



Radical Relationships

Our society puts much weight on our 'relationship status'. In Christian circles, this translates to whether we are single or married. We might instinctively want to look at 1 Corinthians 7 (where the Apostle Paul sets out teaching on singleness and marriage) to discern which state might be preferable for a Christian. Although Paul gives us very balanced guidance on marriage and singleness in this chapter, he is more concerned with our readiness for the coming world than our earthly circumstances. In verse 29, he writes, "...the time has grown very short... let those who have wives live as though they had none." Of course, he is not saying that a married person should ignore their spouse, but that we should set our focus more on the coming world than on this life. "The

Message" paraphrases verse 30 like this: *"Deal as sparingly as possible with the things the world thrusts on you. This world as you see it is fading away."* (1 Cor 7:30)

Jesus – the single person's mascot?

How much does the Bible say about the marital status of Jesus? Our gut response might be that it says nothing. But there are many passages in the Old Testament where God likens himself to a lover of his people. In the New Testament, it becomes clearer that Jesus, in particular, is our Bridegroom. One of Jesus' earliest claims about himself in Mark's gospel is that He is the Bridegroom (Mark 2:18-22), which refers to Old Testament passages such as Hosea 2:16, "In that day," declares the Lord, 'you will call me "my husband"'.

When Paul writes to the Ephesian church, he notes that earthly marriage “refers to Christ and the church.” (Eph 5:32). Paul is showing us here that Jesus is getting ready to be married to His people. Revelation 19 reveals something more about this wedding: the marriage supper of Jesus and His bride, the church, will be in heaven.

“We should set our focus more on the coming world than on this life”

We can easily champion Jesus as our “go-to” person who exemplifies contentment as a single person. And He certainly lived out some impressive aspects of being a single man: He was sexually pure; He cultivated deep friendships; and He directed His energies wholeheartedly towards the Lord’s work. Although the Bible shows Jesus unmarried on this earth, it is clear that He is getting ready to be our Bridegroom in the life to come! And we are not left out, as the passages above have shown. We, the church, are to be united to Jesus in a way that earthly marriages merely foreshadow.

But, of course, we certainly don’t need to be married to be signposts to these great truths. Those who are single in this life equally point towards their Bridegroom by their watchful readiness for the life to come. Indeed, those who have intentionally “made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 19:12) are more like flashing neon signs pointing heavenwards!

Unhelpful ideas on relationships

Sometimes churches portray opposite-sex marriage as the goal that we should all pursue. This unbalanced teaching has sometimes led to disillusionment and mental health problems when earnest same-sex attracted Christians have not seen their sexual desires change. At TFT, we encourage believers instead to pursue the biblical goal of contentment in God (Phil 4:11-13), whether in marriage or in singleness. Fixating upon earthly marriage as the destination, is short-sighted. Earthly marriages are good, but they are really just the warm-up act for the coming union of Jesus with us, the church.

As well as correcting skewed theology in our churches, let us rid our minds of worldly attitudes to marriage and singleness. Secular media drip-feed us with messages like these that mislead us about true contentment:

- “Your life is sad and incomplete without sex”
- “You need to sleep with someone before you know whether you are sexually compatible”
- “You can always divorce if your love grows cold”

If we embrace these beliefs, we will become mere slaves of our feelings and instincts. And the following worldly messages make sexual/romantic relationships into idols:

- “Marriage is about having a picture-perfect wedding”
- “You need to find the perfect romantic partner who will make you complete”

If we let these messages take hold in our hearts and minds, then our pursuit of relationships will be like chasing the wind

(Eccl 1:17) and we are setting ourselves up for disappointment. Sadly, these worldly values saturate so many films and dramas that we can unthinkingly allow them to shape our minds and hence our desires.

Radical singleness. Radical marriage.

Instead, we need to work hard to displace these ungodly messages with biblical values that are true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise (Phil 4:8). Let us embrace the following truths from the Bible about relationships, which are radical in the eyes of this world:

1. Friendships can be deep. They can satisfy much of our need to not be alone (Prov 18:24)
2. Singleness frees you for a truly purposeful life without distraction (1 Cor 7: 32)
3. Marriage in this world is not an end, but rather a signpost to the greater marriage to come (Rev 19)
4. Celibacy celebrates our great union with Jesus in heaven by waiting with purpose and readiness (Matt 25:1-13)

Whether we are single or married, embracing such a counter-cultural outlook will challenge those around us and point them to the three persons of the Godhead (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) who have been modelling close and satisfying relationships since the beginning of time (John 1:2). I think They have a thing or two to teach us about intimacy, faithfulness and joy in relationship!

By Stuart

This edition of Ascend is on the theme of relationships. At TFT, we promote singleness or marriage as being of equal value and so we are featuring articles and testimonies about both.

In her article, Jeanette explores the fascinating idea of being “betrothed to Jesus”. This is the position of every Christian, single or married. You can listen to the extended interview in our Ascend Higher podcast.

We also include two accounts of married life. Both couples share openly about the challenges and blessings of being married when one person is mainly same-sex attracted.

Donald and Joe each write about their own experiences concerning marriage – Joe ended up married, whereas Donald found relief and resolution in “taking dating off the menu”!

And then are two stories from single people. Hannah writes honestly about her feelings for her roommate, and finding strength in God. 100 years since his birth, we also feature from the archives a very helpful interview with John Stott about singleness.

As 2021 draws to an end, we are very thankful to God for all our members and their ongoing prayers, financial support and willingness to support one another this year

**Owen, Paul, Ruth, Simon, Stuart
(TFT Staff team)**



Catherine's Story

When I was very young, my parents nicknamed me 'Girl-Boy' as I was never interested in wearing dresses or playing with girls' toys. I honestly thought that I would grow up to be a man and would admire Tarzan's physique on the TV, hoping that I would look like him when I was older. So, it was quite a shock to me when I discovered I would become a woman one day.

I grew up experiencing constant crushes on female teachers, friends and film stars, but it never occurred to me that I might be gay. My mum would often say that it was quite normal for teenage girls to have crushes on their female teachers. I always wondered why she kept telling me this, and I worried she had found my cutting of a topless girl hidden in my wardrobe! It never occurred to me that I wouldn't marry a man one day, and so, when I started dating my future husband, aged seventeen, I didn't worry about my sexuality or thought to tell him anything about it. Looking back, I realise I had a great lack of self-awareness and that God was looking

after me and protecting me from choosing a different lifestyle when I got older. I married, aged nineteen, and was very happy with married life and in love with my husband.

It wasn't until I started work as a newly qualified teacher that my sexuality became a problem. My mentor at the school I worked in supported me and guided me through my first year of teaching. But she went the 'extra mile' and showered me with gifts and affection, which I found overwhelming. One evening, I found myself in church trying to concentrate on the sermon, and I couldn't stop my mind from wandering to her, fantasising about her, and longing for her. I knew I needed help, so after the service, I went for prayer, and confessed to a lady from the church about my sexuality and struggles for the first time in my life. She suggested I come to her for counselling and from then started a long journey of seeking healing, support and freedom.

Coming home, I knew I had to tell my husband if I was going to get continued support for this problem, so I confessed all to him. He was, and still is, a terrific support to me. One day, he wrote on a piece of notepaper to me, ‘Let me be your Simon of Cyrene and help to carry

“He wrote on a piece of notepaper to me, ‘Let me help you to carry your cross’”

your cross’, a note I have always carried in my purse.

Over the years, we have both had to work out the right balance of accountability together. It wouldn’t be appropriate to tell my husband about every attraction to women that I have (I wouldn’t want him to tell me about all his attractions!) but, now and then, it has been necessary to share with him about a problem with a relationship that I am having with a friend. When I really feel that I am in danger of crossing boundaries in a friendship or feel that I have lost control of my thoughts and desires, I summon the courage to tell him. I also make sure that someone else knows, so I can get prayer support and not expect my husband to do this for me on his own. Over the years, I have gradually become more open with others about my sexuality, even standing up at a parish weekend and sharing my struggles with the church, and so my support network has widened.

We have been married for thirty-two years now, and I have frequently worried that it is unfair to expect my husband to stick with me when he could have found someone else who is more physically compatible with him. But then I remind myself of many longstanding marriages that I’m aware of that seem loveless and cold, whereas Richard and I have a very deep love and respect for each other and love to be in each other’s company. This encourages me that we have a good marriage despite our struggles. We have been through a lot together, including the stress of bringing up three children, one of whom has severe learning disabilities, as well as coping with the pressures of being in church leadership. Our love goes deep, which is a wonderful basis for a good, strong marriage. As Louis de Bernieres puts it in “Captain Corelli’s Mandolin”:

*“Love is not
breathlessness, it is
not excitement, it is
not the promulgation
of promises of eternal
passion. That is just
being in love, which
any fool can do. Love
itself is what is left
over when being in
love has burned away,
and this is both an art
and a fortunate
accident.*

*Those that truly love
have roots that grow
towards each other
underground, and*

*when all the pretty
blossoms have fallen
from their branches,
they find that they are
one tree and not two.”*

Catherine is an ‘admin-queen’ and loves to organise, plan and file. On the other hand, Richard once lost three bags, in three different places, on one trip!

Richard’s Story

Catherine and I married young, which I always see as a great blessing. We were both Christians and entered the marriage with strong ideals and a deep sense that God had brought us together. It was about four or five years into our marriage that Catherine shared about her feelings of same-sex attraction. We’d been visiting a church that offered prayer after services and Cath had found an opportunity there to discuss her feelings. That gave her the strength to chat with me. This church ultimately became our place of worship, and our spiritual home. The people there gave freely of their time to Catherine over the long haul, and I, too, valued feeling part of a supportive environment. And, so, the issues we were facing took us on a shared journey of learning, discovery and healing.

As Catherine shared, I learned about my own emotional desires and

spiritual needs as well. I think we’ve both come to see that God is our ultimate need. As St Augustine famously wrote, ‘You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.’

My journey led me to ordination in the Church of England and Catherine has always supported that call.

Our journey also included having kids, three in fact. The third has additional needs. Again, this took us beyond our own resources and ability to cope. I remember at the time the song ‘You raise me up’, playing on the hospital radio while I was visiting Cath and through it feeling God’s grace and presence for the news the doctors had given us.

“Now I try to understand everything, but focus more on God being there all the time”

For me, it is all about the journey. As I have already stated, we married young. Neither of us was fully formed. And that is still true. We’ve grown in many ways, but often I’m struck by how young I still feel, spiritually.

Life continues to be a journey of discovery and growth. And, in that context, marriage has been a stable and life-giving force. Of course, we still experience tensions and

difficulties, but we find strength and grace in our strong sense of loyalty to one another, our family and Jesus.

The journey has sometimes been difficult. For many years, I focused on ‘understanding’, trying to figure out why things were this way and, therefore, what we should do. Now I try less to understand and more to accept that we can’t understand everything. Instead, I focus more on God being there all the time. He has blessed us by bringing people into our lives to support us, and that has enabled our mixed-orientation marriage to be a place of growth, healing and life. And for all that, I truly thank God.

There seems to be a lot of pressure on marriages nowadays to conform to various stereotypes. Our marriage breaks a lot of those stereotypes. How can a gay person be in an opposite-sex marriage? But I think that underestimates the power of love, both human and divine. As Paul puts it in his prayer for the Ephesians:

*“I pray that you,
being rooted and
established in love,
may have power,
together with all the
Lord’s holy people, to
grasp how wide and
long and deep is the
love of Christ, and to
know this love that
surpasses knowledge
– that you may be
filled to the measure*

*of all the fullness of
God.” Ephesians 3:17-19*

He reminds us that God’s deep love is available for us and our relationships.

Some things that have sustained us over the years include grace (constantly), the Word of God, ardently seeking God’s Spirit, worship, humour and making time for one another and for the things we both enjoy (such as country walks, music, a meal out, family time and reading). Keeping our friendship strong and making time for recreation together is important, as well as the spiritual essentials. Life is such a rich tapestry of light and dark, joy and tears. It’s only the love of God that stops that being a chaotic mess and changes it into a journey of hope. And, in that place of hope we’ve found laughter, joy and worship blossoming, not despite the challenges, but through them and because of them, as God has walked with us all the way.

Richard loves to read and collect books. He spends his spare time putting up bookshelves in his study to accommodate his vast collection. On the other hand, Catherine starts a book and never finishes it.



Betrothed to Christ

TFT: Jeanette, I understand you're writing a new book about the concept of how Christians are betrothed to Jesus. Please could you explain a bit about what led you to write it?

Jeanette: About two years ago, I was preparing some teaching for a church in Leicester on singleness, and I thought, "Oh yes, I'll bring in that sense of feeling wedded to Jesus, which happened back at my baptism by immersion some 35 years earlier." In those days, you wore long heavy white gowns, so it really gave that impression (for me anyway) of being married. As I was preparing it, I just sensed the Lord saying, "Betrothed not married, betrothed." I thought, "How odd, after 35 years." All of a sudden, my thinking was now being challenged. The only thing I knew about betrothal was the Joseph and Mary story. How Mary is pregnant, and how Joseph was betrothed to her and thought about divorcing her quietly.

I started looking into what betrothal actually meant. Was it only like the engagements that we have today, or was it something significantly more? I started looking into the ancient Jewish marriage ceremony, and the different stages that used to happen. These days, it's all in one service, but it was quite a drawn-out period in biblical times. I started looking, and what was so incredible was that this had so many parallels with the Bible's salvation story. The father and his son choose the bride, or the father determines whom he deems to be suitable for his son. It's even down to the specific words that are used: the Ketubah (the contract), the Mikveh (the bath used for immersion to achieve ritual purity) and all of that. I was wondering what was the relevance of all this for me? Of course, knowing that I am not married but am betrothed to Jesus means the first formal part has happened. Next, in the ancient Jewish ceremony, the son goes back to the father's house to prepare what's known as a Huppah. This is

like an extra room, a love nest for him and his bride.

Meanwhile, the betrothed stays where she is with her parents, although now she identifies with her husband-to-be. It appears like nothing's happened. But, when she leaves the house, she veils her face so that everyone sees she is set apart and unavailable.

As I thought about all the symbolism of betrothal, the whole thing really excited me. I thought, "I have received gifts to prepare myself for the great banquet; the time of seeing Jesus face to face; the wedding feast of everlasting life with the Father and the Son."

"I sensed the Lord saying to me, betrothed not married"

TFT: Her change in status was at the time of the betrothal, rather than on the wedding day?

Jeanette: Yes, that shift in her belonging had already happened at the signing of the betrothal. The son would come to the proposed bride, and her family, with a formal document (the "Ketubah"). These were his promises to her, "This is what I offer as your groom; these are my promises; this my covenant." If they were acceptable to her, she would then sign the Ketubah. She had the choice: it was not an arranged marriage where the bride had no choice. This was not a forced

marriage; she could say "No". And then the 'bride price' was paid. It was money or property given to the father of the bride to make up for his loss, as the daughter was going to live elsewhere. He was losing her service. So, the bride price depended on how much the groom held this woman in value. When you think of the price that Christ paid, His own blood as He laid down His life, that's the value He places on us as His chosen ones. It is not about how valuable I think I am. It is what value He has placed on me. This is what He was willing to pay in order to make me His bride.

TFT: And he paid that price when they signed the Ketubah, is that right?

Jeanette: Yes, it was paid for at the start of the betrothal. The couple would then drink a cup of wine to seal the arrangement, which is the equivalent of the "I do". And the betrothal period was about a year to 18 months. It was up to the father to determine when the room was ready, and then he would send his son to collect his bride. What blows my mind is this. Often, the groom would come with his friends at night, would knock on the door and collect the bride. At that stage, the bride could then decide "No". She has had a year or 18 months. Who might have turned her eyes in that time? Has she remained faithful? Has she focused on what is coming rather than what is now? Is she still set apart in her heart, her mind, her strength? Is she driven by what is

coming rather than what she sees around her now? Again, she had the opportunity to turn him down at that point.

I think of the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins. The wise are the ones who have continually prepared for the groom's coming, and therefore there is oil in the lamp. In contrast, the foolish ones haven't actually kept those lamps full of oil. The lamps are empty. They have not gone on preparing themselves for what is coming. I think that's quite a sombre thought.

"This time of betrothal is for us to get to know Jesus better"

TFT: It ties in with our walk of salvation. It's that kind of active waiting that you talk about with the bride: if she just lets her affections wander, then maybe she won't want this bridegroom at the end, because she's allowed herself to be distracted and the troubles and cares of this world have taken her over.

Jeanette: Yes, it's a big deal to give up all that we have known for a person whom we don't really know. He has chosen us, but what do we know about Him? So that time of betrothal is a time of getting to know Him through the gifts that He sends, through our own preparations, and what we hear and learn about Him. And that strengthens us and reminds us that this world is not everything.

TFT: I wonder if some people might say, "Jeanette, that's all very nice thinking ahead to the life to come, but I need a real flesh and blood person in this life to keep me company and to listen to my woes at the end of a hard day. What would you say to someone like that?"

Jeanette: I totally get it! I wouldn't minimise that for a second. We have all just been through a year (2020-21) of very limited touch. Single people like me live alone and work alone. So how do we then answer those needs as best we can? I think there will always be a sense of loss of intimacy. In marriage, the two become one in every sense of the word. We do not have that as single people. Therefore, how, in a godly way, do I meet as much of that as I can, knowing there will always be a hole? CS Lewis wrote, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. ... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world." So, even in the best of marriages, I am sure there is that sense of, "there should be more than this."

I come home sometimes and think, "I really need to talk this out." I have no one to talk with immediately, but I have a small group of people whom I can confide in. It may not be there and then. It may have to be a day later, or whatever. Likewise, if I want to celebrate something fab, there is not an awful lot of fun

blowing a party blower on my own! I've always found pets helpful; dogs just think you're awesome, so I've always found them good. It is a matter of knowing that I'm going to have a nucleus of 'without' in my life and then finding ways of connecting with others in this life whilst holding on to our great hope for the life to come.

TFT: Jeanette, thank you very much for all that food for thought. I wish you well as you craft these into a

book, which we're very much looking forward to reading.

By Jeanette

Jeanette has ministered on sexuality to Christians for thirty-plus years. She enjoys exploring the roads less travelled in her self-converted van and on her sympathetic e-bike.



Betrothed to Christ

To explore the themes from this article of “Betrothed to Christ” in more depth, listen to the discussion between Jeanette and Stuart in the latest episode of the ‘Ascend Higher Podcast’



truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts



Book Review

"People not Pronouns" by Andrew Bunt

(Grove pastoral, 2021) 23 pages

£3.95 paperback, £3.95 ebook

This short book considers people's experience of gender in a careful and pastoral way. It particularly focuses on the way people experience pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, and how these stereotypes mislead people on both sides of the gender argument. Andrew approaches the topic with a simple but helpful structure of thinking through "heart", "head" and "hope" responses.

In the "heart" response, Andrew helps us consider God's heart and he encourages us to reflect God's heart of compassion. Helpfully, we move on to consider cultivating a heart like God's and how this plays out. This is helpful before considering the ideas of gender stereotypes.

The "head" response is the focus of much writing on the subject. In this section, Andrew considers the question, "Who am I?" He guides us carefully through the struggles some face with the question and how we should receive our identities from God.

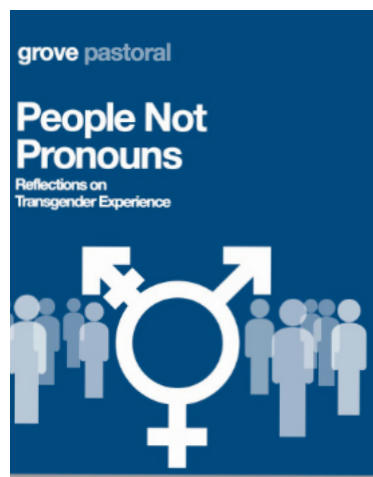
Andrew naturally moves on to the "hope" response, focusing on the hope found in Jesus. This is a clear gospel presentation which includes a theology of suffering.

The book comes to some very orthodox conclusions, wrapped up with plenty of grace and hope. What the book doesn't include is the culture of points scoring

that our world seems so keen to do. The book doesn't explore any pastoral situations or case studies in detail, except for Andrew's own testimony. If the booklet were longer, it may have been good to give a wider picture, by including one or two more personal testimonies.

I would highly recommend this book to people who prefer short reads. It would also be a good book to study in a group or in a 1-2-1 situation. It includes questions at the end of each section, although I would suggest that leaders read wider material (such as those suggested in the notes) to prepare for the deeper conversations that will probably result. At the heart of this book, Andrew clearly states that our ultimate hope is to be found in Jesus alone.

By Owen



"Why I took dating off the menu"

When I became a Christian at 16, I assumed that the price would be singleness. I found other men attractive and, even though I was at an all-boys school, I knew I'd never had feelings for a woman, therefore, getting married to one seemed an impossible prospect. I had struggled to reconcile my gay sexuality with the Bible's teaching on marriage, and I spent a year asking the Lord to help me understand it all. Eventually, I realised that the shame I felt about my sexuality was not from God and that He accepted me as I was. I experienced such profound love and

acceptance in Christ that passing up gay relationships seemed a small price to pay.

I set about being a single Christian with gusto. I was sure that, being "single for the Lord", He would find important work for me, where not being "distracted" by marriage would be an asset. But as I reached my thirties, I became more conscious of all my friends getting married. Where before singleness had been a sacrifice in terms of not having sex, I now felt the lack of intimate companionship more strongly, and I feared being alone.

Donald's Testimony



"Why I pursued marriage"

When given the title for this article: 'Why I pursued marriage', I thought, "That's simple, I didn't!" But, as I'm married, that probably needs to be expanded on a little.

I had come to terms with my same-sex attraction in my 20s and was at peace with singleness. I explained to my friends that I didn't want to be 'set up' with anyone, and I was fully expecting that this was how my life would look. Part of that was an increased openness to people about my sexuality. Where previously I had been careful not to get too close to people (either to avoid awkward questions about my singleness,

Joe's Testimony



or to avoid giving the wrong impression and inadvertently leading people on), I was now happier to share my testimony early on in friendships. So, I began to feel able to get closer to women, and not fear that they would mistake my friendship for romantic interest.

What happened next was exactly that. I got close in friendship with my now wife, but then slowly realised my feelings for her were more than just friendship. It was a surprise in my early thirties, and I was fearful of pursuing it, and worried about hurting her or being rejected, but I confided in close friends and worked out that I needed to explain how I was feeling to her.

At about this time, some well-meaning Christian friends were worried that I was not being open to all the Lord might have for me by being committed to singleness. Their concern was that my hesitation about considering a relationship with a woman was actually motivated by fear of the unknown. There was some truth in that, and by now, I was feeling my unmarried-ness keenly, so their advice seemed wise and timely.

I spent the next several years trying to be open to the possibility of a relationship with a woman. I was confident God was on board with this, but I found it awkward and confusing, as dating

etiquette did not come easily to me. I wished I'd had my teenage years to practise like everyone else!

I wasn't sure whether feelings of attraction would develop within a pre-existing friendship or whether I should expect to feel attracted to a woman before getting to know her. I tried the first option, and that ended painfully and damaged a valuable friendship. I smartened up my wardrobe and got blue contact lenses in the vain hope I would be more attractive. I tried blind dates and speed dating, and watched every episode of the dating makeover show "Would Like To Meet".

When I finally plucked up the courage to do that, she was naturally surprised. To my relief (!) though, she was willing to give dating a go. We were pretty private about our relationship to start with, not wanting the pressure of other people's expectations to interfere, and we let things develop slowly. There was a lot of talking, and we were very honest with each other about our concerns and expectations. We were unhurried in our dating, both thinking about marriage but wanting to be absolutely sure we were ready for the long haul! It was hugely helpful for us to speak with others about our relationship, and our hopes and fears. We each had people we talked to individually, but we also spoke with another TFT couple about their marriage experience. They gave us great advice, applicable to all married or

dating people, of being open and honest, and being clear about each of our 'worst-case scenarios'. The question was discussed and worked through, "Who am I when I'm at my worst, what does that look like, and would you be able to live with that?" We spoke about sex, knowing there was not an option to explore that before marriage, but being honest about our expectations, hopes and fears. That made clear some absolutes for us and things that needed to be non-negotiable.

These conversations were quite heavy at times, but they were also a special time of being vulnerable with each other, as well as growing in our love and trust for each other.

Although my confidence improved, I never came across a woman I found attractive enough for me to pursue a relationship with integrity. I think it's critical to be honest with oneself to avoid leading someone on and people getting hurt.

Over time, the search for a potential wife became unsettling, as though I was constantly scanning the horizon for possibilities rather than focussing on the life and friendships I already had. It felt a long way from the godly contentment described by the apostle Paul in Philippians 4.11-12, and I had to admit that I had been happier when dating had been off the menu. I experienced a tremendous sense of relief and

resolution when I mentally closed the door on dating and marriage and embraced singleness again.

Everyone's situation is different, and I cannot deny that being unmarried in my late forties is a tough walk at times. For me, though, learning to be content with my life as it is, singleness included, has allowed me to focus on living well before the Lord, rather than being preoccupied with the niggling dissatisfaction of wishing things were different.

Donald works for the NHS in the North of England and is TFT's Chair of Trustees. He enjoys collecting three-letter airport codes.

I had heard from different people about the challenges and joys of marriage from the perspective of being same-sex attracted. So we went in with eyes open and very prayerfully. We're in our third year of marriage and, like all marriages, we have to work at it. There are plenty of occasions where forgiveness is necessary, but we have seen God at work in us. Obviously, our relationship is our own, and others might well look different, but we found the following to be essential in our journey to marriage: openness, honesty, vulnerability, and seeking wise counsel from trusted others. Prayer too, of course, but that definitely isn't just for married people!

Joe is coming to terms with being in his late thirties, but enjoys relaxing in front of the TV, going for walks, and eating with friends. He loves languages and is looking forward to travelling abroad again soon!



Our Marriage Journey

TFT: Eileen, would you please share a bit about how Tony's same-sex attraction came into your marriage and what impact it had on your relationship?

Eileen: I guess, when we got married, Tony was in denial, and I had experienced nothing like same-sex attraction. Then, about six years into our marriage, Tony had a breakdown and everything came out. I had inklings about one of Tony's friendships being more than just friendship. I remember going to bed some nights and being absolutely terrified that our marriage could end. But God's grace, His faithfulness and His healing got us through those early years. We had the support of a couple who had experienced similar things. Tony sought help and got involved in "Father's Heart Ministries" and "Living Waters". That started his journey. At that time, I decided this was Tony's issue and not mine, so he went and found help. As long as he was getting the help he needed, I was encouraged. We were very busy in church life for many years, and in 2000 we experienced a church split. We didn't go to church for about six years. And that's when things became far more difficult, and I tried to ignore it!

A few years later, Tony came to the point of leaving me to find the way forward, as his feelings had not changed and he was struggling. During that time, God really spoke to me as well, specifically about my brokenness. It was particularly realising that, although Tony had stuff going on, I did too – I was really no different. It wasn't that I didn't love him before; it was just that I had gained an empathy for him. I wanted to understand more and to journey with him. Tony came to the decision that he

"I remember being absolutely terrified that our marriage could end"

wanted to be with me, that it was right and that we did love each other enough to journey together. We got involved with TFT, and this ministry has featured heavily in our lives and journey. I do still have moments of "OK, what if...." But I know God is greater than it all. I'm just so grateful that we have God in our lives. He will carry us through and I know that His plans for us far outweigh any fears I have for the future.

TFT: Tony, was your breakdown because you struggled with same-sex attraction and tried to keep a lid on it?

Tony: Very much so! Also I was in a Pentecostal church and was getting regular ‘spiritual’ beatings from the pulpit on sexuality. There was absolutely no safe place to own it, let alone unpack it. That would have meant catastrophe. Also, being in this Pentecostal church since I was a teenager made it impossible to share.

TFT: When you say “catastrophe”, what might have happened if you had gone and told the minister?

Tony: In my mind, I would have been thrown out of the church. I wasn’t strong enough mentally to deal with anything like that. I got very busy, to the point of burn-out, and struggled with anxiety and depression. That’s when I became dependent on another young man in the church, which became more than just emotional. In the end, I got help from someone outside the church who was a Christian. Over the following year, God used this person to rebuild me to the point of being able to share with Eileen. Another couple who had experienced similar issues just walked with us both and supported us. I did confidentially share with the pastor, who broke that confidence, and remained condemnatory. So, we ended up leaving the church. But, staying together helped to find a firm path for us both, as well as getting help in dealing with childhood abuse I had experienced, which brought emotional restoration.

TFT: Were you communicating during this time?

Tony: Yes, we had gone through confessing and restoration, sharing much of the stuff I was learning at “Living Waters”. We then went through the church split and were out of a church for many years. This was a time of great challenge and no support. We drew apart, and I struggled and fell. I drank quite a bit as an escape. I made some bad choices, which was when I decided it was time to leave Eileen and find a way forward. I couldn’t deny my feelings and they just wouldn’t go away. What was I supposed to do? I cried out to God! I had struggled since being a teenager and God hadn’t taken these feelings away! I sensed God point me to the creation story in Genesis. This was while I was looking for excuses to do what I wanted and to see the traditional interpretation of the Bible as wrong. I couldn’t get around God’s intention for a man and a

“I was looking for excuses to do what I wanted and to see the traditional interpretation of the Bible as wrong”

woman. I knew God was revealing a purpose in this for my identity, but I needed to submit it to His will. I needed to stop seeking healing of my same-sex feelings, but instead to experience His wholeness through Jesus. I found peace again! My focus became Him and His promise to give us His best. I could focus on ‘knowing’ through Christ that I am whole, even though in the flesh I’m

broken. That's the only place we can stand as Christians, no matter the issue.

TFT: As that became clear to you, did that feel daunting, or was it a relief?

Tony: I was relieved! Daunted, but that was down to my old way of thinking. I found I was anchored again, which I hadn't been for a long time. We got back together 16 years ago. We both became involved in TFT, and that's been amazing. It's a great place of fellowship and community, being able to journey with others and being able to share a part of ourselves with others.

TFT: Thanks for sharing all of that. Now, some people would describe a marriage like yours as "a mixed-orientation marriage" since one of you is same-sex attracted and the other opposite-sex attracted. How would you describe your marriage?

Tony: I never think about us being a "mixed-orientation marriage". Yes, it's a major part of our lives and relationship. However, our relationship is not just about our sexual attraction. It's about friendship, love and caring for one another. There was a poem read at our daughter's wedding, which was incredibly powerful. It was all about the fact that marriage moves on from the young, emotion-driven experiences to a more realistic commitment to one another that goes beyond looks and sex. Not that these things aren't important! We express love in many ways in a relationship. And the longer you are in a relationship, the more ways you find to show and express that love. After 36

years, we still are discovering new ways to show love towards each other.

TFT: Tony, if a Christian man came to you for advice, who was same-sex attracted, but interested in pursuing the possibility of marriage to a woman, what would you want to know about him, and what advice might you give him?

Tony: That is an interesting question. I would ask what he perceives marriage to be about, and why does he want to marry? Is it to overcome his same-sex feelings or to fit into a Christian ideal of marriage? Or is he marrying because he wants to share his whole life with a woman? I think these are questions I would like to scratch around! My situation was that I believed it would 'fix' me.

TFT: Eileen, imagine a woman came to you for advice, perhaps the girlfriend or fiancée of the man we've just spoken about. What would you say to her as she considered whether to marry this man, assuming that otherwise they get along well and are a suitable match for one another?

"Marriage moves on from the emotions to a more realistic commitment that goes beyond looks and sex"

Eileen: I think I would ask her whether she was prepared to be real about the implications of what it meant, and not go into marriage thinking that it's going to fix how this man felt. That she would go into it in the reality of what it is. Does she really love this man, and is she prepared

to have the grace, compassion and understanding to walk the journey with him? And also to realise that she has needs as well. Is he willing to walk with her as well, because it is a two-way thing?

TFT: Some people don't think that a marriage like yours can really work in the long-term, or that it's a sham, just trying to fit in with old-fashioned homophobic attitudes. What would you say to someone who says, "Eventually, the gay partner will need to get out of the marriage, causing a lot of hurt to everyone along the way"?

Tony: I guess I'd invite them to our 37th anniversary and show them the scars! Any relationship is a journey. The key thing is whether two people are prepared to work at it. And, as Eileen said, there is more to marriage than just the sexuality. Who's to say what a sham is? Marriages don't just fall apart because of issues about one partner's sexuality - there's an assumption that this is the case. But there are lots more issues in marriage that might bring it to an end.

TFT: Tony, because of your background in the Pentecostal church and not feeling safe to be open, you didn't tell Eileen about your attractions before you got married. But what would you say to someone today who has started dating about when they should talk to their boyfriend or girlfriend about their same-sex attractions? Is that something they should say on their first date, or should they leave it a year?

Tony: I think somewhere between the first date and the year! I think once there's an established idea that this

relationship could go somewhere, I think that's the point where you have to say, "This is where I'm at." It's easier for people today to have a discussion in their own head before they get married. Probably one of my regrets is that I didn't know before we got married. I didn't have a place to get my head around what it was, because of the world that we lived in.

TFT: What does love in a marriage really mean? Is it having powerful feelings, or is it more a determination to keep going?

Tony: I think it's a determination to go beyond the issue. The issue is not just about sexuality. I think feelings change and vary, and sometimes you really might not like each other. But love is about a commitment that you make to each other. I think those are things that will keep you focused. Sometimes we'll get that wrong, and we need to come back to our commitments in our minds and get our priorities right again. It's also thinking about other people: our children, friends, and so forth. Our faithfulness (or otherwise) impacts them, and it's good to remember that.

Tony leads worship at the church they attend. He likes riding his motorcycle, gardening and cooking, but he dislikes hot quiche! Eileen loves being outside walking "Rufus", the Border Terrier. She much prefers washing up to the arduous task of cooking!



Burdens and Blessings

My parents remember well when I woke them up in the middle of the night, a small child stricken with fear. I had dreamed that I died and went to hell, and I barged into their room so they could help me repent and put my faith in Jesus. Of course, trusting in Jesus as a kid, and growing up in a Christian home, came with burdens and blessings. Lately, I have been fascinated with how God is making blessings from the things I have considered to be burdens, struggles and plain old bad decisions in my life. Wrestling with sinful desires for romantic and sexual relationships with women is the consummate example. Yet when I look for His hand in my past, I can see in everything how He has been working for His glory and my good. Essentially, God has used my experiences to deepen my gratitude for the incredible grace He has given me.

Raised as a warrior

I had many opportunities to learn about God and serve Him because I grew up in

a Christian home and was active in my church. In addition, I knew I was accountable for how I invested these gifts. The parable of the talents in passages like Matthew 25:14-30 still sobers my spirit. Moreover, my parents raised me and my brothers in light of Psalm 127:3-5, which describes children as “like arrows in the hands of a warrior.” My dad told us he hoped we would become warriors, arrows that could contend beyond his reach and stand up for Jesus Christ as the world becomes more and more corrupt. I took Luke 12:48b seriously: “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more” (NKJV).

Then I started to recognise that I had some homosexual feelings. I tried to deny it through all of high school. I knew better than to fall into this sin, but a part of me wanted it badly. My conscience held me prisoner. I felt like a massive hypocrite. At worst, I believed I was a failure. When I was at a county

government meeting, those were my thoughts, giving a speech against the public library for hosting a Drag Queen Story Hour. On the outside, I looked like I was fulfilling the vision of being a fighter for the faith in my community. Then I saw the local secular humanist chapter on the left side of the room, and I felt like I had no right to stand at the podium and tell them that their actions were wrong. I did not act on my temptation, but I still felt like I was disappointing God, my family and my church by desiring it. As painful as it has been to witness LGBTQ+ philosophies change my hometown, I am grateful for God's protection during my youth by raising me in a home that was filled with faith and truth.

Admitting my weaknesses

Naturally, the hardest part of dealing with same-sex attraction has been admitting to others that I am broken. Until the second half of my time at college, I felt okay with keeping my struggle between God and me. Then I fell in love with my roommate. When she started dating her future husband, I felt like I was losing my mind with jealousy. God got my attention when my state went into lockdown for COVID, and my roommate had to move out the day before my birthday. I sank into depression and made a plan to commit suicide as I started to see the consequences of perverting a good friendship with lust. During this time, I cried out to God, "Can You not only forgive me but also restore me? Can You make peace between the friends I've wronged, and me? Is it even possible for

me to have healthy relationships with women?"

I knew that God is in the business of changing lives, and He is the best one at it. I wanted Him to do it for me so badly. I read through the entire Bible in a couple of months, gobbling up whole books in a sitting because I was desperate to know that Jesus could salvage my sin-craving heart. As I poured into Scripture, the Holy Spirit exposed the world's assumptions that I unconsciously accepted about sexuality, orientation and identity. I never want to

"I felt like I had no right to stand at that podium and tell them their actions were wrong"

go through that season again, but I am deeply grateful for how much closer I am to Jesus because of it.

Finding strength in God

While I read the Bible like my life depended on it, the Lord confirmed the truths I was reading through other believers around me. An older lady came alongside me and has continued to be a mentor and friend to me. She has comforted me without getting too emotional, and she is discerning and wise without being purely analytical. Also, she has given me resources and advice, but she never told me what to do. TFT's virtual "Never Alone" conference occurred during the pitch of my depression, and what a timely gift it was! I got to meet brothers and sisters who encouraged me that a faithful, godly life

is not only possible, that healthy intimacy is not only possible, that choosing Jesus over sinful desires is not only possible, but that it is absolutely worth it. Closer to home, my friends continued to pray for my roommate and me, holding me accountable and encouraging my spirit. As for my roommate, I am astounded that she never gave up on me. She really believed that Jesus forgave all my sins and that I could live freely, even though I would still struggle. Her continual forgiveness, compassion and generosity helped me believe that God also felt the same way towards me. Eventually, I confessed to her fiancé. I knew my roommate had already told him about me, but he deserved the respect of me apologising to him, face to face. He forgave me. But that conversation seared into my heart the devastating consequences of lust and the heavy cost of forgiveness. I felt deeply humbled, honoured and grateful to bear witness to their wedding. I did not deserve to be there, but they said it was a privilege to extend grace to me, as God has given grace to them. Friends, that's how amazing the gospel can be.

These are salient examples of how God has used my experience of same-sex attraction to bring me closer to Him and the body of believers. I still want to be a faithful warrior for Christ, but now I am starting to understand what Paul means about boasting in weakness. I have been forgiven much, and I am profoundly grateful (Luke 7:36-50). The Lord set me free from a destructive grip of my heart, and I have peace with God again. In the depth of my troubles, my ways were dead set against His. But He gave me a little more light every time I obeyed. I thought I had a world of expectations to meet, but Jesus' burden is light and free. And His generosity will catch you by surprise.

By Hannah

Hannah is a registered nurse and has been a member of TFT since 2019. She is currently landlocked in the Midwest United States, but hopes to get back soon to her beloved boating and fishing.

Sponsor a Volunteer Speaker

Over the last few years, our approach to speaking engagements has shifted. We now try to send two people from TFT to each engagement where possible. As well as the speakers providing support/accountability to one another, we believe this approach enhances the audience engagement by offering a greater breadth of personal experience. By donating £50, you could pay for a volunteer to attend a speaking event and share their story.





John Stott on singleness

AH: What is your view of singleness?

JS: I wonder if you would allow me to postpone my answer to this question. The reason is that I think we need to discuss marriage before we discuss singleness. The refrain in Genesis 1, day by day, was, 'God saw that it was good.' Then suddenly in Genesis 2:18 God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. What? Something not good in God's good creation? Yes, it is not good for human beings to be or live on their own. Calvin rightly commented that the application of this verse is wider than marriage; nevertheless, it refers primarily to marriage and so indicates that God's general will for his human creation is marriage. We single people must not resist this truth. Marriage is the norm, singleness the abnorm.

We must never exalt singleness (as some early church fathers did, notably Tertullian) as if it were a higher and holier vocation than marriage. We must reject the ascetic tradition which disparages sex as legalised lust, and marriage as legalised fornication. No, no.

Sex is the good gift of a good Creator, and marriage is his own institution.

AH: And singleness?

JS: If marriage is good, singleness is also good. It's an example of the balance of Scripture that, although Genesis 2:18 indicates that it is good to marry, 1 Corinthians 7:1 (in answer to a question posed by the Corinthians) says that 'it is good for a man not to marry'. So, both the married and single state are 'good'; neither is in itself better or worse than the other.

AH: What are the reasons for people to remain single?

JS: I doubt if we could find a clearer answer to this question than in the recorded teaching of Jesus himself in Matthew 19:11-12. He was talking about 'eunuchs', meaning people who remain single and celibate. He listed three reasons why people do not marry.

First, for some it is 'because they were born that way'. This could include those

with a physical defect or with a homosexual orientation. Such are congenitally unlikely to marry.

Second, there are those who 'were made that way by men'. This would include victims of the horrible ancient practice of forcible castration. But it would also include all those today who remain single under any compulsion or external circumstance. One thinks of a daughter who feels under obligation to forgo marriage in order to care for her elderly parents.

Third, 'others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven'. These people, who are under no pressure from within or without, voluntarily put marriage aside, either temporarily or permanently, in order to undertake some work for the kingdom which demands single-minded devotion.

AH: Do you then regard singleness as a gift from God?

JS: Yes. It's noteworthy that Jesus himself, before listing those three categories of single people, said that not everybody could accept what he was about to say, 'but only those to whom it has been given. If singleness is a gift, however, so is marriage. Indeed, I have myself found help in 1 Corinthians 7:7. For here the apostle writes: 'each man [or woman] has his [or her] own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. 'Gift' translates charisma, which is a gift of God's grace (charis). So, whether we are single or married, we need to receive our situation from God as his own special grace-gift to us. Looking back, with the benefits of hindsight, I think I know why

I remained single. I could never have travelled or written as extensively as I have done with the responsibilities of a wife and family.

AH: Do you mean that singleness is a gift in the sense that we are given supernatural power to cope with it?

JS: Not really. The gift of singleness is more a vocation than an empowerment, although to be sure God is faithful in supporting those he calls (1 Thess 5:24). Gift and calling go together. For if he calls us to singleness, the single state becomes a gift that we receive at his hand.

AH: It is widely said that, without marriage, sexual self-control is impossible.

JS: I know that this is often said. And I have to agree both that human sexual desires can be very strong, and that they are made stronger still by the pressures of the sex-obsessed culture in which we live in the West. But we Christians must insist that self-control is possible. We have to learn to control our temper, our tongue, our greed, our jealousy, our pride: why should it be thought impossible to control our libido? To say that we cannot is to deny our dignity as human beings and to descend to the level of animals, which are creatures of uncontrolled instinct.

AH: Could you give us some help in developing sexual self-control?

JS: It seems to me that the best advice comes from the lips of Jesus himself in the Sermon on the Mount, where he

spoke of plucking out an offending eye and cutting off an offending foot (Matt 5:28-30). That is to say, if temptation comes through our eyes, we should not look; if through our feet (places we visit) we should not go. We need to be ruthless in dealing with the first approaches of sin. The New Testament calls this process 'mortification. Here is the apostle Paul's most outspoken statement of it: 'If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live' (Rom. 8:13). In other words, what the world calls life (self-indulgence) is in reality death, whereas putting to death whatever is sinful within us (self-denial) is in reality life. It is what Jesus called 'taking up the cross' – it has to be done daily (Luke 9:23).

AH: Another argument I have heard is that sexual self-control is not only impossible but actually dehumanising, since sexual intercourse is supposedly an indispensable aspect of human experience.

JS: Yes, I have heard this argument too. In fact, the Corinthian false teachers seem to have used it in a letter to Paul. One of their slogans was 'food for the stomach and the stomach for food' (1 Cor 6:13). They were probably saying that just as food and the stomach are meant for each other, so are the body and sex. The stomach can't survive without food; just so, the body can't survive without sex. It's a specious argument, but a blatant lie, which we need to have the courage to repudiate. Jesus our Lord (in the nature of the case) never married or experienced sexual intercourse. Yet he was and is the perfect

model of humanness. His example teaches us that it is perfectly possible to be single, celibate and human at the same time!

AH: Do you struggle with loneliness?

JS: Yes, certainly. God created us as social beings. Love is the greatest thing in the world. For God is love, and when he made us in his own image, he gave us the capacity to love and to be loved. So, we need one another. Yet marriage and family are not the only antidotes to loneliness.

In addition, single people are wise to develop as many friendships as possible, with people of all ages and both sexes. For example, although I have no children of my own, I have hundreds of adopted nephews and nieces all over the world who call me "Uncle John". I cherish these affectionate relationships; they greatly lessen, even if they do not altogether deaden, occasional pangs of loneliness.

AH: What are the main dangers to which single people are exposed?

JS: Apart from sexual temptation, to which I have already referred, the greatest danger which I think we face is self-centredness. We may live alone and have total freedom to plan our own schedule, with nobody else to modify it or even give us advice. If we are not careful, we may find the whole world revolving around ourselves. So, I have found it helpful to have six or eight friends, who are known as 'AGE' (Accountability Group of Elders), with whom I meet several times a year, and

whose advice I seek about my schedule, and especially about which invitations I should accept.

AH: What then are the liberties which singleness brings?

JS: Paul gives a straight answer to this question. Unmarried people, he wrote, are 'concerned about the Lord's affairs', how they can please him, whereas married people are 'concerned about the affairs of this world, how they can please their spouse, and consequently their

interests are divided (1 Cor. 7:32-34). Single people experience the great joy of being able to devote themselves, with concentration and without distraction, to the work of the Lord.

This interview was taken from Al Hsu's "The Single Issue", 1997 (IVP). To find out more about John Stott, visit the 100 website: johnstott100.org

Will there be marriage in heaven?

As earth-dwellers, we can barely begin to grasp the joys of what it will be like to be a part of the wonderful future when God brings heaven and earth finally and fully together (Revelation 21:1-2). All too often, we turn the glory of the new creation into something flat, boring and unattractive. On a flight to Warsaw, I realized this had happened to me, but Jesus also encountered people who had made a similar mistake. Once some members of a Jewish religious sect, who didn't believe in a bodily resurrection, tried to catch Jesus out by posing him a conundrum about a woman who had been married and widowed seven times in this life. They asked him, 'At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?' Jesus replied, '...At the resurrection, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.' (Matthew 22:23-33) Because of dualistic thinking, people have often taken Jesus' words to mean that there will be less than marriage, and

less than sexuality in heaven. They argue that since sexuality is an earthly function of our bodies, we must become asexual beings in heaven. But this is to reduce the dimension of heaven to something that is less than this world. If we understand heaven as a dimension that expands the earth, we should expect that earthly marriage, and even earthly sexuality, will be completed and fulfilled in heaven. This would be in line with other parts of the Bible where we are told that marriage is a signpost to the deeper reality of Jesus Christ's love for his people (Ephesians 5:32). When heaven and earth are united, there will not be less than marriage but more than marriage. As an earth-dweller, I can hardly comprehend what this will mean. However, perhaps it will be that the trusting, faithful, joyful and fruitful relationship that is earthly marriage (at its best) will be so expanded and fulfilled by the intimate relationship we enjoy with God in the new creation that all our relationships will share in this same

quality of love, while not in any way diminishing the special relationship we may have had with another person, if we were married in this life.

I am not suggesting that we will be polyamorous in the new creation! That would be to reduce heaven to earthly terms. Human sexuality is a wonderful earthly reality, but it points beyond itself. The joyful, ecstatic, intimate, other-centred and fruitful sexual union experienced on earth points to something even deeper and more fulfilling in the new creation. It ultimately must point to the eternal joy of being welcomed right in the heart of the joyful, other-centred, life-giving love of the Trinity and being with other people who are filled by that same love.

As Flatlanders (see side box), we can only just begin to imagine the edges of heaven on earth, but we are called to expand our imaginations in a heavenly direction rather than shrink heaven to fit the earth. The future that awaits us when Jesus comes again will be a wondrous glory. It will not be less than this world but the expansion of dimensions, as the weightiness of heaven, the dimension where God's will is done, completes and fulfils the earth. In the end, we will find that we do not love heaven because it contains the things of this life, but that we loved this life because it has contained the things of heaven. When the new creation is fulfilled, we will echo the words of the Unicorn in *The Last Battle*, who says about the new Narnia, 'I have come home at last! This is my real country! I belong here. This is the land I have been looking for all my life.'

What is a Flatlander?

Imagine that we live in the world of Flatland, in which there are only two dimensions: length and width. In Flatland there is no height or depth. Flatland is like a sheet of paper, which has width and length but no thickness. In Flatland, there are triangles and squares, but no solid shapes such as pyramids or spheres.

Imagine one day that a spherical visitor from a three-dimensional world Spaceland visits Flatland and tries to convince its citizens that there is more to reality than their two dimensions. The Flatlanders would just see the spherical visitor as a circle, as they can as they can only see in two dimensions.

The third dimension is not a shadow world when compared to Flatland – rather, it adds a whole new quality of solidity to Flatland. Jim Paul in his book expands more on this analogy to show how much more real and substantial heaven (Spaceland) is compared to earth (Flatland).



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“Light to the World” National Conference - Review

Before I arrived at my carpool for the TFT conference, I texted a buddy in California, “I am headed to a weekend for same-sex attracted Christians. My attitude sucks.” I had started to believe the lie that following biblical teachings destined me for a life of repression and self-hate. I was wrong.

Cut to the start of the conference...

Brothers and sisters in Christ enjoyed intimate fellowship through old and new friendships. Ruth ran a tight ship with properly dry British humour. Paul (the “Emcee”) charmed the crowd with whimsy. Anne Witton shared a series, “Light to the World.” I attended Andrew Bunt’s seminar on “What does it mean to be male or female?” in the Christian context.

In wanting to find answers, I sat front row with pencil, paper and Bible in hand. Anne’s personal experiences, combined with a deep understanding of God’s love, helped her message to land. As Christians, we choose holiness because we trust that God’s plan is better than our own. Anne painted a clear picture of why God’s design of sex within marriage is best for all of us. The union of husband and wife serves as a “movie trailer” for the glorious union we will have with God

in eternity. The good news for unmarried people is we are not excluded from intimacy on this side of heaven – through shared laughter, tears, hugs, kisses, memories, real emotions and more! Anne ended her series by declaring Jesus to be the “Light of Life” and explaining how Jesus offers His intimacy now.

What this meant to me is that I am allowed, even called by God, to accept myself as fearfully and wonderfully made. Growing up in Texas in a house of all boys, I learned most men prefer the Superbowl, business school and hunting with guns. But I prefer ballet, drama school and hunting for the prettiest flower. Jesus loves me just as I am. I am a man because God gave me a male body, and my preferences have no relevance to my manliness in God’s eyes. I can be a strong, righteous Christian man as a dancer with skinny spaghetti arms. Having bigger biceps and shooting guns will not make me any more of a man in God’s eyes. A quote from the book “Gentle and Lowly” best sums up what the conference meant to me: “... the things about you that make you cringe most, make [Jesus] hug the hardest.”

By Johnson