


Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Summer 2023



Reaching others



This edition of Ascend focuses on outreach, both in terms of sharing Jesus and also letting more people know about the work of TFT. Simon explains what we are currently doing to raise the profile of the ministry, and we have a number of book reviews that explore building bridges with people outside the church.

I hope that the articles and stories in the magazine encourage readers to have a growing confidence that the message of Jesus is good news, even to those who seem sceptical.

Abby has designed us a beautiful journal entry on 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8 as our centrefold: you may like to pull it out and stick it to your fridge or use it as a bookmark. Enjoy!

By Stuart, TFT Director



Uncaged

Page 7

Catherine shares her story of how God set her free from the 'cage' of secret fantasies and desires



Review: Space at the table

Page 20

Ric reviews this book, where pastor Brad Harper and his son Drew express their differences, while maintaining positive regard towards one another.



Loving people towards Jesus

Page 22

Dub confesses to 10 years of fruitless evangelism and what lessons God taught him to help others find Jesus.

Reaching out to gay friends

When I originally planned an edition of Ascend on the theme of outreach, I sounded out a few TFT members who live around Brighton based on the thought, “I’m sure Christians living in Brighton have got some good tips on how to reach out to LGBT people”. What I discovered was how disheartened they were about the prospect of outreach in an area that has an established history of hostility to Bible-believing Christianity.

Indeed, many same-sex attracted Christians have moved out of this area, finding it to be too tough a place in which to live as Christians. The town has around 10% of its population identifying as LGBT, whereas only 1% would call themselves evangelical Christians. Many solid evangelical churches in the town have chosen the strategy of not engaging with LGBT events such as Pride, because they’ve found it too risky. Whereas most of us probably don’t find ourselves in towns as unreceptive as Brighton to the Bible’s teaching on sexuality, Christians do generally find themselves on the back foot in Western culture today when it comes to making the case for biblical truth.

The Apostle Paul, in Acts 17, found himself in Athens, a cultural hotbed of trendy ideas. It seems that he hadn’t intended to go

there, but found himself in this cosmopolitan city after his minders whisked him away from the trouble stirred up by his preaching in Berea (v13-15). Similar to modern-day secular society, Paul’s biblical beliefs were sneered at by the cultural elites, who found his ideas novel, but rather peculiar (v18). However, he was not cowed by this hostile reception: on the contrary, he explained the gospel to the Areopagus, the ruling council of elders (v19). But the way that he engaged with the Athenians was sensitive to their culture (v22-31).

A unique opportunity

We might wonder why Paul didn’t just take a mini-sabbatical in Athens, while he waited to get back on to his missional programme (which he did in Acts 18:1, as he set out to Corinth). In 17:16, we can see the reason for this - “While Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols”. Paul allowed himself to be spiritually open to the lostness of the Athenian people. He was more concerned about their spiritual welfare than he was about receiving a warm reception. He knew that he was God’s appointed apostle to the Gentiles (Romans 11:13), and he made the most of his short, albeit unexpected, time in Athens.

Like the Epicurean philosophies that Paul was facing in Athens (Acts 17:18), our culture encourages us to live a life dedicated to pleasure. And for those of us who personally experience same-sex attractions, we understand the appeal! We are perhaps uniquely qualified to build bridges with LGBT friends and family and neighbours. In a postmodern world that elevates personal experience above reasoned argument, our own stories are powerful testimonies of how it is possible to restrain our desires in-line with Jesus' teaching. For some people though, especially those who were active in the LGBT community before following Jesus, this particular type of outreach may be unwise if it reawakens strong temptations through places or people from our past.

“Our own stories are powerful testimonies of how it is possible to conform our desires to Jesus' teaching”

Building bridges

In reflecting on these matters, we might sense God calling us to bring the gospel to LGBT people. But how can we regain our confidence in the goodness of biblical teaching on sexuality? And how can we build bridges with people who might seem so hostile to the Bible? Paul's example in

Athens gives us a few principles that we can use today.

1. Don't assume bad intent

Firstly, let's not assume bad intent in other people. When Paul first started reasoning in the synagogue and the marketplace in Athens (18:17), he was received with a mixture of contempt (“What is this babbler trying to say?” - v18) and some slightly patronising interest (v19). The Athenians were renowned for elevating novelty over truth – “[they] spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (v20). However, Paul didn't let their disdain and condescension put him off from making his case. After sharing the gospel, some continued to mock him (v32). Now he might have been right about some of the Athenians if he'd dismissed them as hedonists and intellectual snobs, but he would have been wrong about some of them too - “Some of the people became followers of Paul and believed” (v34).

Likewise, let us not bracket all LGBT people into one mould. Let us not presume bad intent. Let us not assume anyone is too far from Jesus to be saved. Let us not even interpret initial hostility as permanent disinterest. After all, Colossians 1:21 says of us, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.” Imagine if those who pointed us to Jesus had been put off because

of our initial ambivalence, antagonism or mixed motives?!

2. Be curious about others

Secondly, let's be curious about others. Paul did not walk about Athens wearing a sandwich board stating a true but insensitive Bible verse, such as, "I will pile your dead bodies on the lifeless forms of your idols" (Leviticus 26:30). No. Before he spoke, Paul did his homework. He walked around the city and observed their practices. He found an altar to an unknown god (Acts 17:23) and used this as a cultural bridge to explain to the Athenians the character of the God of the Bible (v24-27). He studied their writings and quoted the wisdom of some of their philosophers back to them, in order to explain the gospel using ideas that they might connect with (v28).

Likewise, let us express interest in the personal lives of our LGBT friends and family. Paul wasn't worrying that he would somehow be contaminated by examining the Athenians' idols, or that he would be mistaken as approving of their idol worship. As we ask questions, we demonstrate our warmth and care for the other person. Many of us as Christians know what it's like to be on the receiving end of the implicit hostility communicated by non-Christians, who pointedly avoid any reference to our faith. Instead of that passive-aggressive approach, let's express genuine interest in other people's lives,

even when we may strongly disagree with the choices they have made.

“Let's express genuine interest in other people's lives”

3. Make the case

Thirdly, once we've earned the right to speak, let us make the case for what we believe. Despite the philosophical and cultural divide between Paul and the Athenians, he made the case there to all – “He reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there” (Acts 17:17). He didn't second-guess how they might respond, and left it in God's sovereign hands to convict people of the truth.

Likewise, when a suitable time and setting arrives, let's explain the gospel to our LGBT friends and colleagues. We can't assume that the other person understands Jesus' heart for them. Even if they think they know what the Bible teaches, have they really encountered the grace of Jesus?

Do we need to undo the damage done by clumsy or homophobic Christians in the past? We can begin with the positives, in the same way that Paul commended the Athenians for their worship – “I see that in every way you are

very religious” (Acts 17:22). Paul didn’t attack them for their idol worship, but rather highlighted their impulse to worship and showed them the God who deserved it.

There is so much in the the Bible that is good news to LGBT people and we need to start with that. Of course, there is costly discipleship for every Christian, and the cost of giving up a same-sex relationship is massively countercultural. But let’s get that in proportion. Far more than a sexual partner, our loved ones need eternal life in the Lord Jesus. Let us love them enough to share the wonderful truth with them. Yes, we will need to be prepared to respond to questions about sexuality, in due course. But we can soften these truths by phrasing the message sensitively and by sharing how we have followed these truths in our own lives.

Concluding thoughts

In my outreach, I think the person who first needs to be reminded of the good news of Jesus is me! If I only focus in my mind on the cost of giving up a same-sex partner, but I’ve lost the eternal perspective and the joy of knowing Jesus, then I’m going to be reluctant to share the gospel with others. Let us continue to preach the good news to our own souls. Then we will be motivated to reach out to the lost. We’ll not assume bad intent in others, but rather build bridges with them and make the case for the greatest gift anyone can ever receive.

Stuart is TFT’s Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He enjoys 90% chocolate, but finds it hard to confine himself to a single square each day.





Uncaged

“**I**n my late teens, I adopted a stray budgie that had flown in through my next door neighbour’s window and landed on his head whilst he was asleep. After trying unsuccessfully to locate the owner of the bird, I kept the budgie, naming it Wally (after the neighbour), not knowing that it was actually a female! Uneasy with keeping birds in cages, I left Wally’s cage door open for her to come and go as she pleased. She loved to have a fly around the room, but always returned to her cage after her excursions. I was fascinated by the fact that every day, she chose to return to captivity, even though in the natural world she would be a wild bird, free to fly anywhere she pleased.

As a same sex attracted female, now married to my husband for thirty three years, I have often felt like Wally the budgie; as a Christian, I am set free from the bondage of sin, and yet time and time again I have

returned to the ‘cage’ of secret fantasies and desires, never enjoying true freedom. I loved verses in the Bible that speak of a believer’s freedom in Christ (e.g. ‘So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’ John 8:36) but deep down, I knew that I wasn’t really experiencing that kind of freedom.

“As a Christian, I am set free from sin ”

From a very young age, I had lived in a fantasy world, probably using my thought life as an escape from reality. Even as young as 4 or 5, I remember fantasising that I was a man, always the hero in my dreams, rescuing a distressed female. As I became a teenager, the fantasies became romantic with me and any girl or woman that I happened to have a crush on at the time. And then entering adulthood, these thoughts became sexualised and felt

more dangerous as the line between fantasy and reality was becoming blurred. I think I must have set up some kind of neural pathways in my brain from a very young age, so that my brain became programmed to need fantasy and escape on a daily basis.

As I approached my fiftieth birthday in 2019, I became particularly distressed about my inner life not matching up to my outward Christian appearance, and I became desperate for change. My family and I attend the Summer New Wine conference each year, and this particular year, my husband and I went forward in response to a great talk to make a deeper commitment in our ministry. As we stepped forward to the front, a woman came bounding up to us and started to speak words from God about our ministry, prophesying into various situations and hurts that we had experienced as church leaders. She then noticed my name badge and said that the name Catherine means pure, and that God sees me as His pure daughter. As she said these words, I found myself screaming very loudly. (Just as a side note, I do not usually do things like this and feel uncomfortable when people scream or yell in church gatherings, so I was just as shocked as everyone else at the noise that came out of my mouth!) My legs then felt very weak and I had to get to the floor. I remember being in a position as if giving birth, and taking lots of deep breaths. All I could think was that I could trust God, whatever He may

be doing to me, and so I wanted to breathe in as much of the Holy Spirit as I could. Another lady then came up to me and said that God was doing a new thing in me and that it was a time of new birth. I don't know how long I was on the floor, but afterwards, I was unable to walk properly for a good half hour.

So what on earth was God doing to me and in me? At the time, I had no idea what was happening, but it felt very freeing, whatever it was. For a few months after this, I didn't have a single sexual thought or desire.

Surely God hadn't taken away all my sexual desires?! But after a few months, thoughts started to return, but I was able to fight them. I didn't actually want them anymore, but just longed for the presence of God that I had felt so tangibly at New Wine. I haven't been perfect since; there have been a couple of occasions when I let fantasies control my mind again, and I have also found that my attractions are still towards females. But what has changed is that I am not controlled by my desires or thoughts anymore. I feel free at last! And because I am

“I wanted to breathe in as much of the Holy Spirit as I could”

experiencing true freedom, I feel much more confident in sharing the Gospel with others now, as I truly believe in and am experiencing the

freedom that Jesus promises to His believers. I know that He can do for others what He has done for me. I am also able to look people in the eye now, without the feeling that I am hiding something all the time.

And the 'new birth' that was spoken over me at New Wine has included a much deeper involvement with TFT. Lockdown made it so much easier for me to join meetings as everything went online, and I am gradually being drawn in to being part of this ministry which I am really excited about.

I know we will not experience perfection this side of Heaven, but I

do believe that it should be every believer's experience to be truly free. God deals with each of us differently, and so freedom won't look the same for each of us, and we don't have to scream loudly and lie on the floor to experience it. He will deal with us in whatever way we need, and we can trust Him completely to take us on a journey that leads us out of the cage and to being 'free indeed'.

Catherine is currently learning to play the drums and is getting very good at her paradiddles.



Uncaged podcast

In this extended conversation, Catherine shares with Ruth about her same-sex attractions, and how she has found accountability to be helpful as a married woman. In particular, she explains the impact upon her of a liberating experience of God's presence that she had at a Christian conference.

To listen to the podcast, you can subscribe to "Ascend Higher" on the major podcasting platforms. Alternatively, listen directly from the TFT website using the link below:

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts





God healed my experience of rejection

I grew up in a non-Christian family. No one, even in my extended family, went to church except for the standard weddings, christenings and funerals. I attended a boarding school which was nominally Christian. We had Chapel 5 times a week and I sang in the choir at churches and cathedrals around the country. I went to church a lot, so I knew *about* God, but I didn't *know* Him. My school ran an evening club, where we could hang out after curfew. The club was led by a couple of Christian teachers, and in exchange for getting free table football and crisps, we listened to them tell us about Jesus. I was fascinated by God. Each week I heard more of who Jesus was and what He had done for me. I was convinced there was something in it and so I was confirmed and I called myself a Christian, but in hindsight, I hadn't actually given my life to Him. I still didn't really know Jesus.

At 16 I came out as a lesbian. I was met with a mixed reaction. My parents and close friends were really accepting, but the wider school community didn't respond kindly at all. I was already a 'different' teen, a geek and a goth, and adding gay to that mix definitely didn't increase my chances of fitting in. I was already bullied and my sexuality became another weapon used against me. It all came to a head when some of the girls in my boarding house stuck a sign on my door saying, "Do not enter! Rape zone ahead!" I am thick skinned, but that hurt. There were also other students I knew of who were struggling with their sexuality and I hated that how I was treated might force them to hide.

Rejection

I took the poster to my housemistress. She was a Christian, who used every opportunity to speak about faith. She looked at the

poster, sat me down and said that she wasn't going to do anything about the other girls. I was told that my behaviour had upset them and that my coming out was bullying them, as it left them feeling unsafe in their boarding house. I needed to think carefully, as I might call myself a Christian, but choosing to be gay meant I was wrong and evil and that I was ultimately going to hell.

I was moved to a different boarding house, and the staff who led the Christian Union in the school tried hard to tell me who Jesus really was, but the damage to my tentative faith was done. I wanted nothing to do with the cruel God the housemistress spoke of, and even less to do with people who would follow a god like that. I had learnt that church was not a safe place for people like me and that God hated us.

Joining the LGBT community

A year later I went off to Sheffield University. In my first week I joined the LGBT society and I loved it. The LGBT community became my family; everyone looked out for and took care of each other. We all had the shared experience of "being different". One of the roles of the LGBT society was to campaign for equality. I am a passionate person - marching, petitioning and waving banners are totally my thing. We often ran stalls to signpost people to support and to flag up key campaigns we were running. I spent many hours on those stalls. Over that time Christian students often

came to speak to me, some to tell me I was wrong, others more graciously to tell me about Jesus. I was also told on more than one occasion that if I just came to Jesus and prayed, He would cure me of my homosexuality and make me straight, so I could be right with Him. They seemed surprised that I didn't want curing and didn't want to be right with a God who wanted to change me before He loved me.

“Church was not a safe place for people like me and that God hated us”

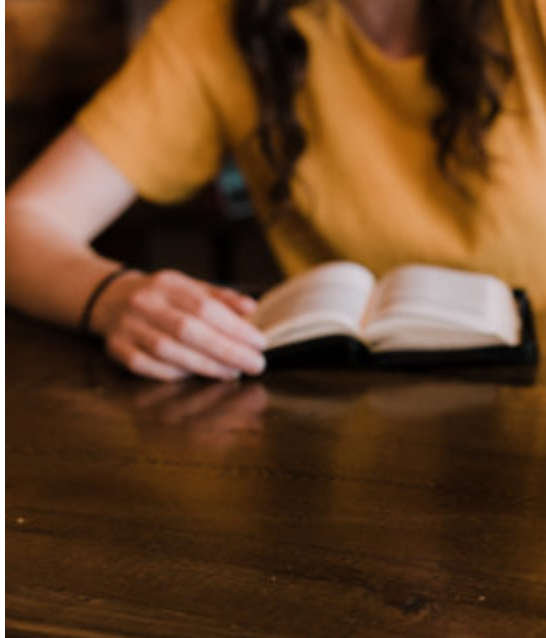
Sometimes I would end up in longer conversations and I would tell them of how my housemistress had condemned me. "Why does God hate gay people?" I would ask them. Their replies of "You must not have heard right" or "I am sure that isn't what she meant" or even "Well, we're all a bit evil and without Jesus we are going to hell, so she wasn't wrong" at best felt like they were invalidating my experience, at worst blaming me for it. Mine wasn't the only story like this within the LGBT community. My opinion of the church evolved; it was no longer just "not a safe place". It was the enemy. If I found out someone was a Christian, that told me all I needed to know about them. My hackles went up, my claws came out and I was ready to fight. I would read the Bible so I could "out-knowledge" Christians. I prepared

questions to catch out the ones who came to speak to me.

The truth of the Gospel

I left university and moved back home to Brighton to start training as a teacher. I also met a girl, got engaged and bought a house. To the outside world, it looked like I had it together. But the reality was I was lonely. The vast LGBT scene I had had at university was much smaller now. I had less time to party and my partner was controlling and didn't like me making new friends. As part of my teacher training, I ended up placed in a Catholic school - not what I would have chosen, especially when my new peer mentor, Matt, turned out to be a Christian.

Matt was a friend of a friend and we arranged to all go out for drinks. During the evening the conversation turned to religion and with it my dislike of Christians. I told him about my housemistress. I was expecting the standard reply, and I was ready to fight back, but Matt disarmed me. He apologised. He acknowledged how wrong her reaction had been. He empathised with me over how angry I must be with the Church and God. His empathy, compassion and righteous rage on my behalf completely stunned me. He confessed to me that he wasn't currently going to church; he was still quite new to the area and as an introvert was overwhelmed with going to a new church and meeting new people. I didn't want to know God and I hadn't forgiven the Church, but I



liked Matt, so I offered to go to church with him. Going to church for the first time was hard. I thought I would stick out, that no one would want me there, that everyone would judge me. I expected to spend my Sunday defending myself. But it wasn't like that at all. Everyone seemed really excited to meet me and were quick to welcome me back.

Then my world crashed. My girlfriend, not happy with my new friendships and independence, broke up with me and kicked me out of our house. Because of her controlling behaviour, I had little access to my money. Matt, my new friend of only a few months, offered me space at his flat for as long as I needed it, rent free.

Learning acceptance

I continued to attend church with Matt and had now also joined an Alpha course with him. My view of



the church was starting to shift. The combination of seeing my way of living fail and of seeing the kindness of someone I thought would be my enemy, allowed the Holy Spirit to speak to me in ways I wouldn't have previously thought possible. What had put me off church was the same thing that pulled me in - feeling like I belonged. I still wasn't ready to be all in though. I had questions about God and being gay. I knew what the Bible said about homosexuality. But what did that mean for me? I didn't want to believe in a god who said I was going to hell for being attracted to women, but I also didn't want to believe in a god who would give us a Bible to follow, but say we could believe the bits we wanted. Neither option seemed like something I could build my life on.

A few weeks later, I asked Matt, "Doesn't God just hate gay people?" He replied gently, "No, God doesn't

hate people. But He does have commands for those who follow Him. He does ask that all those who follow Him lay down their life, just as He lay down His. He does say sex is for marriage and marriage is for one man, one woman." He was honest. It wasn't an answer that was easy to hear and he never pretended it was, but it was an answer I had waited a long time for. It was easier hearing it from someone who I knew cared for me and had shown me Jesus' grace through his actions.

“God says sex is for the marriage of one man and one woman”

Welcoming LGBT people

When I look back at my story there are many things that kept me from giving my life to God sooner, not least His perfect timing. From my experience, I think there were three obstacles that put people from the LGBT community off coming to church, that are worth highlighting:

1. Feeling judged. When *truth* is emphasised over and above *grace*, the Church can look like a place of condemnation, rather than salvation. In John 8, Jesus models a better way when He tells the woman caught in adultery that He doesn't condemn her, *before* He tells her to sin no more.

2. The “us” vs “them” mentality. This is true of both sides, but as Christians, it’s not something we should be encouraging. We have so much more in common with the LGBT community than we often think. We are both passionate and vocal about our values, we are both committed to doing community well, we both find our identity in something bigger than ourselves. The only difference we should be focused on is that we are saved and they are not. Not only is that difference not something we can take credit for, but it’s also, as 1 Timothy 2 says, a difference God doesn’t want to exist.
3. Being seen as an “issue” and not loved as a person. It’s hard to see the God that is love through the actions of someone who isn’t loving *you*. God knows each of us intimately and pursues us individually. The best way for us to display this is personally. What does the person you are

talking to fear? What do they need? How can you be an instrument of God’s blessing to them as a unique, and uniquely loved, person?

God’s heart of love

I gave my life to Jesus straight after that conversation with Matt. I love my testimony. I love how it speaks to the importance of loving people and treating everyone with the grace we have received in Christ. I love how it shows the difference one person can make to another, both negatively (when they fail to represent God well) and positively (when they let God’s love shine through them). But most of all I love how it shows God’s heart for the lost, in that He pursued me even when I had no interest in Him.

Nat loves leading worship at her church, home educating her three daughters, putting the world to rights and playing board games with her husband. She devours books in every spare moment.

Can you help support TFT?

Each year we are supported by many of our members and others who, out of their generosity, help us provide resources, pastoral care and attend events or speaking engagements. Would you prayerfully consider whether or not you could give regularly towards the work of TFT? Regular giving helps us to plan and budget well, knowing how much money we may expect to receive. Do also let us know if you are a tax payer and we can claim Gift Aid on the money you give.

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate
or call us on 0151 653 0773



「Book Review」

“Is God anti-gay 2nd Edition” by Sam Allberry

Paperback £6.99, eBook £2.99, 121 pages, The Good Book Company, March 2023



If you're like me, when *Is God anti-gay?* by Sam Allberry was first published in 2013, you found it a helpful and informative read. I was surprised when an updated version was recently released. But what are the differences in the two editions?

Changes

Thankfully Sam hasn't changed his stance or theology, but his terminology. Rather than using the descriptor 'homosexual', he now uses 'same-sex attracted' (SSA). The original book was 91 pages long, this is 121 pages. Sam explains that the focus in the world has shifted in the last 10 years from asking, "What does the Bible say about gay people?" to "Is Christianity good news at all for gay people?" The objection is that Christianity can't be good news for gay people, but Sam wisely points people to Jesus first before explaining why it is. He has added more questions: "Does Jesus ever mention same-sex relationships?" and "Aren't people just born this way?" The end of chapters now have more space to answer each question.

Suitable for a non-Christian ?

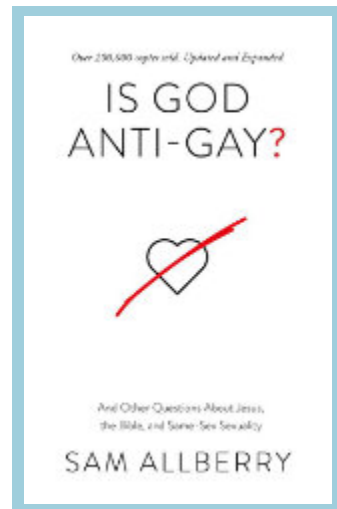
The fundamental issue when dealing with questions from non-Christians about same-sex relationships is the gospel and Sam plays out various

scenarios. I think that this book would be good to give to a non-Christian friend who may want to know what Christians believe on the subject. Sam also does a good job of explaining how the gospel impacted his own life, how his same-sex attraction affected his walk with Jesus and how Jesus is the answer to all his struggles. I would also recommend investing in this book for literature stands at church, even if you have the original.

Worth the money?

The question is whether for £6.99 it is worth the upgrade? That is a decision for you to make, but my overall opinion would be if you have the original book, you're not missing out on much if you don't upgrade. But if you want to see the changes and read the new parts, then obviously buy the updated version, but perhaps wait for a sale!

By Owen





Outreach at TFT

At a recent staff away day, we considered the unique place of TFT's ministry within the church in the UK and Ireland. TFT is long established, having been founded in 1977, and provides one of the largest support networks for Christians experiencing same-sex attraction and/or gender incongruence we are aware of anywhere in the world. Attached to this, we also have a speaking and teaching ministry that works closely with churches, networks and Bible colleges to deliver events that are closely tailored to their individual needs. No two events are the same. One thing I commonly hear when I go out and speak is how helpful churches find it to have a living example of someone showing the plausibility of experiencing the cost of discipleship in this area. No matter how prepared a church is to exposit the biblical teaching on sexual ethics, the element of personal testimony is usually something that can only be brought in via outside help.

In short, we believe that TFT is uniquely placed to show, through both our teaching and the lives of

our members, the hope that the gospel offers for those who experience same-sex attraction or gender incongruence and wish to hold to the historic teaching of the church. However, one thing that TFT isn't is a campaigning organisation. TFT is grateful for the voices of other Christian organisations that speak into the public arena. We feel this enables us to protect and spend our time focusing on supporting our membership. This policy, however, means we have to carefully consider how to raise the profile of our ministry. We want the people who need us to know we are here for them, but we don't want to do it in a way that attracts unwanted attention that may distract from our objectives.

We're grateful that several churches and networks already have committed to supporting us financially and/or praying for us. Many of these connections have come through our speaking and teaching ministry, as churches have kept in touch with us following a visit from one of our speakers. We

continue to invite churches to partner with us in this way. However, we're aware that the strongest partnerships often happen through personal connections. We're thankful for those TFT members who have shared openly with their church leaders about their involvement in our ministry. We appreciate this can be an incredibly brave thing to do. This sometimes leads to those church leaders contacting us about others in their care. In the coming months, TFT plans to make it easier for those wanting to talk to their leadership about their involvement in TFT by producing some resources specifically designed for sharing with them to introduce what we do. Where these introductions turn into deeper relationships, we also plan to release periodic updates for all churches and networks who partner with us, to keep them informed about our work and offer them some ways they can pray for us.

In addition, we're also exploring how the work of TFT can enjoy an increased presence at Christian conferences and festivals across the UK and Ireland. At our National Conference last year, several of our members approached us to tell us about the conferences and networks that matter to them. We've been in touch with several of the organisations behind these this year and hope to exhibit at some of them in the months and years ahead. Our staff team is also exploring opportunities to contribute to other Christian media. Given our pastoral

experience, we again feel we're uniquely placed to help with what so many individuals and churches are struggling with at the moment - how to show that the historic biblical teaching in these areas is also compassionate and loving.

All the above initiatives rely on the grace of God expressed through the generosity of our membership. We're always keen to hear from members who may want some support sharing about their involvement in TFT with their church leadership. In addition, our plans to exhibit at other Christian events require not just funds, but members who are enthusiastic about the ministry of TFT and can communicate our beliefs and aims effectively to others. If either of these people are you, get in touch with us in the TFT office. We do not expect volunteers helping us with conference exhibits to pay their own expenses, and we'll support you to respond sensitively to questions or requests for support. If neither of these people are you, but you're an individual or church looking to get involved, we want to hear from you too! We love working with individuals and churches in partnership, as we encourage others in the joy of following the Lord Jesus Christ.

Simon is TFT's Teaching and Outreach Manager. He enjoys getting out of the office and networking on behalf of TFT, but is still trying to reconcile that with his inner introvert.

TEN MOTIVATIONS TO STAY SEXUAL

or The Ten Commandments for sexual purity
or Ten promises for those who practice sexual purity

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

1

Know God's pleasure as you behave with sexual purity

¹As for other matters, brothers and sisters, I have written you only a few words, but I want you to know how to live in order to please God, as we ask you and urge you in the Lord's name. ²For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

4

Become holy and honourable by controlling your body

³It is God's will that you should be save yourselves from every form of sexual immorality; ⁴that each of you should control your own body in a way that honors the Lord.

5

Distinguish yourself from unbelievers by rejecting your passionate lusts

⁵not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; ⁶and that in this matter no one should defame a brother or sister. The Lord will punish those who commit such sins, as we told you and you know. For God did not call us to be impure, but to be holy.

9

Receive God himself by following his instructions on sexual behaviour

⁸Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not accept the word of God, the very word that brings life to the whole human being but God, the very God who gives life to the Spirit.

10

Respond to God by following his instructions on sexual behaviour



SEXUALLY PURE

Sexuality

Sexual purity

...isters, we instructed you
... in fact you are living. Now
... Jesus to do this more and
... ns we gave you by the

sanctified: that you should
... of you should learn to
... is holy and honourable,
... s, who do not know God;
... and wrong or take advantage

...unish all those who
... d warned you before. ⁷For
... to live a holy life.

...nstruction does not reject a
... who gives you his Holy

...s loving gift
...irit by submitting
...ality to him

2 Demonstrate that Jesus is Lord of your life by submitting your sexuality to him

3 Receive God's sanctification by avoiding sexual immorality

6 Love your brother and sister by refusing to take advantage of them sexually

7 Avoid the Lord's punishment by abstaining from sexual immorality

8 Live in the centre of God's calling for you by living out a sexually pure life





Book Review

“Space at the Table: Conversations between an Evangelical Theologian & His Gay Son” by Brad & Drew Harper
Paperback £6.78, 224 pages, Zeal Books, 2016

In this book, pastor Brad Harper and his son Drew, converse in short letters to each other about their differences of opinion regarding same-sex attraction. Whilst Brad holds to a traditional Christian sexual ethic, Drew has left his biblical faith and embraced an LGBTQ lifestyle.

What ensues is not a disaster, but a miracle. As father and son eloquently engage and respond to each other, and occasionally also ponder life from their own respective corners, the reader is invited into a dialogue that is part sordid family history and part testimony to humility and perseverance. Though father and son disagree deeply on the ‘gay’ issue, they have, over the years, discovered how to love each other profoundly and meaningfully, without abandoning any of their deeply held principles or expecting the other to desert theirs.

What emerges in the telling is a gentle, charitable and often very humorous recollection of one family’s life in the 1990s and early 2000s, told from two perspectives. On the one hand, we have Brad’s take as a conservative preacher, who senses early on that his bright, aesthetically sensitive and bullied

son might be different in the ‘wrong’ ways and wants to help him. On the other, we have Drew’s perspective on faith and social rejection and striving to please his father, even to the point of embracing conversion therapy in his early teens. The story has all the makings of a tragedy, and though Brad and Drew do experience real calamities, both together and apart, father and son hold one thing in common throughout: a commitment to love each other, to respect each other despite their differences, and to keeping lines of communication open. Both learn from their mistakes along the way, and both are better for it. “We don’t see the world the same way”, Drew tells his father in one particularly poignant exchange. “But I can’t imagine my world without you in it” (p.190).

Their shared story offers much to Christian parents confronting the reality of a same-sex-attracted son or daughter who has ‘come out’ and left the faith. Threaded through Brad and Drew’s narratives are short informative sidebars bylined by either Brad or Drew on such ground-floor topics as homophobia and AIDS, misconceptions about the causes of homosexuality and specific mistakes to avoid while making space for each other. For example:

“Can’t I just ‘love the sinner but hate the sin?’ At Stonewall [in June 1969], LGBTQ people did not protest for the right to their sexual orientation. They protested for the right to be open about it as public citizens. Thus, for many gay people, to condemn their behavior simply communicates condemnation of them. Christians can argue all day long that that is not what we are doing, but it will still feel that way to gay folks. So, if we want conversations to be productive, we should stay away from this line of reasoning’.

-Brad (pp.145-46)

fact that the book preaches neither for nor against embracing an LGBTQ identity is its greatest strength. It encourages its readers, Christian or not, to come to the table as partners, ready to talk and, most of all, ready to listen.

Ric lives in the U.S. where he works as a college professor. He enjoys spending time on his screened-in porch overlooking the woods, where he occasionally glimpses bobcats and coyotes.

It seems to be a book that a parent and child could read together, confident that its purpose is not to sway the other’s view, but rather to help both parties learn strategies to stay close and see the best in each other without diminishing either one’s convictions. The book is also broadly applicable to navigating today’s culture, as it could be read as a model for developing compassionate dialogue on virtually any contentious issue.

The book’s message - that a traditional Christian parent can accept and even embrace an LGBTQ child in love (and vice-versa) - is a challenging one for Christian ethics and is the reason the book did not immediately find a willing Christian publisher. This is not, after all, a book intended to convince an LGBTQ child to ‘become straight’ or to choose Christian celibacy. But the





Loving people towards Jesus

10 years of fruitless evangelism

I've learnt a lot about how to do "evangelism" in the 20-odd years since I became a Christian in my mid-20's. In my first decade of being a Christian, I learnt how NOT to do evangelism. My interactions were littered with awkward, car-crash moments of trying to shoehorn the gospel into conversations, of preaching when people weren't listening and of letting friends know they needed to change their lifestyle or their behaviour because it didn't match up to God's standards. You can guess the result: a decade of blood, sweat and tears and of seeing no-one become a Christian (apart from 1 one friend who then walked away under the heavy weight of my directives of how he needed to stop sinning).

I remember praying a prayer full of disappointment about 10 years into my Christian life saying, "God, I CAN'T DO THIS! I can't save anyone!" To which I sensed a gentle and clear response along these lines,

"I'm glad you've worked that out son. Could you do it my way now please?"

I was caught short. I was SURE I had been doing God's work, God's way! Unlike most Christians, I knew I was trying to save people. I was hard working, I was passionate, I was zealous. And yet I was fruitless.

So, what was God's way, and how did it differ from what I was trying to do? Here are some lessons I learnt and changes I've made in the last decade as a result of that question. I've seen the difference that changes make in reaching out to people who don't know Jesus.

People don't want to be preached at

When someone comes to church, they know and accept that there will be a time of preaching. When they walk through the shopping centre, go to the pub or come to your house for dinner, they find impromptu preaching rude, intrusive and offensive. I've genuinely learnt this lesson from different "after dinner

preaches” I had previously delivered!

The above is a contextual observation of mine in post-Christian Britain. It was different at different times in history and is different in different nations right now. In Acts 2, the context for Peter preaching was a crowd of “God-fearing Jews”. In our post-Christian context in the UK, the narrative suggests Christians are judgemental and bigoted. And so, it follows that “soapbox preachers” will clear a crowd rather than gather one. Most people aren’t sitting there thinking, “I wonder which god is the true God?” They’re thinking, “There’s probably no god, and, if there is one, he’s probably not relevant to me...!” So, our starting point is different - we’re looking at people who are sceptical or seemingly opposed to our faith. That doesn’t mean they will continue with that stance, but it does mean our approach needs to be different.

It all begins with love

When asked what the greatest commandment in the Old Testament was, Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Matthew 22 vs 37-39).

According to Jesus, how we reach people who seem far from God

doesn’t begin with a 3-point sermon, it begins with love.

“Care before you share” is such a helpful principle - show the love of God to people *before* you share the message of God. And as we do that, as we love people, we can be confident that God will be at work through every act of kindness and compassion, gently removing barriers and preconceptions about Christians and the God we follow.

“I was hard working, I was passionate, I was zealous. And yet I was fruitless”

It’s worth remembering that this approach isn’t new. This was Jesus’ heart for all sorts of people He met as He walked in Israel. He was labelled “A friend of tax collectors and sinners” by the Pharisees (Matthew 9 vs 10-13). It was meant as an insult, but you can imagine Jesus replying, “Yes, that’s me. I’ve come for the likes of these people who you have rejected.” Jesus showed mercy to the woman caught in adultery *before* helping shape her life in a new way (John 8 vs 1-11). He healed the 10 lepers whilst knowing that only 1 would come back to follow Him (Luke 17 vs 11-19). He offered to have dinner with Zacchaeus *before* saving him (Luke 19 vs 1-10). And After this meal, Jesus told us that His mission, was “to seek and save the lost.”

Whilst Jesus was tender with hurting people, He was strong in His criticism of the Pharisees, who He said were hypocrites who were “shutting the kingdom of God in people’s faces” through their rule-making and harsh treatment of “sinners” (Matthew 23 v 13). It is so important to Jesus that we treat people who seem far from God with the grace that He does. Jesus isn’t repelled by sinful people. He’s drawn to us.

As we allow the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with Jesus’ love and offer it to people who haven’t yet experienced it, we can be confident God will be softening hearts and gently drawing them towards Him. Just read Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 vs 14&16, “You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Jesus, the true light of the world, is promising to fill us with His light and life, so that, as we love others, they will be drawn towards Him.

If you picture your life as a star shining in a dark night, think about how brightly a sky full of stars shines. That’s where the impact of “relational momentum” comes from - the movement towards Jesus caused by introducing people to other Christians. For me, finding social situations where my Christian and not-yet-Christian friends can get to know each other is such a key moment in seeing people start to become open to Jesus.



My friend Matt, a previous “happy atheist” who we saw become a Christian, told his friends in our Life Group, “You have all played your part in helping me *want to* become a Christian.” His and others’ first question isn’t, “Is Christianity true?”, but “Would I want to be like them?” So, a group of Christians being normal, showing we care and having Jesus shape our lives shines a stunning light on a sceptical world.

Love people towards Jesus

Somewhere deep down I used to feel it was my role to convert people. I was a salesman by day and an attempted Christian salesman by night. Realising that “Salvation belongs to the Lord” (Psalm 3 v 8, Psalm 62 v 1, and many more verses), was a defining and liberating moment of seeing that God has



NEVER asked me to save anyone. That role belongs to Him alone and that's how He has planned it. But crucially, God does have a role for me to play. I want my love for others to have a direction - towards Jesus. I've noticed that at times we as Christians can fall into one of two camps: we can either be distant, indifferent or judgemental towards people who don't know Jesus (or preachy as I was); or we can love others, but with no plan or ambition to point them towards Jesus. This can be down to witnessing seeing evangelism gone wrong, or people like me preaching over dessert!, Or it can be down to thinking that the qualifying bar for evangelism is so high - needing to be an expert or an extrovert, a theologian or a preacher or *that person* who says, "Do you know Jesus as your Lord and

Saviour?" to the bewildered girl on the supermarket checkout.

So, if my role is not to try to save people, perhaps it's to help bring people to the Saviour who saves. "Come and see!" seems to be such a simple, yet powerful witness to Jesus. Among others in the gospels, the Samaritan woman at the well said this to her whole community and many followed her to come, meet and receive Jesus for themselves (John 4 vs 29-42). It doesn't take an expert, just an invitation.

"Show the love of God to people *before* you share the message of God"

Our role is also not to judge people, not to clean them up before bringing them to Jesus. Contrast the Pharisees approach with that of Jesus. The Pharisees created so many rules that people had to fulfil before they could become acceptable to God. Jesus touched lepers, healed a woman who'd been bleeding for 12 years after touching his cloak, allowed a prostitute to pour perfume on His feet and wiped them with her hair. Jesus is comfortable meeting people just as they are, whatever their background or lifestyle. And people *knew it*. They could *feel* his acceptance, could *feel* his kindness towards them. Our role is to love people and over time to help bring them into Jesus' presence. As we do so, we can be

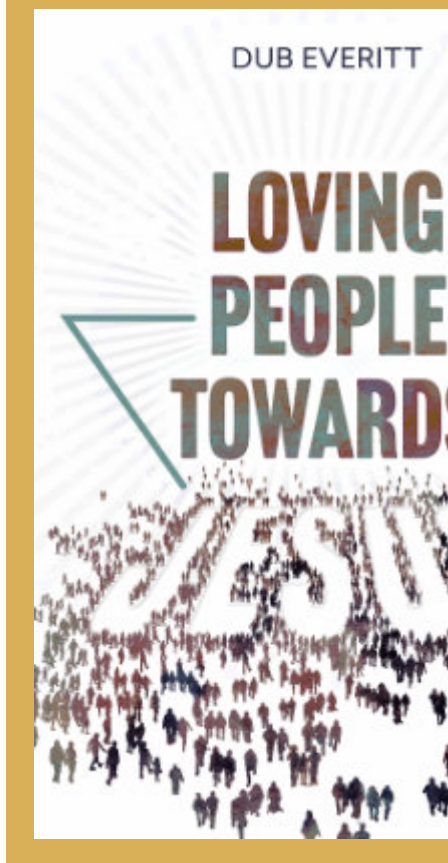
confident Jesus is passionate to meet them and to draw them closer to Himself.

For me, building authentic relationships with people, to be in their lives, to love and to not judge, is the foundation, but it's not the end goal. My ambition for others isn't that they would know the beautiful fruits of a friendship with Dub. That would be a weird ambition, wouldn't it?! No, my ambition is that people would know Jesus, the One who IS love, the One who came to seek and save them, the One who laid His life down for them. Jesus is my ambition for people.

Therefore, I want to find ways of bringing people into His presence. Trust can't be rushed. We're not trying to drag people kicking and screaming to Jesus. The more preconceptions or issues someone may feel towards Christianity, the slower the journey towards Jesus may be. But as trust is built and invites are made, and as your friend comes to understand how loving and gracious Jesus is, they will become open to hearing His truths about what "life to the full" looks like. In short, as we love others *towards* Jesus, we'll see Him do amazing things.

So how do we do it?

At this point you'll probably need to assess your own situation to find the relevant places you can invite people to. Is it to your midweek church group? Is it to church on a Sunday morning? Is it to an Alpha Course? I



love to invite people to Life Group socials and to church-wide socials, which can then lead into an invitation to a Sunday service or an Alpha invitation. This can be a way for people to go on a journey from friendship with me to coming to hear about Jesus.

What is the beauty of loving people towards Jesus? It's relational. You don't need to be an 'expert' evangelist or an extroverted



The focus of this article

While I've learnt a lot about outreach in 21st Century post-Christian Britain, my personal experience of reaching people within the LGBT+ community is definitely limited. What I lay out in this article are some principles that God has taught me over the years of how to love people towards Jesus, particularly those who may feel far from God or unwelcome in churches.

It's likely that, through bad experiences of churches that may have got things wrong or through public perceptions about judgemental Christians, which are regularly unfair and untrue, many people within the LGBT+ community may feel very wary or closed off to followers of Jesus.

The focus of this article is from an individual perspective - how you personally, as well as other Christians in your church, can love others and point them towards Jesus.

A lot of what I cover in this article is expanded in my book, *Loving people towards Jesus*.

www.lovingpeopletowardsjesus.com

personality. It's something we all can do, as we reach out to the people God has placed around us. Step-by-step, we can draw them towards Jesus, the one who loves them and has come to save them.

I believe Olive's lovely story (page 28) is such an encouragement to us, as we think about people in our lives who may feel broken or fear being judged by society or the church. As we reach out in gentleness and love,

together with an intentionality to bring people to Jesus, we will see Him do amazing things in bringing healing and transformation.

*Dub is the Outreach Pastor at Welcome Church, and the author of *Loving people towards Jesus*. He loves his family, football, and food cooked by fire!*

Olive's Story

Being a mum without any close family and friends and facing the never-ending challenges of life, I ended up a lonely, angry and sad person. All my adult life, I have always blamed everything on myself - the friendships that fell apart, the loneliness that I faced, my lack of trust. I had no concept of what was right or wrong. It was a messy place in my head.

In 2019 Dub and Tanya invited us to a Fun Day, but I didn't want to go. I thought "What if people are standing there with Bibles in their hands asking me questions I don't know the answers to and judging me, wanting something in return?" We went along and guess what? There was no holding Bibles in the air, no difficult questions and no judgments. The generosity and the friendliness of people was unbelievable.

I then went to the fireworks night. I also had a great time and thought to myself, "I'll go to the opening of the church to show my appreciation." It was one of the best things I have done in my life!

Yes. The people are friendly and the coffee is good. They also feed you and look after your kids, but that's not the only thing for me. It's the way it all makes me feel. They're my family, better than family. Welcome Church is my safe place. They put a layer of protection around me. I made friendships that are deeper and last longer than any that I've ever had before. I've lived for 42 years and moved to the UK 25 years ago and I **finally belong somewhere**. After my marriage broke up, I thought, "Oh here we go. I have to start looking elsewhere. I may be judged and not be accepted", but Hanneke and the Single Mums team proved me wrong. My children love their church. I bring my friends who equally love this church and want to come back. You feel the presence of God and His son Jesus there. It's a magnet that pulls you in. If there was a Google search for what should I do in life, it would be welcome church, it is welcome church.

I now know the real meaning of the body of Christ. Now I belong. I just wished I had come sooner.

WELCOME TO TFT
WOMEN'S CONFERENCE!



Women's Conference - "Belonging"

One grey day in February, a group of about 40 of us met for the day to explore the topic of "Belonging". We met in the community building belonging to the Friends of the Earth in Central Birmingham - "Ah, that green place!" said my taxi driver from the station. Some had travelled the night before, stayed in a hotel nearby and enjoyed eating out together in a local restaurant.

Our experience of belonging and togetherness was helped by the somewhat cosy place that we were in! But the Friends of the Earth café was very hospitable and was able to provide lunch for some of us - vegan, naturally.

The TFT refreshments team did a wonderful job of keeping us supplied with fresh tea and coffee, not to mention some great biscuits. And my mug of fresh coffee was much appreciated after a delayed train journey, which had included an

impromptu and unwelcome 'track inspection' at one point!

How has Jesus always belonged?

The day started with wonderful sung worship led by Catherine and Nat H, which included Travis Cottrell's moving version of 'Just as I Am'. Nat J was our speaker and managed, in an admirable fashion, to keep her iPad steady on a flimsy, old type music-stand ("Probably vegan" said Ruth wryly). Session 1 was on the topic of *How has Jesus always belonged and what can we take from that?* Nat reminded us that Jesus has always been in relationship with the Trinity - in community. We were chosen before Creation to be His children (Ephesians 1:4-6), those who belong to His inheritance. We are invited to join His eternal family with no limits to our inclusion. We also become part of a church family when we become believers. Therefore, we belong in three ways to Him and to each other: we are born again into His family, we are adopted as His

children and we are part of His Bride.

How did Jesus belong?

Session 2 was entitled *How did Jesus belong during His time on Earth and what does that mean for us?* His time on Earth was characterised by both belonging and marginalisation. Jesus belonged to his family and also to Jewish society. But He was also marginalised in His own family, as they didn't understand Him, as well as misunderstood by the religious rulers. We too can feel marginalised, amongst family and friends who don't understand our beliefs.

The afternoon was taken up by discussion groups and a Q&A session. In our groups we discussed how we experience belonging and marginalisation in our own lives. This encompassed what would help us to belong better in the here and now and how we could help others feel they also are accepted. One group nearly had to meet in the corridor due to lack of space, so we were perhaps able to experience feeling marginalised first hand, but only temporarily! After only a short time to prepare, the questions given in the Q&A session were fielded excellently by the team. It was really interesting to hear differing views on one emotive topic!

Women together

It was wonderful to meet new members, friends of members who came to support them and members who were coming back to TFT events after a long time away. A few

women had even flown in from Europe, just for the conference.

Above all, our topic of "Belonging" was enhanced and illustrated by the wonderful sense of belonging to each other, as well as to the Lord - a feeling of solidarity, fellowship and support.

Jackie is married with three grown-up children. She is a spiritual director (mentor), an artist and a voluntary pastoral worker for TFT. Last year, when hiking, she needed to be rescued by helicopter from a Dorset cliff after she'd sprained her ankle.



「Book Review」

“Welcome - loving your church by making space for everyone” by Jen Oshman

Paperback £9.99, 144 pages, The Good Book Company, 2023



I love the format of this book. Although it is short, Jen Oshman has packed it with nuggets of biblical wisdom. Each chapter has brief real-life stories to bring the topics to life. Jen then roots the principles of what she is saying in biblical passages. The end of each chapter lists a set of “Action steps”, based on the teaching from the chapter. And the book ends with a 7-session discussion guide for small groups, each session being based on one of the chapters as well as a relevant Bible passage. The message is clear - Jen wants us not just to read this material, but to apply it to our churches and to bring about substantial culture change. There is a logical progression through the book. Starting with Jesus’ welcome to us, Jen encourages us to respond in welcome to others. This was the model of the early church, and we need to recapture their radical inclusion of all people. We also need to recognise that many outsiders have a negative view of the church, so we should continually adopt an outsider’s perspective, to ensure that our gatherings are experienced as hospitals for the many rather than exclusive groups for the few.

Chapter 4 will resonate with many TFT members, as it refers to Jesus’ words in Mark 10:29-30 when He said that believers who have given up relationships to follow Him will receive a hundred times as many mothers, sisters and brothers amongst our fellow believers. Jen encourages us to have depth in our interactions with others at church and to make church family our priority.

The remainder of the book continues with its challenging themes. We are called to take our welcome beyond the doors of our churches and to all see ourselves as missionaries. There are also some very practical tips on how to make Sunday services seeker-friendly, but never dumbing down Bible truth. Her advice is always about helping people to feel loved, welcomed and included, rather than compromising the gospel in any way. She concludes the book with a final call to action, reminding us that the church is God’s “Plan A” for his world - there is no “Plan B”!

While Jen Oshman is married with 4 daughters, and there is no explicit mention in the book of those who are same-sex attracted, there is much in this book to encourage TFT

members. She explains how her family experienced being outsiders when they lived in Japan for 10 years, and she relentlessly reminds us what it must be like to be a newcomer attending one of our meetings. Although the book is very upbeat, it is clearly a condemnation of introspective, shallow and cliquy churches. If you are hungry for your church to go deeper in its fellowship and become more radical in its outreach, without watering down its message, then this book will thrill your soul.

The great challenge will be how to achieve that change in posture. This will take time, and it will need a critical mass of core people to get on board with it. This book could be a catalyst for that change. Being short and very practical, the discussion guide at the end would be ideal as a short small group series of studies. If you can encourage your church leaders to read the book and consider working through the material in groups, that would be a great step towards becoming a radically inclusive, but biblical church.

My only real criticism of this book is that at £9.99 it seems quite expensive for a short read, especially one that you are probably going to want to buy multiple copies of to hand out to fellow Christians. I hope that the Good Book Company offers some generous multi-buy deals in due course. It is part of their “Love your church” series, which also

contains books on belonging and on how we meet together.

Overall, I highly recommend this book. Jen Oshman recognises that some of her ideas come from Rosaria Butterfield’s “The Gospel comes with a House Key”, but “Welcome” is in my opinion an easier read and presented in a format that is designed to inspire positive change.

By Stuart





Normal People

I thought I might start by laying my cards on the table. I am someone who experiences same-sex attraction and has done since childhood. I am not only attracted to people of the same sex; I am married, and my wife graciously supports me. My desires are rather carnal than romantic. By which I mean, I have never desired a long-term romantic relationship with a man.

Given Christ's teaching on marriage, sex and relationships, as well as the witness of Scripture as a whole, I believe I am called to deny myself in this area, pick up my cross, and carry it. I nevertheless rejoice in Christ's teaching, believing it be clear and good news for all - no matter our sexuality. In part or in whole, those two paragraphs may ring true for subscribers to Ascend. However, it is my hope that a few of you will be coming to the issue of faithful, biblical sexuality for the first time,

and so I wanted to lay out my stall up-front, as well as give you permission to be curious, confused, intrigued, relieved or outraged, by that or any of what follows.

Now, let's backtrack. I don't remember a 'moment' when I realised I was same-sex attracted, but I was certainly young, younger than ten I think. At that time, in the late 1990s, the nuanced categories which now enable us to think through and speak about sexuality, both in church and the secular world, just weren't available to me or my parents. And at that age, I'm not sure I cared.

I am an only child. I was brought up in a Christian home by two doting parents who loved the Lord and took me - mostly willingly, but sometimes not - to church every Sunday. I honestly cannot remember having any teaching in church or youth group on the subject of sexuality during my

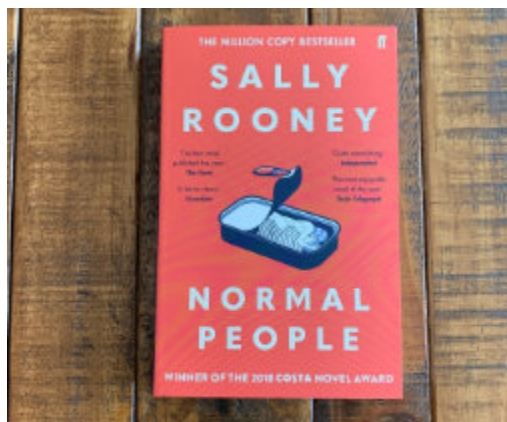
childhood or teenage years, right up to when I turned my back on the Lord aged seventeen. My departure from Him wasn't directly related to this absence of teaching, or indeed any sense of sexual confusion, though I'm sure that played its part. It was more that I was bored.

I was that most worrying of things: a child of Christian parents who knew all the right answers, but didn't know Jesus. I could turn up to youth group each week, nod along, spew out a line or two about some fancy doctrine, then pop home having got my dose of 'religion'. That is what I thought following Jesus was all about: clock in/clock out, know enough of the Bible, and do enough good during the week to put a smile on God's face. Instead of living in the grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I was living with the burden of religion. Of course, I ended up abandoning it.

My parents were naturally disappointed, but incredibly gracious at the same time. No demands or threats were made. No insistence that I get out of bed at once and get dressed and get in the car because it was Sunday. They knew I couldn't piggy-back off their faith in Jesus. If I was to have a true, saving faith it must be mine, and mine alone.

I wasn't an atheist. I was a pretty reluctant agnostic, looking back on it. I was just really annoyed that God existed because I knew that

meant He had an ultimate claim on my life, love and affections, which at that age, I was determined to pour into other things. As a teen, my inner world was a shut-up shop; nothing more so than my same-sex attraction. I wanted to put my fingers in my ears and live a life without God. And so, in His providential kindness, He gave me the life I wanted and let me go.



The decade that followed became steadily chaotic. My sixth form and university years, as well as the best part of my twenties, were spent in a drink and drug induced haze (which was frequently a lot more fun than even now I'm willing to admit). Drink and drugs were a useful tool. They helped buffer my sensitive and insecure heart against a brash, self-obsessed culture that demanded I only need look within to find my truest identity, while also shielding friends, family and the few women I dated/slept with from ever getting too close. I didn't know who I was. And despite all my efforts to prevent it from ever happening, my deepest longing was

to be fully known by another. Some friends came out as bisexual post university and their stories were often familiar: the shame of keeping their sexuality secret; the fear of telling friends; the fear of rejection by parents and family; the longing for acceptance; the ache for peace - it all hit very close to home. I wondered if I would ever display the courage my friends had and confess my secret.

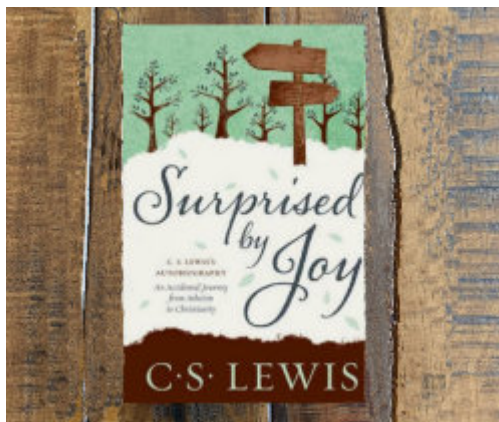
Or whether giving my attractions the appropriate cultural label and leaning into them would bring me the deep rest for which I was yearning.

As 2018 drew to a close, I had put a rebellious and damaging decade firmly behind me. I was sober and living in a lovely new-build flat in south London with a great flatmate and a job in publishing I enjoyed. There was a lot going for me. But reflecting on the months in early 2019 that led up to the events described below, I realise I had become powerfully skilled at self-deception. I was not alright. The decades long shame I felt at my sexuality had grown overwhelming. I was desperately lonely. Foolishly, I had placed on my sobriety the burden of delivering deep psychic and emotional stability. But it hadn't. I had asked the same from my work in publishing, which I adored. That too rang hollow. As did independence and dating and everything else in my life.


Then one cool May evening in 2019, as I was sitting reading "Normal People" by Sally Rooney

(ironically a book about lost and sexually broken - but also whiny - young people), in my armchair in my flat in south London, Jesus showed up.

In "Surprised by Joy", C. S. Lewis's autobiography of his early life, he describes his conversion: "You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England".



That same 'unrelenting approach' stalked me every single day in early 2019. I couldn't wake, sleep, eat, shower, cook, sit, read, talk, watch, listen or laugh without sensing the almost physical presence of the One I had abandoned over a



decade earlier. This all climaxed in my room that May evening when, looking up from my book and placing it with care on the armrest next to me, I turned my gaze back to the wall, 'admitted that God was God', and wept.

As I began my Christian walk in the months that followed, I knew that Jesus' call to discipleship would, and had to, affect every aspect of my life, including my sexuality. Jesus doesn't ask permission to come into the house of your heart to re-pot a few plants, re-paint a few rooms, and re-arrange the tatty furniture. He arrives with a wrecking ball to demolish what wasn't His and to begin construction of a palace fit only for Himself.

Four years have now passed and much has changed: marriage, a call to ministry and reconciling with family and friends are just a few works of the gospel's grace in my life. Of course, my same-sex attraction remains, and I suspect it always will. Discipleship in this area of my life looks like any other: as Jesus' disciple the only identity that matters now, and will matter on the final day, is my identity in Him. I believe He has spoken clearly in Scripture on this matter, and it is my call to deny myself, pick up my cross daily and follow Him, being enabled with all the grace He so lovingly supplies by the Spirit.

As I continue to work out the implications of following Jesus for my same-sex attraction, as well as each and every other aspect of my life, I am made aware of how radical and life-giving the call to Christian discipleship is. Our culture places an unbearable burden on men, women and increasingly children, by calling them to look within and make whatever they find there constitutive of who they most truly and uniquely are. As a Christian, I am so thankful I am called to something greater.

My same-sex attractions are part of my story, certainly, but not my identity. The foundation of my identity is Christ and His work on the cross. Nothing more, nothing less. My identity lies not within myself, but without. With another. And because of that it cannot be shaken. It lies utterly secure. It lies nestled in the heart of Him who gave Himself in my place on the cross, who bore the punishment my sin deserved, who called me while I was wandering and still far off, who came running towards me beaming, with open arms thrown wide. He swept me up as a little child on that cool May evening in south London, as I wept at my foolishness for ever abandoning such a tender and loving Saviour.

Jonathan was, and remains to this day, Southeast England U14 Tenpin Bowling runner-up. He currently spends more time than he would like explaining to his wife why they can't have a pet pig.