

# Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

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**Being distinctive**

This edition of Ascend looks at how Christians are to be distinctive. It is natural for us to want to be chameleons, blending in to our surrounding culture – we are then rewarded with the approval of non-Christian neighbours, colleagues and friends. But Jesus declares his follows to be “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). Sometimes this can be costly, as Andrew describes in his account of his church leaving the Methodist denomination.

Ansunel shares her story of how she won the approval of her fellow university students when she entered a same-sex relationship. But it was only when she listened to the loving biblical truth from her aunt, that she found peace in her conscience before God.

I hope that the various contributors in this magazine inspire you to revive your saltiness!

**By Stuart, TFT Director**



## **Review: Journeys of Faith**

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Andy reviews this free online course aimed at non-Christian LGBT people.



## **What our sacrifices reveal**

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Stuart reflects on 1 Peter and how our sacrifices show where we have truly placed our faith.



## **My singleness celebration**

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Tim explains why he feels he has been called to a life of singleness and why he is celebrating this.

# We were not called out to blend back in

The title of this article was spoken by a pastor of mine many years ago. She was summing up a dozen or so scriptures on the topic of making our election sure, and what a powerful word-picture this statement brings to mind! As Christians, we've been called out—we are God's ekklesia, his representatives on earth. Even so, how strong is the lure to take on the various hues of the world and literally blend back in—just like a salamander.

For the same-sex attracted (SSA) Christian, God's "calling-out" can feel like double jeopardy – battling on two fronts at the same time. We have the responsibility of "shining our light" in darkness (Matthew 5:13-15) and being "in the world, but not of the world" (John 17:14-16; Romans 12:2). But more and more we feel called out even within the church, as biblical morality is questioned and swapped for something more "affirming." In this climate, being called out feels less like standing firm and more like swimming upriver. It can be exhausting and, at times, lonely.

We aren't alone, of course. Christ promises us His presence in our struggle (Matthew 28:20) and even offers to make our burden "light" (Matthew 11:30). Like Him, we choose to be "in, but not of." But what exactly does this mean for us in the day-to-day?

## Called out—for what?

- Called out means standing out. This means we are to be different from non-Christians. The most distinctive feature of our lives is the cross, which we both fall before and take up daily (Matthew 10:38). This means we set Christ's commands above our own whims, knowing that doing so affords us blessing, both in this life and the next:

*"Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."* – Matthew 19:29

- We seek the approval of God more than that of other people—including, perhaps, that of fellow Christians. In doing so, we keep close to our hearts Paul's instruction not to "conform to the pattern of the world" (Romans 12:2). Since we have hope beyond this life, we live according to a higher perspective.
- We stand out among "revisionist" Christians. By submitting to the plain teaching of the Bible even when it doesn't coincide with our intuition, we keep to the ancient path spoken of by Jeremiah 6:16, trusting that by doing so, we will find enduring rest for our souls. Our actions shine light on false teaching and give us confidence to

contend for the truth.

*“Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls” – Jeremiah 6:16*

- We stand out among homophobic Christians. Being regenerated by Christ, we strive to be “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), proclaiming an unswerving gospel tempered with compassion and forgiveness. Christ welcomed sinners into His presence and was not afraid to spend time with people different from him.
- We seek to build up the downtrodden. More often than not, the sacrifices and denials of being tempted towards those of the same sex have equipped us with special sensitivity to the hurts and needs of others, especially those worse off than we are. By challenging such social ills as bullying and inequality, we remind the world that the muscular love of Christ is alive and well.
- We are not superior or judgmental, but rather we humble ourselves even in adversity, since we have a strong, trustworthy advocate. Nor do we avoid those who disagree with us; though we are “shrewd as vipers” in our engagements with the world and even with fellow Christians, we remain in all our activities “as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

### Specific ways Christians stand out:

- We season our conversations with those who disagree so as to be “full of grace” (Colossians 4:6) and the “salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13).
- We shine our light clearly to all, not just to friends, family, and fellow believers (Matthew 5: 43-47), keeping in mind that we are “the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14).

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**“By keeping to God’s ancient paths, we will find enduring rest for our souls”**

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- We are not easily discouraged when the world and its institutions respond to us with hostility or even hatred. Christ has warned that it will hate us because it hates Him (John 15:18-25):
- “You do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” – John 15:19*
- Despite all this, we take strides to “keep [ourselves] from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27).

### Ways SSA Christians stand out:

- We don't "fit" worldly expectations of marriage and family and may even be viewed as curiosities in our marital status—or absence thereof. We may be single (and not seeking a spouse) or married to a person of the sex to which we are not primarily attracted.
- We defend and uphold the biblical definition of marriage, even though it doesn't fit our personal orientation.
- We might feel little in common with "straight" people and "straight" culture (sport, entertainment, social activities); at the same time, we might express little or no commonality with the mainstream LGBTQIA+ community.

All of these points can be summed up with Paul's exhortation to the Galatians: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (6:9). By cooperating with our calling—to stand out without blending back in—we not only attest to Christ's love and grace but also secure a great reward, in this life and the next.

*Ric lives in the U.S. where he has been a university professor almost long enough to be an old bore. Joined by a tabby-cat named Mimi, he enjoys his screened-in porch and its view of the woods in all seasons.*





## God in love unites us

**T**he strapline for the Methodist Marriage and Relationship task group was ‘God in Love Unites Us’. Like many other denominations, Methodism has come to question the long accepted and understood definition that marriage is between one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others for life. This revisionist backdrop increasingly sees a traditional stance as outdated, unjust - unfair even for a modern and progressive society. Sadly, many denominations have got tangled up with the questions of the age, with a desire to stay relevant and modern, and Methodism has been very much leading the way. This has meant that many individuals and indeed entire congregations within the Methodist church have questioned how they are to move forward, in order to remain faithful to God’s Word. For our church family, we were no exception.

Growing up in a small fellowship within the Methodist denomination, I have been thankful to have been

able to both worship and serve there my whole life. Latterly, I have been privileged to be a part of the Leadership Team through some very challenging, yet encouraging, times for us as a fellowship.

### Deciding to leave

Following much prayer, we made the decision as a church back in 2019 to leave the denomination should the Methodist Conference adopt the proposed changes to redefine marriage to include same-sex marriage. Due to the Covid pandemic, the Conference decision was postponed by twelve months until the summer of 2021. But taking a great step of faith, we very much felt God’s call and leading to leave as planned in 2020 before the final Conference decision was made and a newly independent church was formed.

Our decision, which had little, if any, sympathy or understanding from the majority of the wider denomination, came at great cost - emotionally, relationally and

financially. For me and many of my peers, the Methodist label held no great significance. But for many older members of the congregation, who have fond memories of how Methodism was foundational for them and shaped much of their early lives as they began to walk with the Lord, it was profound. Over recent years, these faithful people have been greatly troubled and saddened to see decline in John Wesley's movement, born to promote scriptural holiness throughout the land, a decline both in numerical terms and also the move away from biblical orthodoxy. In truth, those of us that have left the denomination believe ourselves to be the true 'Methodists'. Sadly, the denomination, as a whole, has left its roots behind, the consequences of which are becoming more and more evident.

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### **“Our decision to leave the denomination came at great cost”**

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Resigning our membership meant we gave up and left everything we knew as a Methodist Church. We left our buildings, finances, structures and resources behind- churches that were built by the local people for the local communities. Though we left with nothing and were fully aware that there was no guarantee that we would be able to return to our building, we felt very much at peace about the decision, which the Lord had led us to, and very much trusted Him for what He had for us. Leaving everything behind meant

all we had and were able to do was to rest in the Lord and trust that He would provide for us - what a wonderful place to be!

### **A painful process**

Eventually the vacant church was put up for sale and despite our approach and offer to buy this privately from the denomination, under provisions that allowed property to be sold to similar charitable organisations, it was insisted that it go on the open market. Members pledged financial gifts in order to purchase the building, and the Lord more than provided. After a lengthy process of back and forth, an offer was finally accepted and a completion reached some months later.

Though we were prepared to leave the building behind, we were not prepared to leave our community. Though small, we felt God has a work for us to continue in this locality and He has made a way for us to do that. The church sign may have changed on the wall, but the message of the Lord Jesus does not and we are still the same believers seeking to remain faithful to God and His Word.

This decision was taken by the vast majority of the fellowship, but was sadly not unanimous. For differing reasons, some could not see a home outside of the denomination and this made for some very painful meetings and discussions. Being a small family church, this did somewhat magnify these differences and relationships became strained and fractured. Though it has not been possible to all move together, and though we may not always

agree with the conclusion of others, we respect individual decisions. We continue to pray for all, despite our differences, as they settle in to other Methodist churches in the area.

Becoming an independent church has been a lengthy process. Having to deal with Charity formations, constitutions, buildings, finances and setting up of new structures etc - though necessary and a part of wider church life - they can too be a great distraction from the mission of making Jesus known. But despite these additional burdens, it has been a time of excitement and encouragement as we see how the Lord is at work in these days. We are finding new opportunities to seek to reach our community, without what became the hindrance of denominational labels. We continue to look forward, and though we can feel inadequate and incapable, the Lord equips and provides for such a time as this, and we continue to learn, trusting Him for what lies ahead.

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**“For people who struggle with same-sex attractions, it is so important for churches to be clear and faithful on these issues”**

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### **United in the gospel**

God, in love, does indeed unite us. Romans 8:39 reminds us that “...nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” But this uniting comes



only through the gospel - through the shed blood of our Lord Jesus on the cross. The good news of forgiveness, reconciliation and new life is available to all. We are so thankful to Him, that despite the many challenges and obstacles of this process, He has led us through. It is overwhelming how He has provided for us in such abundance and blessed us, as we have sought to honour Him. A verse or passage of Scripture, which has been prevalent to me during that time, has been Exodus 14, where the Israelites are being pursued and there seemed obstruction on all sides as they came to the Red Sea. Terrified, they cried out to the Lord, but Moses reassuring them states: “Do not be afraid. Stand firm...The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be still.” (Exodus 14:13 -14). Though we can feel hemmed in and pressed from every direction, sometimes we need only to be still, as our Almighty God fights for us and goes






and faithfully teach this, that we can be churches where those, like me, who struggle in these areas, are faithfully encouraged and supported. This is particularly necessary when there is so much opposition from the culture around us and indeed sadly in our churches today.

We continue to pray for our brothers and sisters who face similar challenges and discussions within their own respective churches and denominations, particularly where the faithful scriptural voice finds itself in the minority. We know all too well the emotional cost and strain and pray that they have wisdom and strength in these difficult and challenging days. But we take courage that the Lord knows the beginning from the end and He continues to work His purposes out in these days. All praise to Him.

*Andrew is still heavily involved with church life, but always loves to find time for a cup of tea and getting out for a walk with a good friend.*

before us.

For someone who struggles with same-sex attraction, this brought a different and painful dynamic for me. It hurts to hear that the best way for me to enjoy life in all its fullness is to seek a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex and, indeed that God will even bless this in marriage. As does the view that remaining single and celibate is to miss out on what is seen as God's provision and blessing in this area. It is so important that as churches we show there is another way, and that God's plan for human sexuality and flourishing is good news for all and what is best for us. For someone in my position, it is essential that my church, one where I am in a position of leadership, is clear and faithful on these issues. It is so important that we remain rooted in God's word, sharing this word in both truth and love. And as we seek to uphold the scriptures



## Journeys of Faith

Stories of Love & Purpose From LGBTQ+ SSA Christians

Get Started for Free

## “Journeys of Faith” review

**J**ourneys of Faith is a free online resource produced by the “Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender” - a U.S. based organisation. Having looked at most of the course, I feel it is easier to explain what it is, before I suggest when you might use it.

### Course content

The course comprises of 8 videos, each about 20 minutes long, intended to be used in a one-to-one or group setting. It would most likely be run over 8 weeks, a bit like an Alpha course. The videos contain testimonies from a variety of Christians, who might describe themselves as gay, same-sex attracted, queer or trans - although not all of them specify a ‘label’. Rather those featured explain their experiences of coming to church and meeting Jesus in one way or another. One thing they all share, and this seems to be in line with the ethics of the “Center for Faith, Sexuality & Gender”, is a belief in the traditional biblical view of marriage being between a man and a woman, and being the only appropriate context for sexual activity. This belief is very much in

line with that of TFT.

The session titles start with “No one is excluded”, “The Upside-Down Kingdom”, “Counting the Cost”, “Existing on Purpose” etc., and take participants on a journey, which starts by explaining God’s love for everyone and outlines how personally that love is experienced in Christ. Along the way, the speakers describe how they came to accept God’s call to abstain from same-sex sexual activity, and the impact that has had on their lives. The later sessions look at how we become more like Jesus and how to navigate the Christian community while wrestling with these issues.

### Encouraging dialogue

The testimonies shared are very honest and moving, and the videos are professionally filmed and produced, which makes them comfortable to watch. They are also very non-confrontational, in the sense that they want to encourage dialogue with people holding a wide range of views on the Gay/Christian spectrum, rather than force one set of views onto anyone.

In addition to the videos, there are discussion guides with suggested outlines of how each session could be run. They include some very thought-provoking questions, which I imagine could keep a small group chatting for hours!

Alongside these guides, there is a wealth of additional resources for each session, such as articles, webinars and podcasts, which explore aspects of faith and, in particular, how belief impacts those who experience same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria. Just a few examples of these topics are “Side A & B Christianity”, “What is Marriage?”, “Celibacy & Healing” and “Spiritual Disciplines”, to name a few. There is also a very open dialogue between someone who identifies as “gay” and someone else who prefers “same-sex attracted”. In effect, these resources alone form a wide-ranging library of current discussions within the LGBTQ+ Christian sphere.

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**“This would be a great resource to work through with LGBTQ friends who are interested in Christianity”**

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### **Group discussion**

Now to the question of when you could run this course and with whom. The programme is billed as “Stories of Love & Purpose from LGBTQ/SSA Christians. A FREE 8-part series designed for LGBTQ and same-sex attracted people interested in Jesus.” I think this

describes it well, and it would be a great resource to work through with LGBTQ friends who are interested in Christianity, and who are open to having discussions with people with whom they might disagree. They certainly wouldn’t need to have signed up to the traditional biblical view of sexuality, to which most readers of this magazine will probably have subscribed. I hope that, in this otherwise polarised world, we would be able to find ways of starting these conversations with people and stirring their interest in the course.

It could also be very useful for Barnabas Groups to work through together, as a way of stimulating discussion about these topics and understanding views of others, as well as an encouragement in our own faith journeys. However, having run the first session past my own Barnabas Group, there was some concern that the course doesn’t establish the traditional Christian standpoint of Biblical marriage as a given at the outset: it just presents it as one view. I understand that this is because it is aimed at drawing in LGBTQ people who might not be convinced of this belief, but who are interested in finding out more about Jesus.

If you are interested, you can check out the free course content for yourself at [www.centerforfaith.com](http://www.centerforfaith.com)

*Andy likes cooking, hiking, cycling and came out as a plane-spotter in his teens.*



## What our sacrifices reveal

**T**here are many superficial indicators of faith in my life:

1. I marked myself as ‘Christian’ on the most recent census. But plenty of people select that as a mere label.
2. I have lots of Christian books on my bookshelves. But you could take the view that I’m just an interested student: after all there are plenty of atheists studying theology!
3. I attend church on a Sunday. But you might say that I just go because I enjoy the social side and it makes me feel better about myself!

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with any of these trappings of faith. But each of them can be easily explained by motives that have nothing to do with saving faith. If these surface-level indicators are all I’ve got, how can I know that my faith is real in the eyes of God?

Sacrifice reminds us that we are done with sin

In the book of 1 Peter, the Apostle Peter writes about living godly lives in the midst of a society that does not know the living God. He tells believers that they belong to another kingdom, and so will be “foreigners and exiles” in this life (2:11). He prepares Christians to expect to “suffer for what is right” (3:14) and that non-Christians will “speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ.” In itself, this sounds rather tough and a bit discouraging. But, actually, Peter intends to show us how this position of being distinctive and facing opposition actually helps to remind us who we really are:

*“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because whoever suffers in the body is done with sin.” – 1 Peter 4:1*

Choosing to suffer with Jesus (or make sacrifice for Him) is exactly when faith becomes real. It's easy to "do Christianity" when it is comfortable. At the point when following Jesus becomes truly sacrificial, this can be for many people the decisive moment when His lordship is made clear. If we take a stand against our culture's values and surrender everything to God, it is then truly apparent (to our culture, to God and to ourselves) that we are serious about our faith. But "taking a stand" here isn't so much about external actions, like signing petitions or lobbying decision makers in power. Rather, it is for me to have a serious conversation with myself about whether I am going to take up my cross and live for Jesus in a way that is costly.

### **Unglamorous acts of worship**

Such sacrifice is not glamorous and it's rarely going to win acclaim from those around us. The way of the cross is a quiet, often unnoticed discipline. It should not feed our pride, nor be trying to impress God. But living distinctive lives, where our sacrifice is real to us every day, reassures us that we are truly His. We will be prepared for when hard times come, when opposition is fierce, and when doubts emerge in our own minds. We will already have trodden the path of decisive discipleship. We will look back and see that we chose this narrow path a long time ago, and we will be less inclined to turn back.

*"As a result, they do not live the rest of their earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God." – 1 Peter 4:2*

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## **"Choosing to suffer with Jesus is the point at which faith becomes real"**

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Let me be clear that I'm not proposing sacrifice for its own sake. Going on a tough diet or making yourself take cold showers does not make you holy! Indeed, many non-Christians make huge sacrifices for their career, their children, their body image or even to set themselves up for a dream retirement. But these kinds of sacrifices are not what Peter is calling us to here.

In Colossians 2:23, the Apostle Paul challenges the value of self-denial as an end in itself: *"Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence."* Rather, our sacrificial choices must be acts of worship that align us with our suffering Saviour: *"[we] do not live the rest of [our] earthly lives for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God"*. The purpose of our sacrifice is all-important: if we sacrifice out of obedience to God, it can transform a decision from one of grim determination into one of joyful service.

For the same-sex attracted believer, their sacrifice may become very apparent in their relationship decisions. Some people will sense a call to singleness - their unmarried state will be a constant reminder to them that they are set apart from the world's insistence upon an active sex life. Instead, their spiritual life comes from their obedient determination to stay sexually pure. Other same-sex attracted people may be able to get married to someone of the opposite sex: often these marriages can be wonderful, albeit not without their challenges. But, even for those who marry according to the biblical definition of marriage, their decision to resist the lure of a same-sex marriage is a reminder to them that they have chosen the narrow way.

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**“We need to value God’s favour more than we fear the criticism of the watching world”**

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### **Getting off the fence**

Sometimes faithful Christians look at the debauchery of the world and think, “They look like they’re having fun. Am I missing out?” But Peter reminds us that we are now to consider those behaviours as being from a past life:

*“For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do - living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” - 1 Peter 4:3*

Do we ever look back on memories of old sin with fondness? If so, we need to take Peter’s words here to heart. Our past lives may have been governed by sensual indulgence. But that was the past life. Indeed, that was a wasted life. Nothing in those behaviours has any lasting value. On the contrary, that old way of living darkened our lives and took us further away from God. The closer we are aligned with the will of God, the more we will see the past life as a waste of time and lose our appetite for it. In contrast, the longer we sit on the fence, and toy with old desires, the more we will taunt ourselves with old passions, and risk returning to the wasted life. If we can not only get off the fence, but walk well away from the fence, then we will increasingly see the old ways of living as consigned to history. We won’t be tempted to peek through the knotholes in the fence at old temptations, and they will increasingly lose their grip on us. Practically speaking, this probably starts with the radical disposal of any objects or contacts that connect us with that past life.

But other people may be offended by our choice to abstain from their way of living:

*“They are surprised that you do not join them in their reckless, wild living, and they heap abuse on you.” - 1 Peter 4:4*

We need to be ready for criticism. Leaving behind “wild living” will certainly stir up surprise. And Peter tells us that people may respond to our withdrawal from these behaviours with abuse, perhaps interpreting our abstinence as being

judgemental. We certainly shouldn't adopt a disapproving posture towards them, but we can't stop our pure living shining a light on their lives. Indeed, we enjoy fellowship with God when we walk in the light (1 John 1:7). To prepare for inevitable criticism, we need to value God's favour more than we fear the criticism of the watching world.

### The reality of our faith

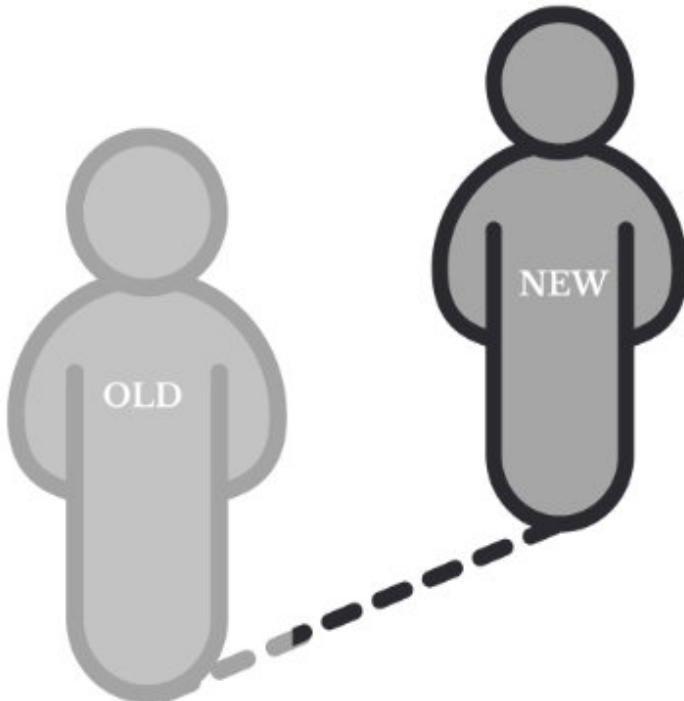
Do we ever doubt the reality of our faith? How can we convince ourselves that we are true believers and not just superficial ones? After all, Jesus told his disciples that *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt 7:21).

In summary, 1 Peter 4:1-4 shows us a way to demonstrate that our faith is real. If we can look back on genuine

sacrifices that we have made in our Christian lives, then we can see decisions that only make sense if we have faith in God. We will be encouraged and assured that our faith is real. And as we continue to put distance between our new life and our old "wasted life", we will know that we are set apart from the world and its ways.

Our attitude to costly living need not be a reluctant, self-pitying one. Peter calls us to "arm [ourselves]" (v1) with Christ's attitude of embracing sacrifice, because it sets us apart and helps us to know that we are His forever.

*Stuart is TFT's Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He considers himself to be an uncompetitive person, but his board-gaming friends seem to disagree.*





## “Family of God” conference review

### A conversation between Adrian and Sally

**S**ally: As a newcomer, what did you think of your first TFT event? What stood out for you? Was there anything that surprised you? What was particularly good?

**Adrian:** I really enjoyed it and thought the worship together was tremendous. But, most of all, I will remember the warm welcome. Everyone I met I could connect with, which made me feel that I had known them much longer. The subtitle of my seminar group was “Deep Welcome” and that was so true of the day. How about you?

**S:** Yes. I agree and felt similarly. There was a good atmosphere, worship and sense of belonging. We spoke to so many, either individually or together. Thank you for making us feel welcome.

**A:** This was your second Living Out/TFT day conference wasn't it?

**S:** Yes, it was. Although I had met a few of the people already, I was

surprised how many of those I spoke to said they were here for the first time. They seemed “at home”.

What were your take home messages? What will you remember and what was special for you?

**A:** Well, to be honest, there was so much that was memorable. Why





don't we write it down together?

Let's call the notes "One-liners" or "Thoughts from the day."

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## "Biblical teaching should routinely cover sexuality and gender"

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**S:** OK. Let's do it that way. It might come out as a bit of a list, but hopefully it might refresh people's memories or encourage them to come to the next event. Perhaps as you read through the list, you might focus and mull over one or two particular phrases. I certainly have 1 or 2 favourites!

**S & A:** Here goes then...

Firstly, from the morning session:

### The Church as Bride

- The Bride eyes not her garments, but her dear Bridegroom's face (from the hymn "The Sands of Time are sinking" by Samuel Rutherford)
- Our every longing will be satisfied
- Jesus loves us in our ugliness and died to make us beautiful. I'm living from a position of acceptance, not living for it
- I thank God for who I am. God delights in me (Zephaniah 3:17)
- "I thought back to my baptism; at that point I became the bride of Christ. But, later in life, that belief changed, when I realised that I became His Bride when I became betrothed to Him. I am now getting ready for the wedding. It gets better!"
- Now I look up. Then I will look down
- The church - the community of the engaged, is waiting for the wedding day
- I cannot be actively gay and actively a Christian. That fact is the cost of becoming a Christian
- We must acknowledge previous prejudices and be willing to say sorry
- Wrong thinking leads to wrong living. God is renewing our minds; we need to partner with Him
- I am a new creation and a child of God



Secondly, from the afternoon session:

### Church as Family

- Quote from a congregation: “We don’t want a single same-sex attracted man leading our church; we are a family church.” But Paul, and indeed Jesus, were single and they were both pretty effective
- There should be no one who is single, for we are the family of God. This is a big challenge
- Remember your hopeless status apart from Christ; it will keep you humble
- Celebrate your reconciliation with God
- We enjoy amazing family privilege in Christ
- You are not less than you ought to be - male, female, single or married - and you don’t need to conform to what people think of as a real man or woman. You are fully accepted. Be yourself, be authentic
- It is only His opinion that counts, not what others think of you
- As the lyrics from one of the songs we sang says, “No fate I dread, I know I am forgiven. To this I hold: my hope is only Jesus”
- Biblical teaching should routinely cover sexuality and gender
- Focus on the nature of God rather than “Life is unfair”
- Hospitality and friendship are important rather than cliquishness, hostility,

indifference, insensitivity, inconsistency and hypocrisy

- Hospitality is all about the welcome and not about the quality of the food

**S:** Well that was quite a summary of the day! I hope something from the list strikes a chord with those reading. We would like to say a big thank you to everyone who made the day possible and such an excellent event. There were so many involved, which is what made the day so good - both those at the front and those stewarding and generally helping.

**A:** Absolutely and we look forward to next year’s event.

**A & S:** We will close with a thought that arose from our Bible reading this morning (two days later). The Christian life is a life of freedom (Gal 5:1), freedom from condemnation and a guilty conscience; these burdens are replaced by the joy of forgiveness and experiencing mercy without merit. This freedom has boundaries that are there to protect us from self-indulgence and gratifying the desires of our sinful nature. It is a disciplined life. In fact, we are free in relation to God, but slaves to each other, for we are called to serve one another in love (Gal 5:16). Through serving, the law is not disregarded, but fulfilled in the single command: Love your neighbour as yourself.

*Adrian and Sally both retired from the NHS a few years ago. They live in Norwich, but often stay in Newark, supporting their family.*



## Hearing the truth in love

I'm proudly South African and I recently came to the UK as a seasonal farm worker - at least that is the reason on my visa application and what pays for my food! I have come to realise, though, that God brought me to Britain for so much more than picking fruit and driving tractors. The following testimony may be a testament to my stubbornness - that God had to bring me to a different continent for me to listen to Him - or rather a statement of God's faithfulness to His children. The change that has occurred in me is undoubtedly all to the glory of our loving and faithful Father and His lavish, abundant grace.

### **My searching question**

As a woman with same-sex attraction, I have a history of running away from God and suppressing the conviction of adhering to biblical holiness that He graciously placed on my heart. In my country, where same-sex attractions are neither generally spoken about, nor properly addressed in churches,. Therefore,

it's quite easy to not only to compromise belief, but to avoid accountability for ungodly living and keep under the radar. There is a global movement towards embracing same-sex relationships and it feels like the majority of those left disapproving prefer to ignore the issue, rather than address it. Therefore, the question I have recently been faced with is this: "how is the church, as the body of Christ, living differently to the world to live distinctively regarding sexual activity between those of the same sex?"

### **Compromise and conviction**

I need to go back at this point and put this question into the context of my life. In 2021, four years into my university degree, living far away from home, I was trying to keep my head above water with my never-ending studies. I'd made a handful of good friends and one day decided to share some news with them that I believed was wonderful - I'd entered into my first same-sex relationship. My friends reacted with boisterous support and even

elation. I received statements of affirmation like “love is love” and “Ah, don’t worry. The Bible is an old book that is no longer relevant today”. They obviously felt that this was worthy moral support. I wanted to be ecstatic at their response - my close friends were loving and kind, rejoicing that I had found a partner. And yet, something jarred within me. I was constantly and uncomfortably aware of a small voice of conviction of sin in my heart, but I ignored it. My friends, who professed to be Bible-believing Christians like me, told me that my choices and lifestyle were perfectly acceptable and to be celebrated. They endorsed my wrong thinking and I just tolerated the prodding of the Holy Spirit within me.

A few weeks later, I sat with my aunt at the dinner table and shared with her about my same-sex relationship. The words came out much more carefully than with my friends. Being from an older generation, I was worried that she would condemn me into the fiery pit for my behaviour. To my relief,

she listened intently and patiently. Then she slowly said: “Thank you for opening up to me. I can imagine this must be hard for you. I want you to know that we love you no matter what. Our door is always open with a warm welcome waiting inside. We will not be treating you any differently than before. Yet, I believe it’s important that I stand on the truth of the Word of God. It tells me that engaging in same-sex relationships is wrong.” At this, my shoulders relaxed, as my stomach tied itself in knots.

### Truth and grace

These words were uncomfortable and challenging, but to that constant quiet voice inside me, they were like honey. They were the sweet sound of amazing grace. God loved me and was speaking truth to me. My conviction was calmed and momentary peace was brought to the spirit in me, because the Holy Spirit shared the same truth, the truth I had yet to step into. From that point onwards, I then started to lean much more on my aunt’s support, and her advice on



responding to my same-sex feelings, than that of my friends. I knew I needed the truth, despite not being ready to step into it.

In hindsight, I am so grateful that my Aunt's statement was loving in its truth. It was evident that explaining scripture was more loving toward me, than saying she loved me a hundred times. This question has been answered for me – "how am I, and how is the church, to live distinctively?". We are called to abide in God's word, seeking to flourish in truth and grace. We are called to stand on the truth and still show up. We are called to love our neighbour as we ourselves want to be loved.

I am both inspired and challenged by what people from one gay

community had to say about Pastor Edward Dobson after he'd reached out to them in service: "We understand where you stand, and know that you do not agree with us. But you still show the love of Jesus, and we're drawn to that."

Can the world say that of us today? Are we committed to being a people who display the same love that Jesus showed, regardless of our cultural, political or sexual orientation?

*Ansunel has always had a deeply appreciative love for animals and the outdoors. From working in a lion park to grooming horses to walking miles through desolate landscapes in observation of small birds - no adventure is too big or small.*

## TFT Night Prayers

A number of us (typically between 4 and 8) meet together for prayer and reflection via Zoom each weekday evening for about 15 minutes, starting at 9:30pm. There is usually someone who leads, with the time being divided into two parts: a reflection or meditation often on some verses from the Bible, followed by intercessions and petitions. Requests are made out loud or via the chat function. I find that the meetings provide some space towards the end of a weekday to find peace, and also to lay down before the Lord any burdens or concerns we may have, knowing that we have the prayer support of brothers and sisters in Christ. You certainly don't need to be there every weekday evening, and some may well just want to join in silently with their cameras off. However, we always try to make time to pray for True Freedom Trust, in particular for our leaders, and any speaking events or other engagements coming up (e.g. visits to speak at a church or conference). Any member is welcome to join. Instructions for joining the Zoom call can be obtained by sending an email to [info@truefreedomtrust.co.uk](mailto:info@truefreedomtrust.co.uk)

By Andrew



## Should I stay?

**S**tuart: We're going to be looking at what would happen if someone's considering leaving their church or denomination because the leadership's departed from orthodox teaching. Do you have any general thoughts on this?

**Ed:** I'm part of the Church of England that is in the process of walking away from orthodoxy. My local church is my family. I'm the third generation of my family to work in an Anglican church. I've given the last 25 years of my life to serving churches.

### Leaving church is a big deal

**Stuart:** It is right that we're committed to our churches, but there's no such thing as the perfect church. There is the consumerist mindset in the West of "I'm not happy. I'm going to go shopping for a new church."

**Ed:** I've been on the receiving end of this consumerist mentality. People who are really committed to a local church family through the ups and downs of life show maturity. If you go to a church that you are completely happy with, that should ring alarm bells, because genuine family life always has its difficulties.

**Stuart:** Within one church fellowship there could be theological differences over secondary matters and the Bible gives accommodation for that in Romans 14, doesn't it?

**Ed:** Yes. I disagree with probably about half my church on baptism and women preaching. We should embrace people who have different perspectives because they are church family. But we must be united on things that are first order issues. Being in a church which successfully holds together disagreements in secondary areas should be humbling. We love Jesus

and may need to express our views less stridently.

### Leaving a church is a 'luxury'

**Stuart:** In church history, you might have just had one church that you went to and there wasn't really another option. You couldn't say "I'll go to another church down the road."

**Ed:** I live in a big city with a whole range of good Bible, believing churches. I advise people just to plump for one. There are so many people in different parts of the world who would love more than one to choose from. It's a luxury for us, so be more grateful!

### Commitment is good for us

**Stuart:** Being committed to a local body of believers, not necessarily for life, but for a decent amount of time, does allow you to get involved and not sit on the fence.

**Ed:** I was really struck overhearing a friend recently advising young single, celibate gay Christians to stay somewhere. Join a church, build yourself a family. I think that's good theologically, but also good pastorally, especially for those of us who are single.

### Principles for staying or leaving

**Stuart:** In the West a lot of churches and denominations are departing from biblical orthodox teaching, particularly on sexuality. What sort of principles you would offer to someone who's wondering whether to stay or go?

**Ed:** There are no easy answers. If you're in the position to positively affect and change a local church or denomination that's going in the wrong direction, then stay. If your conscience allows you to be part of a mixed denomination where there are people that believe different things to you, you might fight for the truth. Whereas, if you have a really tender conscience, it's probably better to leave.

In the 60's there were a number of bishops who didn't believe the creed. But people like John Stott stayed. And now, in 2023, there's creedal orthodoxy in the Church of England. So don't necessarily rush to the door.

**Stuart:** That's really encouraging, isn't it? To remember that God is sovereign over the church. We need an almost prophetic voice of reminding the church what the Bible says.

**Ed:** Those who stay can have a positive effect, but actually also some of those who leave can too. People setting up new vibrant churches often is a challenge to the denomination they've left. The Wesley brothers setting up Methodism meant that were much more successful at reaching out, particularly to working class people. In God's sovereignty He's going to build His church.

**Stuart:** That's good. This is a wake-up call. If you're staying, then you could be an increasingly lonely voice calling people back to orthodoxy, but if you're going, you could be pioneering something new.

**Ed:** It would be much easier if I just walked away from the Church of England at this point. I'm in my mid-40s now and halfway through my working life and ministry. Do I really want to spend the next 25 years seeking to return the Church of England to orthodoxy when it comes to sexual ethics? Some people are just called to contend for the gospel in really difficult circumstances. Perhaps they never saw the fruit of 30 years of church decline, but the result of their prayers is that there's now a flourishing gospel ministry.

### Staying to contend for truth

**Stuart:** In Revelation 2, Jesus challenges the church in Thyatira saying, "You tolerate this woman, Jezebel who is teaching sexual immorality." So, if we stay, we shouldn't be accused of colluding with liberal teaching, but also not just letting things drift and keeping the peace.

One of our members, Chloe, wrote about going to a Church of England church where the leader had held to an orthodox position on sexuality, but he later changed his mind. Chloe wrote to the minister and warned him that he was leading people astray, not unkindly, but clearly. She had fairly frank conversations with other people in the fellowship and that was painful. But she felt, in all due conscience, that she needed to explain the reasons for leaving.

**Ed:** Chloe would seem to be a beautiful example of the sort of speaking the truth in love, which the Apostle Paul encourages to do in Ephesians 4. Leaving well is so

important. We need to point out the fact that actually changing their sexual ethics might mean that people are excluded.

**Stuart:** The great irony in her story was that the minister said, "Well, I think we need to be a more inclusive church." Chloe left the church and was excluded because of what she believed.

### When a church stops being true

**Ed:** In 1 John there are markers of authentic Christianity. If your church denies the deity of Christ, then it's not a Christian church. If it doesn't see obedience to God's words and God's will as important, is it actually genuinely a Christian church?

**Stuart:** When the church leadership has left behind biblical teaching, they're really the ones who've done the departing. Whether you stay or leave, there may be some heart work to do, so that you don't you stay or leave with bitterness and resentment.

**Ed:** It's going to be really hard to trust the leadership of your new church. Allow yourself the time to grieve and to heal. It's about joining well too. When people have joined my church after a difficult departure, I haven't rushed them into service, because they have just experienced something really traumatic.

### The same-sex attracted Christian

**Stuart:** I moved church in 2013 largely for good reasons, but it did in some ways set me back a little bit. There was a cost in leaving, not just in terms of the upheaval, but also



perhaps putting things on hold in terms of my ability to serve.

I'm just wondering if there are any specific principles we need to highlight for the person who is same-sex attracted when the church leadership turns to revisionist teaching?

**Ed:** I have the support of my local church family in living a single celibate life. As a same-sex attractive believer, God's Word encourages me to embrace this gift. Knowing I could have a same-sex sexual relationship blessed by leaders in

my church would break down the trust I have in the leaders.

**Stuart:** Yes. One of our members found himself in a church with a mixture of theology on sexuality. Part of him just wanted to ignore the biblical teaching and follow his feelings. He needed his brothers and sisters though to encourage him on the narrow way.

Thanks so much, Ed, for sharing your wisdom on these matters.



## “Should I stay?” podcast

In this extended conversation, Stuart talks to Ed Shaw about the impact on church members when their leaders depart from orthodox teaching on sexuality and marriage. He explores with Ed whether he would advise someone in this situation to stay or to find another church.

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](http://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts)





## My singleness celebration

**T**his August I will be having a ceremony to dedicate myself to a life of singleness. A ceremony like this is not a common thing. I've heard of one or two people who have done something similar, most notably Kate Wharton, who was on the leadership team of New Wine for some years.

But it's certainly unconventional, so I'd like to talk about why I'm doing this, by telling you some of my story. What I am describing here is my personal sense of calling to lifelong singleness. Other single people will be called to singleness for a time, so I'm not advocating that every single person follows my example.

When I was growing up, I thought that I needed to be in a romantic relationship to be a complete person. I assumed that one day I would meet a girl who was "The One", we would eventually get

married and then all of my problems, insecurities and struggles would go away. My upbringing was Christian and I knew that God had a good plan for my life; I assumed He was fully on board with this idea. After all, marriage is a good, God-ordained thing, so surely, He would want me to have it, right?

### The big plan

In my younger teens, I noticed that I was physically attracted to (very few) boys/men, but didn't think much of it. When I was about 15, these feelings extended to romantic attraction as well. I didn't feel any conflict with this and my relationship with God at any point though. I felt as close to God as ever, when I was figuring these feelings out, despite never hearing any teaching about same-sex relationships. I didn't think same-sex attraction really affected the "grand plan" for my life. I just thought "The One" for me would be

a man instead of a woman, but my future would be mapped out the same.

My desire to be in a romantic relationship became a bit of an obsession and I ended up developing a crush for one of my friends at school. At the age of 16-17, neither of us handled it particularly well. We fell out, but eventually made up, yet I still felt this massive emptiness inside. I thought that only a boyfriend could fill it and bring me happiness. The fact that I wasn't in a relationship was really disappointing to me, together with the subsequent realisation that I was enslaved by this need. Interestingly, nobody explicitly told me "You are incomplete without a partner" or "If you are single, you are 'less than'", but those were the beliefs that I'd embraced over the years.

### Happy ever after

Some of what I'm describing may be familiar to you; after all, most films and TV shows involve a romance for the main character (though this has started to improve in recent years), and almost all pop songs are about romance (or sex). I don't think it is just the media, or even the secular world which promotes relationships. There is also an underlying belief in Christian circles that everybody is on a path that will one day lead to marriage and children. If you don't fit into that ideal, then something has gone wrong. I personally desired the rosy picture of a perfect marriage that would mean a 'happily ever after' scenario (because that's a completely realistic picture of what marriage is like!). Without that, it felt like I had all this love to give to

someone, but nobody wanted it.

### Freedom

When I was 18, during the summer after leaving school/college, I was finding singleness really difficult. At a Christian festival, I called out to God, asking how much longer I could take living like this. Suddenly, God said that all this stuff I was worrying about didn't really matter. I was so loved by Him, by my family and friends, and a complete person as I was. This love inside me could be directed towards others, and, most of all, towards the God who loves me more than I could ever comprehend.

That was a real turning point in my life. There was an amazing sense of freedom. I was no longer enslaved by this need to be in a romantic relationship. It was great to have experienced that before I went to university, because it meant I could be myself and make friends without feeling the need to scout out a future husband to try and fill a hole. Being single was the right and best thing for me and the way I could fulfil God's ministry. How glorious!

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**"Marriage is a good, God-ordained thing. Surely He would want me to have it, right?"**

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I've been living with that revelation ever since. I admit it has been challenging and I have developed romantic feelings for someone over that time. Nevertheless, singleness is my calling.

## Public recognition

So, why have a ceremony? There are three main reasons I want to do this.

The first is that although I've been living this way for a few years, I want to make a formal commitment before God to say this is the life that I'm going to lead for Him.

Secondly, I can have an opportunity to show my non-Christian friends what God has done for me. With some of my Christian friends and family who have had weddings, they've invited people who usually wouldn't set foot inside a church. They came to church for a wedding and experienced love and welcome.

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**“I want to publicly show people that a single life is a valid option”**

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I'd be delighted to invite my friends to the church I've grown up in and pray that they will feel the Holy Spirit through the service.

The third reason I want a ceremony is to publicly show people that a single life is a valid option. Our culture tends to say (and has for many years) that having a single life is the worst possible thing, “dying alone” is something to be avoided at all costs, even if that means you have to “settle” and get married just for the sake of not staying single. And yet, for some people being single is the right and best thing for



them as a lifelong calling. Remaining single does not mean being alone; I've been able to cultivate friendships, in a way I don't think I would have done, if I weren't single.

## Lifelong commitment

Am I too young to be making such a big decision? What if something changes down the line and I meet someone who is a “perfect match” for me? Isn't this a really big sacrifice? Those are valid points - it will involve sacrifice and is not a decision I've taken lightly. I see this commitment as the equivalent one in marriage. If I met someone when I was 18, and we started a relationship, and now at the age of 26 I said I want to marry them, that would probably be considered quite normal. And yet marriage means putting another person first for the rest of your life, saying to that person “I won't ask ‘what if someone better comes along’ - I choose you now and will continue to every day of my life”.



But despite all the challenges of marriage, it is no doubt completely worth it - a beautiful sacrament blessed by God. In the same way, I'm choosing to live a life of commitment to Jesus, which will involve great sacrifice, but will also bring me untold riches and joy. God has taken me on a wonderful adventure so far, and I'm looking forward to seeing what else He has in store for me, as I enter the next chapter of my life.

*Tim is a software engineer who lives in Surrey. During lockdown he had an alter ego called Professor Potty, who used to bring his congregation a monthly "eco act" that they could do to help the environment.*



*"Joining TFT has given me a tribe, a group of people who see the difficulties I face, friends who support me on my journey and brothers and sisters who lovingly point me to Christ when it feels hard. My small group is a place where all emotions are welcomed, struggles are understood and the joy we have in Jesus is freely shared. I went to my first conference a year ago and it was like walking into family. I wish I had joined TFT years ago." - Nat*

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## Book Review

“God, Sex and your Marriage” by Dr. Juli Slattery  
Paperback £11.99, ebook £6.64, 224 pages, Moody  
Publishers, June 2022

This book is an exceptional resource for couples seeking to improve their communication, both in action and speech, and enhance the physical aspect of their marriage. While primarily (in my opinion) suited for those already married, the book also offers valuable insights for individuals approaching marriage within the Christian context, whether both partners identify as heterosexual or whether there is same-sex attraction (SSA). The author does make a fleeting mention of SSA.

### The four pillars

The book is structured around four pillars that serve as a foundation for building a meaningful and fulfilling marriage: Faithfulness, Intimate Knowing, Sacrificial Love and Passionate Celebration. Dr Juli Slattery offers practical guidance and profound wisdom within each of these pillars to help couples cultivate a thriving relationship. But before delving into the pillars, the author explores how a couple's individual backstories influence their relationship:

*“Backstory is everything. It paints the picture for how we understand and interpret the events that are happening right now... These backstories include*

*what has happened between the two of you and also what you experienced before you ever met.” p18*

By understanding and addressing these personal histories, couples can overcome challenges and deepen their connection.

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### “A couple's individual backstories influence their relationship”

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### Covenant love

God's story of sex is examined and highlights the importance of pursuing wholeness beyond sexual purity, providing a refreshing and holistic perspective on intimacy within marriage. The author describes the ‘covenant love’ with which God loves His church. She encourages us to model our marriages on this love, for a stronger and fuller experience here on earth. Covenant love flips our culture’s “If you meet my needs, we will be good together” belief on its head.

Each of the eight chapters is thoughtfully crafted, presenting highly supportive and challenging ideas that encourage personal

reflection and foster meaningful couple-centred discussions, such as:

*“What is one thing God is showing you about what it means to surrender your sexuality to Him?” p171*

The inclusion of scriptural references throughout the book adds depth and allows readers to connect their experiences with timeless biblical truths.

Furthermore, the book offers additional resources such as surveys and recommended reading, providing opportunities for further exploration and growth.

### Practical ways forward

"God, Sex, and Your Marriage" concludes with a section titled "Take the Next Step," which empowers readers to apply the knowledge gained from the book into practical actions:

*“Like hiking a mountain, your journey toward sexual wholeness can feel like a massive undertaking... Throughout this book, you have learned that sexual intimacy in your marriage is an earthly metaphor for God’s covenant love.” p145*

This hands-on approach helps couples actively implement the concepts discussed, leading to transformational change in their relationship; offering tools to navigate through the complexities of communication, intimacy, and love within marriage.

### Personal testimony

As my spouse and I approach our 30th wedding anniversary, I can't help but reflect on the profound impact that "God, Sex, and Your Marriage" has had on our lives. For nearly 29 years, I held onto the belief that God would miraculously "heal" my SSA, but as time went on, this was not the path God had for me. We each read the book from cover to cover independently, allowing us to process our own thoughts and feelings; we grappled with deep emotions, faced difficult questions and ultimately enlarged our focus from a narrow viewpoint to embracing a new understanding of wholeness. A paradigm shift is being brought to our relationship, as we continue to pray through and reflect on the chapters for a second time.

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**“We grappled with deep emotions, faced difficult questions”**

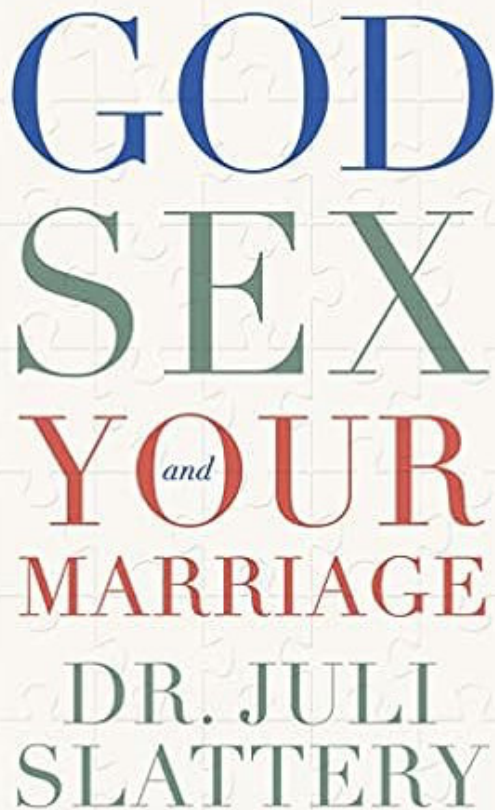
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Dr Slattery's passionate and insightful writing style resonated deeply with us, providing comfort and clarity during this transformative time. While our path may have taken an unexpected turn, "God, Sex, and Your Marriage" is helping us embrace a new sense of purpose, authenticity, and deepening connection in our relationship, with tools to approach our marriage with grace, understanding and a renewed commitment to sacrificial covenant love and support for each other.

### Recommendation

In summary, "God, Sex, and Your Marriage" is a must-read for married couples looking to deepen their connection and foster a more fulfilling relationship. I also wholeheartedly recommend the book to anyone who finds themselves living with SSA within a marriage. Its comprehensive approach, supported by thought-provoking discussion questions and scriptural references, provides a solid framework for couples to build a strong and lasting marriage.

*Paul is married to Caroline. He is a pianist leading worship at his fellowship. He grew up in a Christian family with three siblings and made a commitment to Christ at the age of sixteen.*



GOD  
SEX  
and  
YOUR  
MARRIAGE  
DR. JULI  
SLATTERY

