. Thankfully, I didn't carry this through, as my story would then be very different.

Struggles

It was during my early to mid-teens that I realised that there were particular older male teachers that I wanted to be close to. This developed into fantasies and masturbation. I tried to form some friendships with girls, as I wanted so much to be 'normal', but these never lasted and I never even got close to a sexual experience. Looking back, I think I was quite a mixed up, unhappy and anxious teenager.

At 17, I became a Christian after my sister had dragged me along to a church she had become involved with. Although a gradual process this was a genuine experience. Part of the attraction for

**"I can remember
making up a plan to kill
my father's mistress
with a spade"**

me was the love and concern I was shown. The downside was that I would fantasise about the older men in the congregation. In my heart, I knew these feelings were not how God designed me to be – I had a constant battle and often an overwhelming sense of guilt.

I left home at 18 when I got a job about 20 miles away. The attraction was getting away from the atmosphere I had grown up with. I lived in shared accommodation but was often the only one there. It was at work that I met the man with whom I had a relationship for almost four years. He was a colleague in his sixties. I'm not sure exactly how it started, but he showed an interest in me, and I craved the attention of an older man. Being away from the church I had attended, whilst working many shifts on a Sunday had led to a lack of Christian

“He showed an interest in me, and I craved the attention of an older man”

fellowship. Initially, our relationship was one of friendship and grabbing brief moments of physical contact at work. He had recently lost his long-term male partner and was living at his sister's. He was on the waiting list for a flat, and we knew that as soon as he got one, our relationship would become more physical. The first time I went to his flat, we quickly ended up in bed. I had no experience, whereas he had years of sexual behaviour with other men. However, I am sure he was not acting in a predatory manner, as I remember him saying “You’ve done this before haven’t you?” and then being concerned that he was leading me into something I did not want. But the thing was, I really

wanted it. It fulfilled a deep inner need in me, and I can still picture that first encounter. However, this was the door to a lifetime of guilt, battle and struggle. This relationship was the point where those needs of affirmation, belonging, grounding and self-worth became sexualised.

But I was still a Christian, and so my flesh warred with the Spirit of God within me. To try to assuage this guilt, I would drink (mainly whisky) before visiting him. I tried to shut out God, and yet I so wanted to know him too. All the while, I was desperately trying to keep our relationship secret.

For two years or more, this continued until I moved to another job. The distance, work commitments and my overwhelming guilt led to less frequent meet-ups. I also had a couple of other encounters with older men, although my heart and emotions were tied up with my first lover.

Turning back to God

It was at this time that drinking and gambling were playing a bigger part in my life. In short, I was quite a mess. But God had a plan. One Sunday evening, when I had been drinking, I went for a walk and heard singing from a local free church. I felt drawn in and, amazingly, the person taking the service was from the congregation where I had become a Christian. Once more, I felt loved and valued by this small fellowship. My faith was growing, yet I was still deeply unhappy.

A watershed moment came when I ended up in hospital having taken an overdose. I had misread the signs from another man, consumed too much alcohol and swallowed a load of pills. I found myself on the doorstep of the

pastor of a chapel I had recently been attending. They called an ambulance, but also showed me such love and concern, which truly demonstrated God's compassion to me. Whilst in the hospital, there was a moment when, in my desperation, I was crying out to God. It felt like physical arms enveloped me and held me. At that moment I was reassured of God's love and compassion for me. Gradually my faith was reignited, and a short while later I met the young lady who was to become my wife. We both knew that it was right that we were together. However, I didn't tell her about my past.

"I cried out to God and I was reassured of God's love and compassion for me"

But it is not all bad news. God has been very gracious to me. I believe it is as if He has put a hedge around me – protecting me from being consumed into a homosexual lifestyle when I was younger, and watching over me even when I engaged in risky behaviour. He has provided people to support and strengthen me when I have most needed them. He has graciously revealed His love, grace and mercy to me through His word, through pictures He has given me and those times when He has drawn me out of the miry clay. Importantly, He has protected my wife and family from much of the hurt I could have caused them. They are unaware of my same-sex attractions, and I feel that has been the right course for us, although it might not be for everyone. I wish I could be more open, as that might relieve some of the pressure, but that would be for selfish reasons, and maybe this is part of the burden I am called to carry. In recent years God has blessed me

with the support of a volunteer, Peter, from TFT. Words cannot adequately describe the difference this has made to my battle with same-sex attractions and my walk with the Lord. God has placed many people in my path who have helped me enormously, but this is the first time I have been able to share with someone who REALLY understands. From the first time we met, he has showed me love and understanding and has been the conduit of God's grace and mercy. He reminds me of the truth of the Gospel, and has imparted wisdom to me. He is endlessly patient with me, which is a demonstration of God's patience. He is now one of my dearest friends and brothers in Christ.

Another important role Peter fulfils is that of my accountability partner regarding my use of pornography. For years this blighted my life, and I realise I had become addicted and that even a few minutes is enough to damage my mind, heart and soul. This can become a pattern which goes on for a few days until I come to my senses again. Every time I sin in this way, I feel such despair and despondency until I turn again to Jesus and seek his grace and mercy. I tend to feel I have to beat myself up for a while until I allow myself to accept His forgiveness. This is not the Gospel.

I set up Covenant Eyes on my various devices, and Peter agreed to be my accountability partner. It's not cheap, and it's not foolproof, but for me it adds a significant layer of protection. When I am tempted, I ask myself whether I want to have that conversation with Peter when the report comes out.

Acceptance and forgiveness

There are many things that have helped me along my journey. Two have been particularly significant. One has been a



gradual and ongoing acceptance of who I am and what defines me. Yes, I am a man who experiences same-sex desires – but that is only a part of me. For years my holy grail has been to be ‘normal’. It has taken a long, long time for me to accept that this is unlikely to happen and, in fact, it should not be my major concern. Rather, I am a child of God whom He calls to be a disciple of Jesus and to be His ambassador, faithfully propagating the Gospel. Yes, it is a part of me, and it is a constant battle to resist temptation. But it will not define me. I suspect that this part of me has been much more important to me than it has to God!!

The other significant aspect has been that of forgiveness, both towards my father and towards myself. I cannot change any of the past, and I believe that my father’s behaviour, and lack of affection towards me, has played a large part in my being attracted to older men. But I accept he didn’t deliberately set out to damage me or cause me the pain I have encountered. He was a product of his own upbringing, and I have to leave him in God’s hands. Sometimes I have to revisit this and almost forgive him again, albeit posthumously.

I am also slowly learning to forgive myself. I am responsible for my behaviour. I opened the gateway by

“My holy grail was to be ‘normal’. I now accept that this should not be my major concern”

engaging in a sexual relationship. I am responsible for other encounters. I am responsible for my use of pornography. But I have repented many times, and I must believe the Bible when it says, “if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins” (1 John 1:9).

So, I would encourage you to seek support and accept it when it is offered. TFT is a great place to do this. Also, identify in what areas you struggle and take some action. I have had to accept that the only thing I bring to the table is my weakness. I often pray the hymn, “Just as I am”, but that is the best place to be. For God says, “my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).

By Derek

Derek has a passion for supporting the persecuted church. He enjoys watching and taking part in a variety of sports, including running. Although now in his sixties, he hopes to be doing this for at least the next 20 years!

Our New Square Leaflet

We have recently launched our new square leaflet, which combines our three previous A6 leaflets ("Receiving Pastoral Support", "Invite a Speaker", "Supporting the Work of TFT") into one simple introduction to TFT.

The square leaflet gives an overview of what TFT offers and how to get involved, including supporting the ministry in prayer and financial giving. It is ideal for church literature displays or for handing out at seminars/talks on biblical sexuality. If you would like more copies of this leaflet, please contact the TFT staff team:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/contact-page
or 0151 653 0773



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Living Out

We help people, churches and society
talk about faith and sexuality.



Living Out Website

Living Out relaunched their website in January and it is packed full of new resources and features, including animations, a blog, podcasts, brand new articles and a dedicated church leaders' area. Director Ed Shaw comments: "If you've ever found yourself asking 'How can same-sex attracted Christians flourish?', 'Is the gospel really good news for gay people?' or 'Is the Christian sexual ethic harmful?' then you're not alone. The new Living Out website is specifically designed to help people explore questions like these." See for yourself at: www.livingout.org

Winter Warmer Review

On 29th December 2020, over 30 members gathered for fun & games online as a one-off event to support those isolated over the Christmas break.



When I heard about the Winter Warmer, I had two thoughts: it would be nice to have something in my calendar over the holidays, and that it would be especially important for people who were spending Christmas alone for the first time.

My Christmas plans echoed the other couple of years I've spent Christmas "home alone", but I had not thought that through: Nothing works out the same in a pandemic. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day went well but, after that, I found things harder than expected. Therefore, I was especially looking forward to the Winter Warmer. As soon as I logged on, I was enveloped in the chat and familiar faces from my women's book club, my online Barnabas Group, and the various online events I had attended since my first TFT event "Never Alone" in June 2020. Everything else disappeared, and I was part of something. I have been video chatting with my non-Christian family over Christmas, but a Christmas Eve meal with my bubble had been my only time with my church family. In joining the Winter Warmer, I felt I was home because we all celebrate Emmanuel.

As with most families this year, people with various skills and of different generations helped each other with the technology. There were jokes and gentle jibes, Christmas jumpers, decorations and a Smurf village! We played games and had fun. Most conversations in 2020 have been serious ones about the latest news. Now, getting to play felt like an oasis in the desert. I forgot about the pandemic, I forgot about trying to figure out if being alone for Christmas 2020 was supposed to feel "like this", and I had fun! So, it turns out one person who really needed the Winter Warmer was me! I needed to get together with a group of people I have not met "in real life", who chose to hang out on the 29th of December, to laugh, play charades, play Scattergories, run around our houses finding things to make a self-portrait, play Never-Have-I-Ever and listen to a beautiful impromptu rendition of "Silent Night" in another language. I am so thankful to God, to those who knew some of us would need this, for the technology that made it possible and for everyone who joined the Winter Warmer, whether they needed it or were just happy to be part of it.

By Louise



Sipping Poison won't make you Wise

The wisest person isn't always the most experienced. I had to learn that the hard way.

I graduated from high school as an evangelical kid — innocent enough to feel at home in church, yet insecure enough in that innocence to feel I was missing out on something. I wanted to add a layer of toughness to my skinny frame, thinking that would make me more interesting. So, I joined the Marine Corps. There was a reserve unit just outside my hometown, a tank unit, so I could drive tanks on the weekends and be a college student during the week. Wahoo! I'd be a manly man who could strut and say things like, "back when I was in the Corps..."

I remember teargas training. As the room filled with teargas, the drill instructor started marching around the room and making guys take off their masks. When he came back by and showed you his fist, you could put your mask back on. It went fast enough that you could hold your breath until he returned. Then, once your mask was on, you would plug the filters with your hands and blow out hard. This would clear all the gas out of your mask and you could breathe in filtered air. Easy peasy.

Things started out alright for my group. We took off our masks obediently and held our collective breath. A minute later, the drill instructor gave me the signal to put my mask on. I was done. I just needed to put on my mask and clear it.

My dumb idea

But then I started thinking: *"How many people can say they've been teargassed?"*

How many skinny, Christian kids from Idaho have gone through this?" The thought continued: "Now I know what it's like to have teargas on your skin and in your eyes, but what would it feel like to have teargas in your lungs?" The resolution followed: "Maybe I should just take a little sip of the teargas before putting my mask back on. Because then I would know; I would have that experience; I would be wiser."

So, I took just one little sip.

Sure enough, my lungs lit on fire and I exploded into a fit of coughing. It felt like napalm had been poured down my throat. Panicking, I pulled on my gas mask quickly, but I had no air left in my lungs to clear the mask. All I could do was suck in the teargas now inside the mask. Total panic set in and I ripped my mask off, thinking I just needed to run for the door and be free.

But I pulled myself together, got my mask back on a second time, and, with a good deal more retching and gagging, breathed through the trapped teargas until I started getting relatively clean air from the filters.

Forbidden wisdom

It was such a weird impulse to succumb to. I've never told that story and had someone say, "lucky you!" It's usually more like, "why?" It was a dumb thing to think and an idiotic thing to do. But at that moment - and I know this sounds ridiculous - it seemed like an opportunity. An opportunity to do something that would distinguish me from everyone else. To be that much more impressive because I had experienced something that most had not.



Such stupidity is a fundamental error that plagues us all, going back to our first parents.

When the serpent tempted Eve, he told her that when she ate the forbidden fruit her eyes would be opened, and she would be like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 3:3). The power of the serpent's temptation was the idea that just tasting that fruit would open her eyes and make her wise. She would become distinguished by her experience. And to that temptation she succumbed.

This type of temptation still pulls at each of us with an incredible power. We feel that tasting a forbidden thing will bring us greater wisdom and make us more impressive. In fact, think of how easily we can feel embarrassed by all the sins we haven't committed! We can actually become ashamed of our own innocence. Who wants to be naïve and inexperienced? How many Christian kids are embarrassed by their virginity, even though they're convinced they're right in preserving it until marriage? In our confusion, innocence becomes insecurity. Such confusion can be cleared up, though, by answering a simple question: *Does experience with sin make you wiser or more foolish? Does falling*

into real sin turn you into someone we should want to be like, or does it turn you into something we should want to avoid?

Enough already

We won't grow into godly Christians by becoming more experienced with worldly sins. We should thank God for saving people out of drugs and debauchery, but an exciting testimony is not something to strive for. As the apostle Peter reminds us, "the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry" (1 Pet. 4:3).

Regardless of how much or how little experience you have with sin, it is enough. There's nothing wrong with having a boring testimony.

Don't confuse poison with wisdom. Wisdom doesn't come from sipping sin, but from drinking deeply of God's Word and letting it become part of you. That is the experience that truly matters.

By Ben

A longer version of this article was originally published on The Gospel Coalition website www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/sipping-poison



Can we avoid Suffering?

These days, all too often, we see suffering as something to be avoided. We pursue happiness. If something makes you really suffer, you stop doing it. If something will make you happy, you sign up for it. So why on earth would anyone sign up for a life of suffering as a celibate same-sex attracted Christian? And how can I encourage others to do the same?

In a word: Jesus. For he teaches us that suffering for a good purpose is not to be avoided but embraced. Once his disciples had understood who he was (God's long-promised Messiah), this was the first thing that Jesus (the Son of Man) told them:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. - Mark 8:31

Jesus came to suffer: he exchanged the comfort of heaven for an earthly life of suffering and a death that was the greatest act of human suffering ever. Suffering is what his life on this planet was all about.

Suffering was as unpopular then as it is now. We prefer the idea of a successful king to a suffering one. Why? Because we see the implications: follow a successful king and you share in his success; follow a suffering king and you share in his sufferings. Jesus makes this crystal clear:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.' - Mark 8:34

Jesus calls us to suffer too. Following a suffering Messiah makes suffering inevitable. He went to the cross - his disciples will have to go the way of the cross too.

And those disciples who first heard these words soon discovered the truth of them. They watched Jesus suffer and die (and rise again), and then they suffered and died for him, some on crosses as he did. Generations of other Christians have done the same: suffered by sacrificing their lives like Jesus.

A Christian veneer

That's how these words have reached people like you and me. But, for some reason, in our generation, following

Jesus is no longer about our sacrifice and suffering. Western Christians have, by and large, stopped denying ourselves - we now talk more about our right to be ourselves. Our Christian lives are more about self-gratification - seemingly denying the existence of Jesus' words here. They are a continuation of our previous lives, with a thin Christian veneer: just being nicer to a few more people.

The crosses we bear are the small annoyances we haven't yet managed to rid ourselves of (a dodgy knee, our interfering mother-in-law, a bad boss at work), rather than any significant suffering we intentionally embrace because we are following Jesus and want others to follow him too. We've chosen to ignore the fact that Jesus is here calling his disciples to make a conscious and costly decision to sacrifice ourselves, to say 'No!' to things we might want, even deserve or need, because that's what it means to follow his example.

Our contemporary Christian lives of comfort are not the Jesus way. He couldn't make that any clearer in these verses.

The way of suffering

The way of Jesus is the way of suffering. Until we can talk of significant ways in which we have denied ourselves in following Jesus, we should be wary of describing ourselves as his followers. Self-sacrifice has got to be the mark of following the one who sacrificed all that he had for us. It certainly used to be.

What is the suffering, what are the real crosses, you have intentionally embraced because you are his disciple? Is it the painful distance between you and your non-Christian family, because you now follow Jesus and keep trying

to persuade them to follow him too? Is it a loving perseverance in a deeply unhappy marriage? Is it denying your children what their peers all enjoy so that gospel ministry can happen? For me it is (among other things) not having the sexual relations with a man that I long for. I do that out of obedience to Jesus' words here.

“Are our lives just a continuation of our previous lives, with a thin Christian veneer: just being nicer to a few more people?”

Previous generations walked in Jesus' self-sacrificial way more consistently. And, of course, many Christians in non-Western parts of the world today do - even a few in our own churches. All help us see the plausibility of it in their Christian joy in the midst of their sufferings for Christ. When I most struggle with the plausibility of suffering for Jesus as a same-sex attracted Christian, I look at the much greater sufferings of the persecuted church and see that plausibility proclaimed by the blood of the martyrs and the perseverance of the saints. I'm also reminded that it has always been those who are willing to suffer for Jesus that have been the most effective at attracting people to Jesus.

Suffering cannot be avoided by those who follow him. It is part and parcel of the Christian life.

By Ed Shaw

This is an edited extract from ‘The Plausibility Problem’ – Misstep #9 - Reproduced by permission.



Book Review

Purposeful Sexuality by Ed Shaw

(IVP, 2021) 80 pages

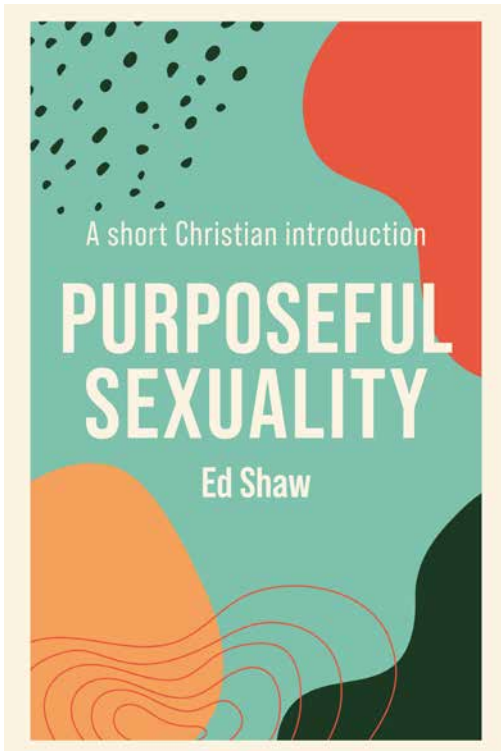
£7.99 paperback, £4.79 Ebook

“What is the purpose of our sexuality?” That is the question that this short book wrestles with. Ed Shaw takes us deeper than the “human flourishing” arguments that only focus on our happiness in this life – he also helps us to mature beyond the simple youth-group questions (e.g. “Whom can I have sex with?”) to the deeper and ultimately more helpful question of “What is sexuality for?” First, he recognises the value for married people of the three traditional answers (marriage, having children,

sharing pleasure), but then he notes how unsatisfying these answers are to those who are single, widowed or divorced, as well as those who are married but either can’t have children or are not sexually active, for whatever reason.

Shaw shares how two sentences from the writing of John Piper helped him to see how sexuality ultimately points us towards the relationship between God and his people. If I am single and celibate, my powerful sexual feelings are not there to torture me, but “they exist to make my life more joyful, as they help me begin to appreciate God’s love for me” (p.22). In case this sounds too abstract, he compares a film trailer (i.e. sex in this life) to the entire film (i.e. our intimate relationship with God in the life to come). He helpfully develops this analogy with the assertion that “No-one who gets to enjoy a really good film in its entirety kicks themselves for having missed seeing the enticing short trailer” (p.37). Quotes like these throughout the book help us grasp these profound truths.

In case the reader worries that the book is going to be too theoretical, Shaw dedicates two chapters to the theme of ‘How does this help us?’ First, he grapples with the question of why God has restricted marriage to two people of opposite sexes. To do this, he turns to Ephesians 5, which compares marriage to the “union in difference that we are all going to enjoy one day” (p.30). There



is a brief foray into the incompatibility issues that some gay and lesbian couples find in their sexual relationships, although Shaw is careful only to quote gay and lesbian writers and he is careful not to make sweeping generalisations. These arguments are presented very much as secondary to the biblical arguments.

He is also careful to distinguish between indulging lustful thoughts

“We are free to admire beauty in another person as long as it turns our gaze upwards to our Creator”

and appreciating the God-given beauty in another person (of either sex). This helpful distinction frees us to admire beauty in another person as long as it turns our gaze upwards to their Creator, rather than downward into envy or sexual desire.

Shaw quotes some shocking words by secular author Olivia Fane: “I have been abused by the dominant ideology of the day: that sex is important and profound, and you are obliged to join in.” Acknowledging the damage that the idolatry of sex has done to each of us, Shaw then presents God’s wonderful corrective: “Sex is important and profound, but you are not obliged to join in. You don’t ever have to have sex, because the reason why it is so important and profound is what it points us forwards to, not what it is in and of itself” (p.39).

Looking at the very practical matter of sexual temptation, Shaw looks at why sexual temptation for many people

is such an ongoing battle, as well as why is it such a divisive matter in our churches. He explains that the profound significance of sex means that it’s an important spiritual battleground, both in our personal lives and within the church.

Chapter 6 (‘What does God do to help us?’) explores the humanity and sexuality of Jesus. Shaw presents author Andy Angel’s retelling of John 4, where Jesus meets the woman at the well with all the sexual overtones that would have been present in that context at the time. I found this interpretation very intriguing, and it opens up this narrative as a helpful case study for modelling sexual purity. For many people, examining Jesus’ behaviour in this story will be much more compelling than citing a more abstract verse (such as Hebrews 4:15: “...we have one who has been tempted in every way”).

Overall, I found ‘Purposeful Sexuality’ to be a pleasing balance of profound truths, memorable quotations and practical thoughts. Shaw challenges the modern view of sex, which claims that it is essential for human flourishing, and shows us that sexuality is rather a signpost to something far greater. He infects us with his enthusiasm for the ultimate intimacy in the life to come, which helps us get the fleeting pleasures of this life into their right perspective.

By Stuart

Stuart is TFT’s Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He claims to love house plants, but has an uncanny knack for letting them die.

Why can't we be Friends?

Navigating friendships is hard when same-sex attraction is present. Just when I think I have it all figured out and have matured enough to handle awkwardness, another friendship teaches me a humbling lesson.

Not too long ago, a new acquaintance in my graduate programme told me she wanted to get to know me better. Even though this person heard a bit about my journey with same-sex attraction through a class presentation, I accepted her invitation to friendship with some hesitancy. After repeated attempts to meet up, I began to interpret her insistence at hanging out as a desire to be more than just friends. I must admit that I lost several nights of sleep mulling over how to navigate what I perceived to be romantic intentions.

When we finally could get together, I was overcome with embarrassment when she introduced me to her boyfriend. This instantly shattered my unfounded assumptions about my new friend's sexual orientation. As I reflect on that blunder, I am reminded of all the lessons I have learned about friendship in the past and am hopeful for future growth in this area of life.

Friendship is a special gift

On a recent trip to the Midwest, I connected with an old friend from undergrad. This friend walked with me through porn addiction and SSA during one of the most confusing seasons of my life. In the year we shared together at college, my friend showed unfathomable patience with me as I slowly let my guard down to engage in mutual friendship.

This friend entered into spiritual trenches with me. She wrote me notes with encouraging promises from Scripture and instructed me to read them when the temptation to look at porn became too strong to handle. (The notes have remained in my Bible through the years since and serves as a reminder of my friend's journey with me.) One night, after I told her I was about to binge on porn, my friend sat up with me and supported me with her presence until I fell asleep. I remember feeling fully exposed in our friendship, yet without shame. My friend blessed me with the gift of vulnerability.

Connection, confusion and pain

Over time, our friendship became confusing for me as I developed a strong romantic affection for her that was punctuated by our emotional closeness. It took many counselling sessions to unpack the complexities between the friendship love and my romantic attraction present in our relationship. The work in counselling was hard but fruitful and, eventually, I saw past the confusion of attraction to the sincerity of our platonic friendship.

When I saw this friend a few weeks ago, I was ready. I had even prepared a mental outline of things I wanted to share with her about her presence in my life during that difficult season in college, along with all that I had learned about myself since then. But to my sincerest surprise, as we interacted, the things that drew me to her as a young college student became apparent with alarming clarity. During the time we spent together, my attraction to her resurfaced as I remembered all the

qualities I admired in her. However, instead of confusion, this time my attraction was accompanied by pain because my friend has married a godly man who complements her in ways no one else could. My romantic attraction is sorely out of place in our friendship.

I still desperately need quality friendships in my life

I wonder if my friend sensed my feelings. Did she recognise my lingering attraction to her? Did she notice the flickers of pain? Knowing her deep sensitivity for people, my guess is that she saw all those things. Yet, despite that, she texted later and said, “thanks for continuing to accept me as is.” Oh, my dear friend; words cannot describe the extent to which you have done that for me!

No, it is not easy engaging in same-sex friendships. Confusion and pain have marked several key relationships since that season of addiction in college, and sometimes I just want to give up trying.

However, I cannot ignore the grace I’ve experienced through friendships with godly women. I glimpse God’s steadfast love when my college friend showers me with grace and understanding amid confusion and pain. Without the joys and trials of friendship, I would miss out on many blessings.

With those things in mind, I think of the gal from my graduate programme I mentioned earlier. To my surprise, she continues to reach out to me. Why can’t we be friends? In my brokenness, I want to ignore her invitations to friendship to avoid the confusion, pain, and flat out awkwardness. But those are selfish reasons. Instead, as I lean into difficult relationships, perhaps I should pose the question, “How is God revealing himself to me though this friendship?”

By Sarah

This article first appeared on the Where Grace Abounds blog at wheregraceabounds.org





CHURCH LEADER LIVE WORKSHOPS

We are launching our first series of online workshops to help equip leaders to teach and pastor better on biblical sexuality within their churches. These workshops are open to church leaders at any level of leadership – ministers, small group leaders, youth workers etc. Leaders are welcome to attend either individually or as a team.

These workshops will be delivered via Zoom with a balance of taught content and interactive groupwork. Each session will have some general principles presented by our staff along with questions and case studies for small groups of participants to discuss and apply to their own church contexts.

Theme: “Caring for same-sex attracted Christians”

Dates: (all Wednesdays): 28th April, 5th May, 12th May, 19th May 2021

Timing: 12:00 – 13:00

More details and sign-up: truefreedomtrust.co.uk/events

Cost: £12 per person for the series of four sessions

We’re Almost “Back To Church”

Last October, we shared the details of our “Back to Church” fundraising campaign with you. At the moment, our speaking and teaching work is limited because of the continuing effects of the global pandemic. With the end in sight, however, we are keen to start heavily investing in our team of volunteer speakers around the country. We are also planning to expand our online offering and hold a number of webinars and events via Zoom for churches and their leaders. To do this, we need to recruit a new member of the team to oversee this work.

We’ve proposed the new position of Speaking Team Manager, to take these plans forward. To fund this role for two years, we need to raise £30,000. Now that we are three months into this campaign, we have received funds or pledges of £22,000 over 2 years (as of mid-January 2021). Thank you so much if you have already contributed in this way. If you see the importance of TFT speaking with grace and truth in UK churches, please join with us in funding this role.

Please visit truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate

