

# Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

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**Pursuing good mental health**

Recent research by psychologist Dr Lucy Foulkes suggests that raising awareness of mental health issues can have a positive effect, by improving recognition of mental health conditions. However, she also explores whether widespread awareness raising has now led some individuals to interpret common psychological experiences as mental health conditions. I hope that this edition of Ascend helps with the former without contributing to excessive introspection.

Other research by Dr Rakib Ehsan concludes that religious people in the UK are overall significantly happier, more optimistic and resilient than their unbelieving neighbours. Among religious Britons, nearly three quarters (73%) said they had "good psychological wellbeing", compared to only half (49%) of atheists. Seeing these statistics though should not discount the very real experiences of Christians struggling with mental health conditions: the testimonies and articles in the magazine explore these experiences and how we can all support one another in pursuing good mental health.

**By Stuart, TFT Director**



## Designed for Happiness

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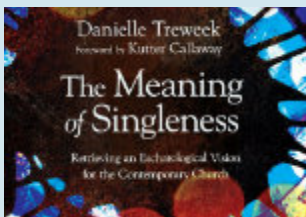
Stefan helps us to think through how happiness is found in Christ. He helpfully challenges some lies and distractions.



## A God of many Chances

Page 12

Sue shares her story of her ups and downs, struggles with mental health and same-sex attraction. She tells how God was at work and how she has seen his sense of humour in her life.



## Review: The Meaning of Singleness

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Simon reviews this book on singleness by Dani Treweek. He reflects on the theology of the book and its treatment of the range of emotional responses to this topic.

# Receiving God's refreshment

“I shouldn't feel like this. I'm a Christian.” “I feel so guilty.” “Do you think I am possessed?” Many times I have heard these, or similar statements, from those experiencing some form of mental or emotional distress or dis-ease. Sometimes this has been fuelled by a person's engagement with scripture, the teaching they have received or the implicit ethos of the faith group they belong to.

But is this how God wants us to think and feel? What is God's response to His people when they are struggling with anxiety, depression, psychoses and a myriad of other mental health issues? It is true that His word tells us to 'Rejoice in the Lord always' (Philippians 4:4) and 'Do not be anxious about anything' (Philippians 4:6). However, taken out of context, this can lead to the belief that our mental ailments are due to spiritual poverty.

It is important to understand that the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual parts of our beings all interact. And God knows this! Perhaps nowhere is this highlighted more than in the way God deals with Elijah. Why not pause and read 1 Kings chapters 18 and 19 and then we will look at how God met Elijah in his hour of need?

Elijah went from the heights of Mount Carmel to the depths of not wanting to be alive. He went from a

place of great confidence in God, to a place of hopelessness. Elijah, who was a man just like us (James 5:17) must have been ecstatic at the top of Carmel. His God had shown Himself to be the ruler by decisively defeating the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:16-46). Elijah would have been on a real spiritual and emotional high.

Yet a short while later we see the low of Beersheba: fear, running for his life, wishing he was dead, isolating himself and the loss of confidence in God. If he was not doubting God, he was certainly doubting His plans: depression, despondency, despair and self-pity.

What a contrast to the bold, courageous Elijah who confronted King Ahab and the prophets of Baal! Perhaps when we see Elijah in this state, we more easily identify with him being human, just as we are.

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**“Care for our bodies, as well as our minds and souls”**

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God knew exactly what Elijah needed. He dealt with him in a holistic way.

## **God cares for our bodies**

God cared for Elijah physically, giving him the food, water and sleep that he needed (1 Kings 19:6-8). Sometimes we can ignore

or lessen the importance of our physical well-being. After all, it is the spiritual part of us that matters, isn't it? Elijah is emotionally and physically spent. He had just run 17 miles after all. But here God's first approach to Elijah isn't for the angel to tell him to believe more or have more faith. Elijah needs to sleep and eat. Twice the angel comes to him, telling him to fill himself with sustenance for the journey. It is important that we do what we can to care for our bodies, as well as our minds and souls.

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## **“We should allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds”**

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### **God renews our minds**

Elijah had an unbalanced view of things (1 Kings 19:10, 14). But God challenged his thinking by asking him the same question twice: ‘What are you doing here Elijah?’ (1 Kings 19:9,13). Cognitive Behavioural Therapy isn't new!! The way we think really does affect the way we feel and behave: “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12: 1-2). We don't all have the same intellectual capacity. But we should allow the Holy Spirit to renew our minds and to think things through if we are able. We shouldn't be afraid of this either. Truth is truth and it will prevail in Christ.

So, God demonstrated His power again, albeit in a different way: by meeting Elijah's physical and emotional needs. Then Elijah set off again, journeying for 40 days and 40 nights (1 Kings 19:8). He

went to the same mountain where Moses met with God, Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai).

God again asked Elijah, “What are you doing here?” Elijah once more answered rather grumpily and negatively, “I am the only one left and they are trying to kill me too.” (1 Kings 19:10)

### **God refreshes our spirits**

God refreshed Elijah's spirit by displaying His power, glory and tenderness (1 Kings 19:11-15).

Sometimes we need to have God speak to us in powerful ways that force us out of our comfort zones. In this instance, God was not ‘in’ the wind, the earthquake or fire. He was ‘passing by’. I must admit this is one of the most puzzling parts of this account. It perhaps reinforces the surprising nature of God. Where Elijah probably expects God to manifest Himself in the powerful displays of wind, earthquake or fire, He instead shows up in a gentle whisper, a still small voice. Elijah's senses are likely still on high alert after the great victory on Carmel and then the descent into despair. So, God, lovingly, speaks to him in a gentle whisper, a still small voice.

Elijah recognised the voice of God. Learning to discern God's gentle nudges can take time and practice. But if we incline our spiritual ears and our hearts, we will hear Him. As we test out what we believe God is saying, checking it against scripture, perhaps talking with a trusted Christian friend, we will grow in confidence and trust.

Despite Elijah's wobble, God does not sideline him. Instead, He gives him fresh instructions and tasks. He is reminded he is not on his own. In fact, God gives Elijah a team to be part of: the kings and his successor, Elisha (1 Kings 19:15-21).

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## “Learning to discern God’s gentle nudges can take time and practice”

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### God is with us

As God was with Elijah, so He will be with us.

Christians are not immune to struggles with our mental health - why should we be? It is part of being a member of the fallen human race, in the same way that physical illness is. Those who

experience same-sex attraction are no less likely to battle with mental health than anyone else. The internal conflict, the isolation, and the battle against sinful thoughts and behaviour, can all be a factor in destabilising the mental health of the person who seeks to follow Christ.

But we have a gracious, compassionate, loving God who comes alongside us and will deal with us gently. He knows our needs. Through His word, His Spirit and our fellow believers, He will minister to our bodies, minds and souls.

*John spent 40 years working in the field of mental health. Having faced his fear by learning to swim at the age of 60, he discovered another fear when on the high ropes experience at Center Parcs!*





## Designed for Happiness

**H**appiness begins and ends in Jesus Christ. That's it. Full stop.

Surely it can't be as simple as that? We all have friends and family who will encourage us to think something quite different. The argument is often that happiness can only truly be found in the arms of another person, in a sexual union of some sort. We hear voices saying that having Jesus is all well and good, but in this life, you can't just rely on Him. You need something or someone else that is more tangible and immediate. Someone, or something that will give you that dopamine rush of excitement, that helps you forget your troubles and, even if it is just for a short while, gives a sense of being OK, normal and feeling loved.

I don't want to be trite. I acknowledge that being human in our world means experiencing sin and sinfulness in all its diverse shapes and sizes. This pervasiveness

of sin influences our minds far more than you and I fully grasp. We find ourselves drawn to false ways of thinking that promise happiness. Brothers and sisters, it may often feel tough and counter-cultural, but I want to argue for the better way, the way of happiness in Jesus Christ. It is a way that is healthier for mind and body and prepares us for heaven.

My argument in this brief article will begin with the reality that we have been designed to be happy God's way. Secondly, and drawing on the work of Andrew Fellows in his excellent book "*Smuggling Jesus Back into the Church*" (IVP, 2022), I will consider the influences that encourage us to believe less about Jesus as our source of happiness. Finally, I want to encourage us to conform our thinking Christ-wards rather than to the world.

### Designer happiness

The Bible tells us that God is happy. He is full of joy. It's in His very

nature to be so. The first chapter of Genesis tells us that God experienced happiness as he made the world and us. He saw it was good (e.g. Genesis 1:4,10,12). His creation brought joy to His heart. It still does. He is the unchanging joyful God (e.g. 1 Kings 10:9, Matthew 25:21, John 17:3, Hebrews 12:1-3, 1 Timothy 1:11). Eternity for the Christian will be enjoyed in the presence of a joyful God (e.g. 1 Chronicles 16:27, Psalm 16:11, Romans 14:17).

We are made in His image, and so we have in our DNA a desire for lasting happiness that can only be met in one person - this person is Jesus (e.g. John 15: 9-11, Colossians 3:10, Ephesians 4:24, James 3:9).

### Thinking happy

I grew up with very difficult emotions. I realise now that what I experienced were severe attacks of anxiety. As a child, I found different ways of what we might now call 'acting out' in order to soothe my anxious feelings. As I grew older, these became sexualised and I found that my feelings could temporarily be calmed by sexual behaviour and habits. These patterns became entrenched. My thinking was focussed on how I might hide these behaviours from others. Now I realise that my thinking was the source of my anxiety. I had wrongly assumed that my feelings would drive my thinking. Does this make sense? And I now see that it is really the other way around. I have come, very slowly, to realise that what I think and believe triggers my feelings, including feelings of happiness. Feelings do not just come out of thin air, nor do they simply resolve

and go away. Paul hits the nail on the head when he says in Romans that we need to be "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). It is in renewing our minds that our whole selves will be transformed. What will this transformed self look like? We will think and look more like Jesus. In doing so we will also experience the happiness of Jesus. Speaking of Jesus, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says of Him:

*"You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions" - Hebrews 1:9*

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**"...we have been designed to be happy God's way"**

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As we follow Jesus in loving good and turning away from sin, so the oil of gladness will overflow in our lives.

Therefore, if you or I want to be happy, we need to stick close to Jesus, to steadily become more like Him in the joy we feel. Jesus teaches in John 15:

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." - vs 9-11*

## Distracted from happiness

When our thinking is distracted from considering Christ as our joy, churches and individuals may be tempted to think that happiness lies elsewhere. This, in a nutshell, is Andrew Fellows' argument. I'm using some of his insights as the basis for my own reflections on how happiness goes wrong.

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### “We repent of sin and we seek to obey”

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Firstly, we think of ourselves first and foremost. We assume that we are at the centre of our world - what Fellows calls egoism. Our faith in Christ is essentially a self-improvement programme. We think that the more we do the 'right' things, the more we will find satisfaction in life and so happiness and positivity will be our daily experience. Once we have achieved our full potential, we will be happy. This is a big lie. We are tempted to replace trusting God with our ego. Far from joy or happiness, this is a way of thinking that leads to joylessness. We can never deliver to ourselves that which we are spiritually lacking. Nothing we try is ever enough.

A second lie is what Fellows terms naturalism. We are tempted to believe that the only real things are those we can see and touch. In effect we lose sight of God, who is spirit. Our thinking focuses on how we can make the most of the material world. We believe that somehow, we will find happiness from the world.

This is a distraction from Jesus and He gets excluded from our thinking. Ultimately, if we are honest with ourselves, we are left feeling hollow. The joy of a wonderful sunset can never eclipse the joy of meeting the Creator who made that sunset for our pleasure.

Thirdly is the lie of hedonism. This is the idea that the best life, the happiest life we can lead, is to have our senses gratified. The end result is a craving for more and more sensations from what we can see and touch. We seek out sex from whomever and whenever, we seek love from men and women, and we crave the next dopamine high to flood our minds with warm fuzzy feelings. It does not matter where the buzz comes from because here is all we have and we deserve to be made happy. Does this sound familiar? A friend of mine recently turned his back on Christ. The reason he gave (albeit dressed up with more words) is that sex with men delivers happiness where Christ does not. Does that shock you? My guess is that most of us know people who have said and done something similar. In a hedonistic mindset, feelings are king/queen and everything else is to be subjugated to them.

Finally, Fellows talks of politicism, the quest for justice and meaningful change in society as a route to life satisfaction. I feel happiness in my healthcare work when I think I have made a difference for people. Activism can offer a sense of happiness and joy. However, when we see this as our primary role in the world, and the source of our



greatest joy, we quickly lose sight of Jesus. We become busy, distracted and ultimately disillusioned.

### Walking back to happiness

How do we do this? We come back to Jesus. We engage in the spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, listening to God speak through His word and joining with God's holy people in the local church. We repent of sin and we seek to obey. As the great old hymn says:

*“Trust and obey, for there's no other  
way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and  
obey.”*

As you reflect on this article, maybe you can take some time out to think about your thinking! Does that sound odd? It's called reflexivity and is the practice of stepping back from thoughts, feelings and habits and asking questions. How come I think this way? How do these thoughts serve me in my walk with Jesus? What purpose has this habit had in my life? What fresh, more Christ-like ways of thinking can I adopt? What support do I need to change my thinking? Building reflection into your routines can help you stay alert to the many temptations to think wrongly.

As Paul said in the letter to the Philippians:

*“Finally, brothers and sisters,  
whatever is true, whatever is noble,  
whatever is right, whatever is pure,  
whatever is lovely, whatever is  
admirable—if anything is excellent or  
praiseworthy—think about such  
things” - Philippians 4:8*

He is pointing us to Jesus. Happiness begins and ends in Jesus Christ!

*Stefan has indulged in none of the fresh air and robust walks on offer since moving to the North. His interest in cake and Italian food has remained unaffected. He has learned that train timetables 'up here' are more like wishful thoughts than actual reality.*

*We are indebted to Andrew Fellows' book, "Smuggling Jesus back into the Church", as a source of ideas in this article*





## Book Review

“Christ and the Culture Wars: Speaking for Jesus in a World of Identity Politics” by Ben Chang

£13.99 paperback, £7.99 Kindle, 224 pages, 2023  
Christian Focus

Ben Chang’s latest book is an astute and wisely prophetic look at the evolving social movements competing with traditional Christian positions today. When I began reading the book, I was expecting an overview of the conflicts themselves, alongside proposals for how to mitigate the damages done by them, according to some enlightened scheme. What I found was a book that is roughly equal parts backstory and treatment plan. The backstory is a modern history of four loosely interrelated social movements: feminism, racial justice, gay pride and trans(sexual) rights. Though I baulked a bit at having to slog through 100 pages of history before getting to “the good stuff,” I was pleasantly surprised by the objectivity of Ben’s discussion and alarmed at my own deficient understanding of these movements. Looking back, I’m grateful for the backstory, as I believe it will help me be a more effective Christian witness.

Once I’d made my way humbly through the first hundred pages of the book, I delved into the second half, where Ben pulls things together in what he calls “The Grand Narrative of Identity Politics.” As he sees it, hangers-on of the four movements have good reason to feel disenfranchised and

disenchanted in the ways they do. As a same-sex attracted man, who has experienced the effects of homophobia at various times in my life, I was in agreement on this point. That said, disenfranchisement in the context of Christian mission gave the topic fresh poignancy and urgency in my way of thinking.

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“This book is roughly equal parts backstory and treatment plan”

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Identity politics, Ben tells us, are not a new thing, but social media has fertilised the field for bringing identity politics to greater public awareness and acceptance. He writes:

*“With social media ... we can now create any identity profile we want for ourselves, and broadcast to the world any version of our reality that our imaginations can conjure up” (p. 94).*

The problem, as he sees it, is that while modern culture seeks to reinvent itself and distance itself from Christian tradition, it perversely strives also to hold on to gains from that same tradition. For example, the principle of “love thy

neighbour,” which can be found (in some form) at the heart of many countercultural ideas. At the same time, identity politics has infiltrated the Church. This, Ben argues, is “not necessarily a bad thing,” since:

*“Where identity politics shines a light on church practices that are oppressive, discriminatory, or in any other way sinful, we should be grateful for the wake-up call and committed to repentance” (p. 131).*

I conclude from his arguments that the culture wars are less clear-cut than we think; indeed, they are fought between new ideas rooted in uncomfortable historical truths, and old ideas that are too appealing to give up.

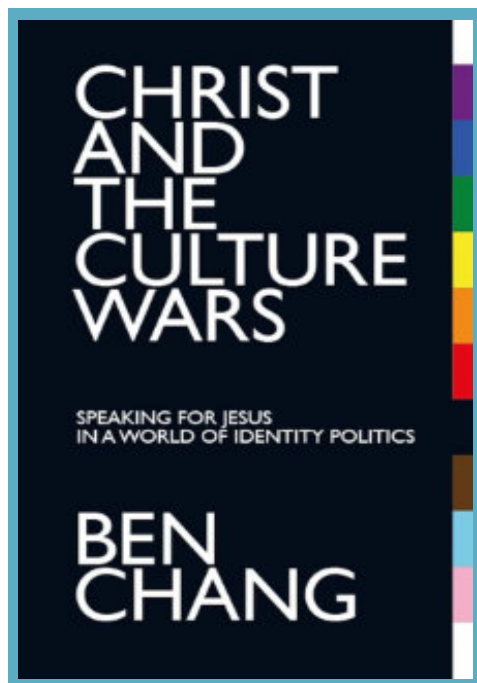
We might win the culture wars, the author informs us, by harnessing “the power of the narrative” and writing a “better story.” Countercultural movements are built on stories and lived experiences and are powerful for that reason. It makes sense, therefore, that the gospel, being the greatest story of all, should also be the most compelling story; we must endeavour to tell it better. By “telling a better story,” we position the gospel to outshine countercultural messages. In doing so, we need not be—should not be—limited to words, but must aspire also to “live redemptively,” which Ben defines, quoting N.T. Wright, as:

*“...living as those who have experienced that redeeming power of God already, and whose lives—individually and corporate—are signposts to the ultimate liberation of all creation and humanity from*

*every form of oppression and slavery” (p. 187).*

Ultimately this strategy for reclaiming the upper hand in the culture wars is a tall order without easy answers. I admit I finished the book feeling somewhat frustrated by the lack of specific, operational alternatives to the habitual lines of defence. But I believe as I continue to ponder the “power of narrative” related in this book, I will have a few good ideas in time.

*Ric is an educator who lives in the U.S. He recently bought a carpeted tower for his cat, but his cat still prefers the armchair.*





## A God of many chances

**A**s a child I was definitely not a girly girl. I was very much a tomboy, preferring my brothers Action Man over my Sindy doll, hating dresses and generally thinking life was so unfair that I was a girl.

I first became aware of my same-sex attractions during puberty, when I was confused about my sexuality and identity. It was not a subject that I could talk about, as the other girls in my form were daydreaming over the new male boys PE teacher whilst I preferred the girls female PE teacher! I did however have a best friend from the age of 14, Kevin, who has actually been my husband for the past 33 years. I married my best friend.

Despite my mother's frantic actions to ballet lessons, Brownies and Girl Guides, I hung out with Kevin and his mates and avoided all the girly hair and make-up chats! I did find an activity I really enjoyed for its sense of adventure and that was the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme. However, it was during my late teens

on a DofE summer camp week that I was raped and subsequently sexually abused by a male youth leader, who was in his mid-50's.

### Depression and hopelessness

I started working in the travel industry and for some reason in the late 80s the travel industry was a magnet for gay people. I worked on the Greek party island of Spetses, where every rep was gay and proud...sun, sea, sand, same-sex and lots of ouzo was an average working day. My job took me to Spain too. It was full of old people looking for winter sun; I hated old people and couldn't wait to get home.

Kevin and I married and before long I found myself at home, a mum of 3 children under 5 and very depressed. I made a serious suicide attempt and ended up sectioned into a psychiatric hospital. It was a cycle I went through several times.

In September 2002 I was existing, which meant being irresponsible, abusing prescription drugs, abusing alcohol, smoking cigarettes and

cannabis. I was not the ideal mother or wife of a hard-working husband. Despite depression plaguing me for many years with several psychiatric admissions, I wasn't taking responsibility for my own life. The downward spiral I was on led me to being arrested and locked in a police cell. I had hit an all-time low and I couldn't deny it. Social services had given me enough chances to 'get my act together' and I was faced with drastic action. I had been given a choice either to stay away from my children, my husband and my home or the children would be taken away with an emergency protection order. As I stood in the rain looking up at the dark sky, my tears mixing with the rain on my face, I knew I didn't want to live a minute longer. I had nothing left.

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**“I wasn't taking  
responsibility for my own  
life”**

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### **Help from Samaritans**

I was going to end my life, but somehow I found myself banging on the door of my Doctor's surgery. It was shut, but all of a sudden the door opened and there was my GP. He had forgotten something in the office, but needed to dash off again to a meeting. I don't remember the conversation really, but I do remember that he would see me at 8am the following morning. The finer details of how I managed to find myself sitting in the Samaritans office, in another town, with an elderly gentleman, drinking tea at 5am in the morning are beyond me!

He had arranged for a friend of mine to come and accompany me back to High Wycombe. I will always be grateful to the Samaritans. The next morning my GP referred me to the community mental health team, who got me a place to stay.

### **Christian crisis centre**

I was taken to The Ark, a Christian crisis centre and the only place that was willing to take me given my circumstances. I didn't like Christians. I thought they were pushy and opinionated, wore socks and sandals, were judgmental and needed to be avoided at all costs. I decided to avoid them and go out all day, but we got snowed in and I had to spend 3 days talking to Wendy, the Christian lady who ran The Ark! She accepted me for who I was and showed me love and support. She offered me friendship for the next 3 months, even though I must have driven her mad, even when I got drunk once and she was supposed to ask me to leave. One day I was being particularly difficult and shouted at Wendy and she said "I really don't know what to do with you. You need Jesus in your life!" I shouted back at her "Your Jesus isn't interested in someone as bad as me." My barriers fell away. Wendy told me about Jesus and gave me a Bible. I read Psalm 139 and cried and cried. I went for a long walk, fell on my knees in a cow field and gave my life to Jesus.

I had an independent psychiatric assessment in London and was in court as part of the care proceedings. I was anxious. I decided to pray, telling God how sorry and scared I was and how much I loved my family. I couldn't

deny the bright light and an audible voice saying “Stick with me and everything will be OK.” I then believed that I would get my children and husband back. I just had to stick with God.

### **Salvation and renewal**

I began to make huge changes in my life. I was given a diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), which helped me understand of the confusion in my head. I never touched cannabis or alcohol again. Smoking would go too but that did take a further 5 years! I completed an in-depth anger management course, attended parenting classes and enrolled myself on adult education classes. I fought my addiction to tranquilizers and I started taking my medication properly. I engaged with the mental health team and worked with social services. Eventually I was given more supervised contact with my children. By September 2004 I had demonstrated in court that I was capable of change. I was given a two-year supervision order to see if it was possible for us to be reunited in the future as a family.

Things continued to go well. I did have bad days, but with God’s help I kept on track. My mental health team and social worker were amazing. My social worker was a Christian, who helped me in extraordinarily kind ways and my children’s health visitor became a brilliant friend.

A year into the supervision order I was visiting my GP when he asked what had given me the strength to turn my life around. Sheepishly I said that I had become a Christian.

He replied he too was a Christian and reminded me of the night I had turned up at the surgery wanting to take my own life. He had got his whole church to pray for me that evening! God was protecting me that night; he answered their prayers for me and brought me through to new life as a child of God.

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**“I thank God for TFT’s hugely supportive ministry, which is a lifeline...”**

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### **Returning home**

I had increased contact with the children, having home visits, then home overnight stays and then increasing my overnight stays. I finally moved back home in October 2007. I had lived at The Ark for almost 5 years.

After I returned home, I did miss the close Christian community where I had come to faith, but I was also far more thankful to God for giving me a second chance at family life. Everything was good for about 3 years, until my eldest daughter became pregnant at 16 and had my grand-daughter. My daughter got involved with a partner who used drugs and a serious incident happened involving social services. Our grand-daughter was placed our care (there was an irony in that, having previously being forced to live apart from my children!) Police panic alarms were installed in the house.

My daughter upsettingly turned against me, the panic alarms served to make me feel scared, as opposed to safe, and the child protection conferences we had to regularly attend brought back a lot of tough memories for me. I felt very vulnerable. I was contacted by one of the staff where my daughter worked and she invited me for a coffee. There were red flags flying, but I thought I was strong.

### **Battles with sin**

Gen was the same age as me, but she was openly gay. In all the chaos of my infidelity, I heard God talking to me as His child several times saying "This is not what I want for your life.". Things got messy when I told Gen that I couldn't see her anymore – she Facebooked my children about our affair and turned up at my church ranting about how church didn't allow me to be myself. The worst thing was I had let God down after he had given me a second chance and I had hurt the people who I loved most.

God is good. He is a God of many chances. Kevin was aware of my same-sex attraction, but the infidelity hurt him a great deal. God has used the mess I created for good. We are now able to talk openly about my same-sex feelings, which helps me and God has healed the hurt I caused and strengthened our marriage.

### **Joining TFT**

During the healing process from Gen, I went online searching for support and came across TFT. I joined and attended my first National Conference in 2017. Meeting others who understand the struggle with same-sex attractions is truly a gift from God. I thank God for this hugely supportive ministry, which is a lifeline in what has been a long and lonely road for nearly 40 years.

God does have a sense of humour, considering my hatred of old people when I lived in Spain. He has, through a programme called "Growing leaders", which I attended through my church, called me into the area of older people's ministry! He has given me a passion and heart for the elderly. I'm part of the pastoral care team at my church, do home visits to the elderly, as well as care home and sheltered housing visits with services and talks... everything elderly and I love it.

*Sue could say that she's a successful social media influencer with over a million followers. Well, she isn't... Coffee and a good book are what she needs to keep her happy!*



## Review: Belfast conference

**A**t 42 years of age, I had already made many bad choices because I struggled alone as a Christian with gender dysphoria and homosexual feelings. I did not dare to seek the advice of other Christians even in confidentiality, since it could never be undone, that they would know my secret. At the same time, I was afraid I was about to lose my determination not to act on temptations or even start a double life. Because I had started to seek emotional support from non-Christian homosexual male friends.

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**“I feared my secret would be revealed”**

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I felt so lonely, and it seemed somewhat safe, because it was not the sex that I am attracted to. But still, even though they knew and respected, that I wanted to live as a Christian, I could sense a hope, that I would one day stop being commitment to celibacy, since they could not see the value of living according to the Bible.

In March this year, I decided to tell my pastor. I feared that I would stop being a Christian if I should continue to hide my struggles and only receive help from non-Christians.

It was a true relief for me to tell him and other Christians. I have got weekly support from my pastor, and I have been pointed in the direction of True Freedom Trust, where I have been talking to Liam, who works with pastoral care in TFT. It has been lifechanging for me. Before God felt distant in my struggles, but pastoral care has shown me how I can rest in God's hands and go to God with my struggles every day. I have grown much closer to God. God is not just the one setting boundaries for my life. He is also my closest help in my struggles, and I want to worship him instead of being angry at him for making my life difficult with boundaries.

The Belfast conference was my first chance to go to a conference as a new TFT member. I felt that I had to come, even though it was all the way from Denmark, to meet and



worship him together with lots of other Christians. Christians who share my pain and struggles and who had also put their trust in the Lord and are committed to his ways. Others that believe that it is indeed possible, to live a fulfilling life, without acting on homosexual feelings.

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**“I left comforted despite the pain I feel and deeply encouraged ”**

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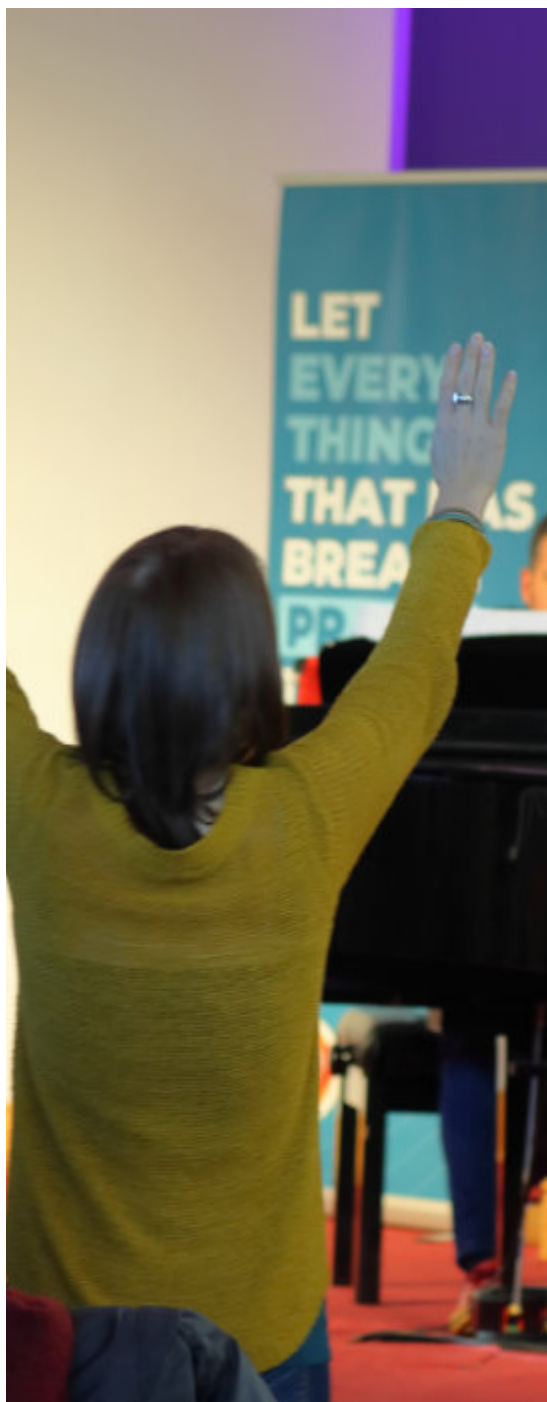
The program was very good. Pastor Mark Smith was keynote speaker and there were 3 seminars where I



chose “Sexuality”, which was a good choice for me and enhanced my knowledge. I was deeply touched by personal life stories from

several attendees, who shared what they had gone through as planned interviews or testimonies. There was also lots of time to talk socially during dinner and the and I appreciated to get to know others like me. I left the conference in Belfast both comforted in the pain I feel and deeply encouraged to continue to live according to the Bible.

*Margarethe works as a theologian and midwife. She has Asperger’s Syndrome. Her special interests are researching plane crashes, and virtual walks around the world combining physical steps with distances on Google maps*





## The inevitability of God's victory

I was sitting in the public gallery of Church House on 15th November last year. As the afternoon session closed, bringing another cycle of LLF(Living in Life and Faith) debates to an end, I caught the eye of the lady sitting to my right. We silently shook our heads at each other in polite and pained disappointment at what had happened. Giving a look around the circular hall, she said, "I can't feel Jesus here anywhere. I just don't know where He is."

What has made me reflect most on this encounter was, to my shame, what I silently thought in response: "Well, what did you think was going to happen?" I am not pleased with that response; but it was true that I felt like that. I nodded in vague agreement and mumbled some meagre encouragement as I slid along the row of seats on my way out.

As an ordinand (a person training to be a minister), who is same-sex attracted, this past year has had a dull inevitability about it. To be sure, I'm convinced as ever that Christ is building His church. But watching the drip-drip, bit-by-bit nature of the Church of England's letting go of the Lord's teaching on marriage and sex is wearying.

In light of current goings on, my fellow orthodox ordinands and I have been thinking a great deal about how to navigate fellowship, communion services, curacies, ordinations and licensing from diocesan structures that we sadly believe to be departing the Bible's life-giving sexual ethic. To be candid, I find myself annoyed that this is something I even have to spend time thinking about.

But the Lord is kind. When my resilience for this work has been wearing thin this past year, I have been so encouraged by the faithfulness of my church and its leaders, as well as the hundreds of fellow ordinands - evangelical, catholic and others - who have united in prayer and support. I dearly pray that all Ascend readers can point to the Lord's kindness in their daily lives when resilience in the face of the world, the flesh and the devil is low.

In fact, stop reading this article right now. I'm serious. Spend a few minutes praying before we continue.

Why not identify three things in your life this past year, big or small, through which your shepherd-king has demonstrated His boundless

love for you? You, his vulnerable, every-wandering little sheep. Close your eyes and spend a few minutes thanking and praising Him now.

Welcome back! He's great, isn't He?

I want to spend some time now reflecting on and encouraging us from the drama of Isaiah 36-37. Personally, I have found these chapters to be a timely balm following the November synod. The weariness of Lord's people, the pride of the world and the apparent inevitability of historical progress and outcomes are all swept up by the Lord in a gloriously wrought salvation. Our encouragement in these chapters comes simply from drawing deeply on the character and sheer majesty of the One who is and will always be for us in Christ.

A little over 2700 years ago, Jerusalem lay as the last piece of unconquered ground in The Promised Land. The Assyrians had swept away the northern kingdom of Israel and were now bearing down on the city where the Lord dwelt with His people. We read in 2 Kings 18 that the kingdom of Judah was being ruled by an uncommonly godly king, Hezekiah, who:

*"... did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, just as his father David had done. He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles .... He held fast to the LORD and did not stop following him; .... And the LORD was with him; he was successful in whatever he undertook."*  
- vs 3-7

But even God-fearing Hezekiah was afraid of the unstoppable power of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib. By the time the Assyrian army arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, Hezekiah had already emptied the royal treasury and stripped the temple of its gold in order to placate Sennacherib. With the city surrounded, the Assyrian king sends his envoy, the Rabshakeh, to threaten and mock both Hezekiah and the Lord.

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**"...the sheer majesty of the One who is and will always be for us in Christ"**

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The Rabshakeh's speech in Isaiah 36 is fantastic for us to meditate on, as it is full of the same jibes, accusations and petitions that we can expect to hear today as people faithfully trusting Christ. Nothing's changed!

The Rabshakeh first points out the vast difference in numbers on each side:

*"On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have counsel and might for war—but you speak only empty words. ... Come now, make a bargain with my master, the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses —if you can put riders on them!"* - vs 19-23

Some days I feel like the whole world - including my denomination - is telling me that I am on the wrong side of history for my faith in the Bible's teaching. It often doesn't seem to me like we have the

'numbers', so to speak. And then, too, there are the sweet overtures from all sides persuading the Lord's people to give up and give in:

*"This is what the king of Assyria says: Make peace with me and come out to me. Then each of you will eat fruit from your own vine and fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own —a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards." - vs 31&32*

Whether its publicly contending for Christ's teaching on sex and marriage or just our daily plod towards glory, the temptation to walk a smoother, pleasanter or wider path will always be there. And even when we resolve to trust in the Lord through all this, we are confronted everywhere in our culture with the heralds of inevitability:

*"Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, 'The LORD will deliver us.' Have the gods of any nations ever delivered their lands from the hand of the king of Assyria? ... How then can the LORD deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" - vs 33-35*

The gods of the surrounding nations were no match for Assyria, says the Rabshakeh. And now Sennacherib's army has swept through to the gates of Jerusalem with ease. When the Assyrians take Jerusalem, as they surely will, the Lord will be just another notch on Sennacherib's sword. The remnant of the people cannot possibly think that merely trusting in the Lord will allow them to resist the inevitable?

But Hezekiah provides us with wonderful encouragement in Isaiah 37. The prayer he prays when all outcomes appear inevitable is one of the best in Scripture. He offers the Lord no advice (which I am often guilty of doing) and he makes no supplications on behalf of the people's long suffering and weariness. In the face of catastrophic defeat, he petitions the Lord simply on the basis of the majesty and glory of his name:

*"Give ear, LORD, and hear; open your eyes, LORD, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God. ... "It is true, LORD, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, LORD our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, LORD, are the only God." - vs 17-20*

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**"We may grow tired, but He doesn't"**

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I am resolved this year to make my prayers more like that of Hezekiah. It is true that our 21st century culture has many 'gods', and their growth can seem inevitable. Their worshippers are many too. But only one God is the living God. We may grow tired, but He doesn't; we may grow despondent, but He doesn't. He will surely deliver His people time and time again, before one day all will bow before His throne:

*“I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!” - 2 Kings 19:34*

Sennacherib doesn't set foot in the city. Neither do his armies. Nor the Rabshakeh. No siege ramps are built and not one arrow is fired. Instead, with His people on their knees before Him, the Lord destroys 'a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp.' And a little while later, great King Sennacherib is assassinated by his own sons, while worshipping in the temple of his god. He comes to the same end as what he worshipped: nothing.

As well as the promise of salvation to Hezekiah and the people, as an Anglican, I draw particular encouragement from one aspect of the Lord's response to Sennacherib:

*“Have you not heard?  
Long ago I ordained it.  
In days of old I planned it;  
now I have brought it to pass,  
that you have turned fortified cities  
into piles of stone.” - 2 Kings 19:25*

Yes, the Assyrians have the numbers. Yes, they have many horses. But their success has only ever been at

the Lord's will. He had planned it and ordained it. The Lord's enemies are a mere instrument in His hand. When His people were scared and panicking, He was not surprised by any new threat or development.

In light of these verses, I find myself needing to repent of my despondency at Synod. (That is not at all to say that there is no place for weariness and despair, far from it. A life of relentless stoicism is not required of sheep with so tender a shepherd). Isaiah 36-37 reminds us of the truth that each night we can close our eyes and speak to the same living, unstoppable God who acted 2700 years ago outside Jerusalem. He acted then so that we might know now in 2024 that He will not let his name be defamed. Nothing that happens in our culture, or our churches, or in our lives is outside of His endless care or plan. Nor is anything inevitable. Ever. He sees us, He knows us, and through his Son, our shepherd-king, He is attentive to us at all times.

*Jonathan currently (and happily) splits his time at college between systematic theology and his Nintendo 64. He is an “80-year old 8-year old” according to his wife.*

## Christian resilience podcast

In this extended conversation, Stuart and Jonathan talk about God's victory even when it seems like he is losing, and how we can be resilient as a result.

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

# TFT SPEAKING VIDEO



The new promotional video for speaking is now on the TFT website to be shared.

The purpose of this video is to be used in churches or circulated to others so they can see the service we offer.



If you would like to use this video in your church or to book a speaking engagement please visit the link below.



[truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking](https://truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking)



## Building on rock and not sinking sand

**H**ave you ever questioned your faith or had doubts whether you are right about sexuality? (For what TFT believes, see [our Basis](#))

Those of us who hold to biblical teaching on sexuality are increasingly out of step with the culture. We can also find ourselves at odds with some who identify as Christians. It can feel as though we are caught in the cross fire and that is hard.

And, let's be honest, the world's teaching can sometimes sound attractive. There are times when it is attractive to believe that we could have a same-sex partner, with all of the associated blessings of being in a relationship, and be celebrated for that.

But truth is not determined by how attractive or comfortable something is. However enticing a viewpoint might be, unless it is also true, it is an empty hope, and that's not actually that attractive.

How can we test our faith and examine what others are saying to ensure that we are building on rock and not sinking sand?

I listened to a podcast series last year called "The Witch Trials of JK Rowling". It is a six-part series hosted by American political activist Megan Phelps-Roper who used to be a member of Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) (famous for its distasteful pickets and obnoxious views). Megan Phelps-Roper left WBC when she found that she could not reconcile her beliefs with those of WBC. She isn't, as I understand it, a Christian. The series looks at how JK Rowling has been put "on trial" by the media following the expression of views on gender/transgender issues. Megan's approach is to encourage discussion of different viewpoints and she has six questions which she uses to assess her own beliefs. Here are my reflections on the six questions, which are listed below:

## Open to doubt?

*Q1: Are you able to entertain real doubt about your beliefs or are you operating from a position of certainty?*

It takes humility to accept that we might be wrong in what we believe. It takes open-mindedness and wisdom to listen to someone's else's view and to weigh it. Being able to entertain real doubt about our beliefs may be about our entire worldview or it may be about what the Bible teaches on a specific point.

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**“Truth is not determined by how attractive or comfortable something is”**

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I came to faith from an atheist background, in part because I was willing to open my mind to the possibility that I might be wrong. A while back I asked a friend to help me wrestle through a secondary theological issue and I ended up changing my mind on the basis of the evidence. That led me to change churches and to give up something I enjoyed doing. So, I would say yes to the first question - I have a track record of being willing to entertain real doubt about my beliefs.

## Views unfalsifiable?

*Q2: Can you articulate the evidence that you would need to cede, in order to change your position, or is your perspective unfalsifiable?*

The strongest evidence for Christianity is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Anything which showed that to be untrue would be a cause for me to change my faith.

Similarly, something which showed the Bible to be untrue/not the word of God would cause me to re-evaluate my faith. The Bible needs to be read in a genre-appropriate way, so I don't mean taking poetic language (e.g. “storehouses of snow” in Job 38:22) and try to make literal sense of it (e.g. by saying that because of modern science we understand that there aren't literal storehouses of snow and that therefore the Bible is wrong and cannot be trusted). But I also need to approach this with humility recognising that human knowledge is imperfect and that later archaeological or scientific discoveries may challenge current understanding, so I would not want to walk away over a minor point.

When it comes to interpreting the Bible, I'd need to be convinced that the Bible said something different on a natural reading of the text and look at all the different passages that dealt with the issue. I'd want to be alert to what CS Lewis called “chronological snobbery” (i.e. assuming that something is right or better just because it is new and assuming that we have reached the pinnacle of knowledge in our day) and also to personal and cultural pressures to re-interpret the Bible. Looking at this in the context of sexuality, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of Christians throughout time and across the world have held to traditional teaching that sex is only for marriage and marriage is heterosexual. Now they could all be wrong, but, before we jump to the conclusion that they were unenlightened, it is worth taking a step back and acknowledging that



there is cultural pressure in the West at this point in history, not only to permit, but also to celebrate same-sex sexual relationships.

For those of us who experience same-sex attraction, we need to be especially aware of personal incentives to change our theology. But we aren't the only ones with skin in the game. Those who aren't gay, lesbian or bisexual/who don't experience same-sex attraction may feel that changing their view would win them popularity points, help them to keep a relationship they care about, help them to get promoted or even just to keep their job, or they may feel that it will help to attract younger generations to church. We are not the only ones facing pressure to change our view.

We need to make sure that we are reading the Bible to inform our judgement on what it says. To me, it is very clear that marriage is a picture of Christ (the groom) and the church (the bride), and that all human marriages are intended to be a little picture of that. It is also clear that just as God is three persons, each different and yet equal in value and united in love, human beings are made male and female in the image of God, different and yet equal in value and (in some cases) united in love in the context of human marriages - another picture.

There are also passages which are very clear that homosexual sex (whether between two men or two women) is sinful. The most natural reading of the Bible is that marriage is to be between a man and a woman and that any other form of sexual relationship is not permitted.

If the Bible wanted to condemn only older men sleeping with teenage boys (as some have argued), it could have done that, but it didn't.

### **“Straw manning”?**

*Q3: Can you articulate your opponent's perspective in a way that they recognise, or are you “straw manning”?*

John Stott once said that we should attack our opponent's viewpoint at its strongest point. There is integrity in that, and I would agree that we should seek to do this. It can be hard to slow down and make sure that we have understood what someone is actually saying, but it is important. We may need to be wise in terms of how and when we expose ourselves to views which may be unhelpful for us. For example, it may be best to do it in community with other believers who are committed to biblical truth and with a critical eye, or to avoid it in seasons where we are going to find it unhelpful. I have confidence that the Bible stacks up, but our emotions can sway us.

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## **“We should attack our opponent's viewpoint at its strongest point”**

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### **Ad hominem attacks?**

*Q4: Are you attacking the ideas or the people who hold them?*

We need to be able to attack the ideas, not the people. I'd agree with that. We should seek to love everyone, including those who disagree with us or who are rude about us, although that can be easier said than done.

We probably also need to define what is meant by “attacking” the person. Someone might perceive something to be an attack where the other person is questioning whether gay relationships are OK. That isn’t an attack on the person, but may feel like one if the other person fears that their rights may be taken away.

We as Christians are also judged by the way we live and especially by how well we live out what we say we believe. So, it is not unreasonable for us to expect others to live out their beliefs as well. Questioning why someone is not living out their beliefs may feel like a personal attack (and we should try not to make it sound like one), but it is reasonable to ask why someone’s life doesn’t match their expressed beliefs. We should also be prepared to answer the question when there is a gap between what we say we believe and how we live. In my case the answer is that I am a sinful human being living in a fallen world.

### **Overreacting to difference?**

*Q5: Are you willing to cut off close relationships with people who disagree with you, particularly over relatively small points of contention?*

I find this one tricky as there is a wisdom call here. Cutting people off because they have a different view on something minor sounds like quite an extreme reaction. We do of course need to ask the question “What is a small point of contention?” Re-interpreting (in an unfaithful way) or disregarding the Bible is not minor. Permitting gay weddings in churches, or having

church leaders who do not submit to biblical teaching is not minor. The difference for us personally between living a single celibate life (or a life with an opposite sex spouse) and having a same-sex partner is not minor.

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## **“We need to be wise about which friendships will be helpful or unhelpful for us”**

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It follows that there may be people with whom it is unhelpful for us to spend a lot of time because of their beliefs or behaviours. We need to be wise about which friendships will be helpful or unhelpful for us. I did some serious thinking about who was in my ‘inner circle’ a number of years ago. I concluded that there were too many non-Christians and not enough Christians. That isn’t to say that I cut off previous relationships, but I did re-balance the amount of time I was spending with different people and what I was sharing with whom.

### **Punishing opponents?**

*Q6: Are you willing to use extraordinary means against people who disagree with you (e.g. forcing people out of their jobs or homes; violence or threats of violence; celebrating tragedy)?*

We should never celebrate tragedy, as we are people who are called to rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn. Violence, threats of violence and trying to get someone removed from their home or job simply because they hold a different view is unloving. There may, however, be

some behaviours based on someone's beliefs which mean that a particular job is not appropriate for them. It is also possible to envisage scenarios where a commitment to this viewpoint might be tested, particularly where the beliefs in question might be viewed as harmful or where the behaviours that would naturally flow from the beliefs would be harmful.

### **Conclusion**

What do you think of Megan Phelps-Roper's questions? Are they helpful? Are there any you would add, remove or change? How would you answer them?

I'm not sure that I'll adopt the six questions wholesale, as I prefer the shorter and more biblical question "What does it look like to love God and love my neighbour in this?" But it has been interesting to think about these questions.

*Billie enjoys the Harry Potter world created by JK Rowling. She is a Gryffindor and her Patronus is a cat.*





# Book Review

“The Meaning of Singleness” by Dani Treweek  
£28 paperback, £26 Kindle, 336 pages, 2023 IVP

As I give my testimony when delivering speaking engagements on behalf of TFT, I often find myself sharing what the reasons were that I decided to contact TFT and pursue membership in the first place. One of those reasons related to a struggle over what seemed like an accepted evangelical narrative – one that said I must marry and have children if I’m ever to advance into spiritual adulthood. Probably many TFT members have felt that, at times, the Church has told them that singleness is second best.

## Theology of singleness

Dani Treweek serves as a theological researcher in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney. In this scholarly book, she seeks to demonstrate what she calls “the unique intelligibility and privileged inhabitability of singleness” in the lives of God’s people, and in the Church. Treweek presents a theology of singleness that is rooted in the age that is coming on the other side of Christ’s return, arguing that singleness in this age allows us to anticipate the completion of our union with Christ in a way that is distinct from, but equal in beauty to, biblical marriage.

This is an academic book, coming out of Treweek’s doctoral studies. It is extremely well researched, and would make a great starting place for anyone wanting to do a significant study of their own on the

topic. That shouldn’t put off other types of reader though, as church leaders and those with a more casual interest in the topic would likely find it quite readable. The book is helpfully broken down into four parts, and chapters can be read independently of each other.

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“Our love for one another  
will be made perfect”

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## History and culture of singleness

Treweek opens the book in part one by looking at perceptions of singleness through history in both church and culture. Want to know how unmarried women went from being thought of as the epitome of purity and beauty to being thought of as ‘spinsters’, or worse, a threat to traditional family values? The first part of the book has you covered. The second part of the book turns to address some of the missteps the church has taken in its attitude towards singleness. This was one of my favourite parts of the book, as it gave language to the narrative that has been heard by many of my single brothers and sisters. That singleness is characterised by lack, inadequacy and unfulfillment. Treweek provides a critique of this view.

Part three is the lengthiest and most academically dense part of the book. Treweek recognises that

Christianity hasn't always thought the same way about singleness as it does today. Here, she seeks to mine the riches of Christian thought through history, to see what lessons there might be for the modern age. Attention is given to three fields of study: church history, biblical exegesis (focusing mainly on Matthew 22 and 1 Corinthians 7) and the thought of four noteworthy theologians. The final part of the book weaves all that has gone before together and paints a positive vision of singleness as a gift for both individual disciples and the wider Church.

### Emotional breadth

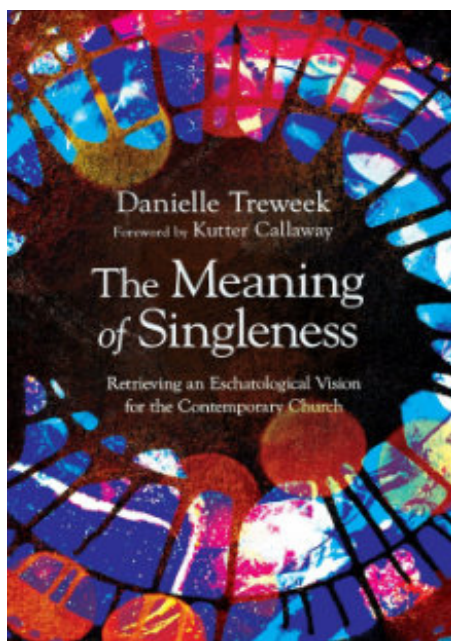
A strength of this book, which you don't often see in academic works, is that Treweek is acutely aware of the complex gamut of emotion that comes with talking about these subjects. It actually made me think about something I said at a recent speaking engagement about the temporality of human marriage; owing to Matthew 22 teaching there will be no marriage in the age to come, as perhaps sounding a little insensitive towards those in the room who are happily married. Here, Treweek helpfully points to RC Sproul, who reminds us that while legal/covenantal relationships of that type between believers will not exist in the new creation, our love for one another will be made perfect and, therefore, will only increase.

### God's design

This isn't an especially practical book. If you're looking for some punchy, handy hints on how to make the most of your singleness as a Christian, or how to facilitate the

best conditions for Christian community, this won't be for you. What this book will give you is a deeper understanding of the significance of singleness and how it relates to other areas of theology (particularly eschatology). As theoretical as that sounds, understanding God's design can help us to live at ease with our circumstances and know our place in His plans and purposes. For the person who struggles with their own singleness, that just might be the reassurance needed to keep going and press into the Lord.

*Simon oversees TFT's speaking and teaching work. Being born in the 90s, he spent much of his childhood immersed in Pokémon games, playing the whole game with a single Pokémon. He's sure this bio will mean nothing to most of Ascend's readers.*





# Mixing Mental health and Sexuality

**I**n preparation for this article, I asked a number of members of TFT some questions about their mental health. I chose people who experience both same-sex attractions and had at least one mental health diagnosis. My questions explore how their mental health condition interacted with their same-sex feelings. Each person picked from my questions which ones they wanted to answer. My intention was particularly to share experiences with others, so that others who have similar blends of sexual temptations with mental health struggles might benefit from the experience and wisdom of others. The responses below are simply the experiences of these five people.

## What impact does your mental health condition have on your same-sex attractions?

**Vanessa:** “I experience anxiety, OCD and depression. When these are strong, I may have more temptations to seek comfort.”

**Joe:** “I suffer from depression. The temptation to sin is stronger when I feel depressed because I feel more lonely and sad. My depression is really episodic and normally very

short (2 weeks - to a month), and once I get out of an episode, I look like a perfectly normal, happy and social person. I was diagnosed with depression in 2014 and I have had only 4 episodes so far: the 3 relapses happened when I was not on antidepressants. But for some people, it's more long-term.”

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**“I would encourage them to take medication as prescribed ”**

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**Jade:** “I struggle with anorexia, as well as anxiety disorder. It makes me think about previous relationships more and how life was easier with someone else there. I then begin to crave and miss those relationships and connections more.”

**Sue:** “My diagnosis is Borderline Personality Disorder with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. When my mental health is more of a struggle my same-sex thoughts increase greatly. This in turn will increase my need for comfort and the increased same-sex temptations heighten my inner struggle that a same-sex relationship is where my

comfort will be found, instead of looking to God for my comfort.”

**Mark:** “My bipolar condition can rock my faith, as it can play tricks on my mind. I keep praying it will go back to normal. If it wasn’t for my mum, I feel that I would be lost. Jesus is Lord and somehow still has a grip on me in these end times.”

### What effect do your same-sex attractions have on your overall mental health?

**Joe:** “I feel an intense inner conflict. I feel more ashamed and wonder if this struggle will be this painful through my whole life. Same-sex attraction basically depresses me.”

**Jade:** “Not a huge impact on my mental health. I’m able to speak about these struggles with friends who help remind me of the truth. But it does leave me doubting my beliefs and whether I’m doing the right thing.”

**Sue:** “The overall effect of increased same-sex attractions eventually results in feelings of guilt and failure, both of which in the long term have a negative impact on my mental health and my self-esteem and increase my inner mental conflict regarding my identity.”

**Mark:** “My bipolar condition is complicated by addictive behaviours such as alcohol and nicotine, gambling and sexual addiction. I watch too much TV and, if I’m honest, I feel it’s the enemy trying to distract me from the faith.”

### How does any medication you take affect your same-sex attractions?

**Joe:** “Yes, I take 10mg of Escitalopram every day. I think, generally speaking, the drugs have a positive effect on me. I am one of those people who respond really well to medicines (I know some people don’t), and the medication keeps my emotions and cognition above baseline levels. This means that when I feel the urge to sin, or when I feel sad because of this sin, I have a certain level of psychological flexibility to shift my attention away from this struggle and just carry on with life. It would be harder for me to do this if I were not on medication. In my support group, I found that those who refused to take medication or had low medication compliance generally had a poor prognosis. I would encourage them to take medication as prescribed. I know this even more clearly after I started studying mental health, because mental illness does have a biological cause (even though it may not be the main one).”

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“I benefit from ...my own prayers and the prayers of others ”

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**Sue:** “Depending on which medication I’m on, and the dosage, sexual feelings can sometimes be suppressed. In this case, my same-sex feelings will be much less or will not be an issue.”

**What strategies do you find helpful in managing both your mental health and your same-sex feelings?**

**Vanessa:** "I benefit from accountability. Also, my own prayers and the prayers of others."

**Joe:** "These are the tools that help me: antidepressant medication, exercise and keeping in touch with my family, friends and brothers and sisters in the church. Counselling also helps. Another thing, and this is the most effective coping mechanism for me, is work. During a recent semester, I was very busy studying, volunteering and looking for a part-time job, so there was very little time for me to dwell on my same-sex feelings."

**Jade:** "I have found that vulnerability and honesty with others really helps me: being open about my struggles and having others pray helps to ground me biblically and keeps me in the truth. Also, distraction techniques and keeping busy help me."

**Sue:** "Not keeping my feelings to myself is helpful. Also, seeking out a trusted Christian friend to talk and pray with: I have had an accountability partner in the past who was invaluable, with regards to keeping me on track and helping me through the most intense parts of my struggle."

**How can we best support those facing a combination of mental health struggles and same-sex attractions?**

**Joe:** "I had a similar support group of Christians who experienced same-sex attractions in China. Among the big group, there were 6 members who met regularly, and half of them had some kind of mental disorder and were on medications. As well as encouraging them to take any prescribed medication, I would also just be there for them when they needed someone to talk to. Sometimes I had to be extremely patient. It can be frustrating to talk to depressed people, as you can get sucked into their negativity and feel as helpless as them. When I talked to one member of the support group, it could feel hopeless, because it felt like there was nothing I could do to improve his situation. At these times, I would tell myself that at least I am also suffering with him and that's going to make him feel better."

**Afterword**

I hope that the reflections shared above are an encouragement to you. However, these responses do not constitute expert mental health advice. Rather, they are shared in good faith for the encouragement of the reader. If you have a mental health condition, please pursue professional advice that is tailored to you.

**Stuart**



# 6 Tips to offering support to those facing mental illness

## 1 Learn more

By learning more about the mental illness you will be better positioned to empathise and advocate for the person facing mental illness.

## 2 Raise awareness

Many people suffer mental illness in isolation. By raising awareness, you may help to destigmatise mental illness and give people the opportunity to discuss their struggles more openly.

## 3 Assist practically

Those facing mental illness may need varying levels of practical support, depending on the severity of the mental illness. It is important to listen well to learn each person's practical needs.

## 4 Encourage

Mental illness can make it harder for brothers and sisters in Christ to remember what God says about who they are. Passages like Ephesians 1 can be helpful as you encourage one another.

## 5 Relate

It's important to be intentional to include those who may become easily isolated for various reasons. You may invite someone to your home, find ways for them to serve according to their capacity, or go for regular walks.

## 6 Be refined

Helping those facing mental illness to be spiritually refined will look different from person to person. Understanding what spiritual growth look like in each person may prevent wrongful judgement or impatience.



Extract from “Mental Health and your church” by Steve Midgley & Helen Throne, copyright 25/01/24 by The Good Book Company, used by kind permission.



## Finding rest from anxious thoughts

### My Early Life

I was privileged enough to be born to Christian parents. They both are brilliant parents and brought me up in the faith. My father would read the Bible to me and my brothers every night, right until the end of primary school. I owe a large amount of my Bible knowledge to him and my mother. This knowledge has been really helpful as I have learned to deal with same-sex attractions (SSA), so I am incredibly thankful to my father for that.

I remember my parents leading me in a very simple sinner's prayer when I was about 6. Even though I maybe didn't understand everything that was involved in being a Christian, I believe God honoured my prayer and has been in relationship with me ever since. As a result, my relationship with God did not start with a single defining moment of salvation. My testimony will therefore be more a story of how I grew in my Christian faith.

### About SSA in my Life

As a kid, I was much more interested in creative things, such as art and music, rather than the stereotypical things that boys enjoy, such as sport. However, all my crushes during my primary school years were on girls and not guys. I did have one or two intense friendships with guys, which were probably early signs of SSA. Like many pre-teen boys (I suspect), I had a lingering fear that I might grow up to be gay.

I started experiencing SSA during puberty. I remember the first time I had an attraction to a boy. It was about 2 days before my 14th birthday. It completely freaked me out and, for some reason, I told my parents about my fear of being gay. I don't think they really believed me though. I think they thought it was just a phase I was going through and that I did not really understand what it meant to be gay. We had a chat and they calmed me down. I remember believing that it would go away after a while.

As you might expect, the SSA did not diminish. I cannot remember much about my early high school, but I do remember a lot of anxiety - especially regarding my sexuality. I was petrified that people would find out and so I kept it to myself and tried pretending to be straight. However, not dealing very well with my new experience, led to unhealthy ways of coping. I wish I had reached out for help sooner, but I was so ashamed of my feelings that I preferred to suffer alone and pretend that everything was fine.

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**“I had a lingering fear that I might grow up to be gay”**

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I was convinced that the fact that I experienced same-sex feelings was in itself a sin against God and I needed to somehow stop these attractions. I did not understand the difference between a temptation and a sin. I thought that experiencing an attraction to a guy was in itself a sin, like stealing is a sin. This led to an almost constant state of guilt and shame, since I could control who I was attracted to. (See towards the end of the article for the difference between sin and temptation.)

All this came to a head around the time my grandmother died when I was 16. Since I had already learned to suppress my feelings, my family thought I was OK. In the two years that I had been experiencing SSA, I had learned to cope with my emotions through a form of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). To deal with the shame and

guilt, I would “confess my sins” non-stop, over and over again, until the bad feeling went away. This might seem like a good thing, but because being same-sex attracted is not a sin, the temptations have no need to be confessed and the guilt was unwarranted. Confessing doggedly, in that manner, was not the correct way to deal with those feelings of guilt and shame.

Once my grandmother died, the OCD grew to become an all-encompassing reality as I tried to suppress the SSA as well as the grief associated with her death. Thankfully, at that time, I had been meeting with a pastor who was discipling me. He noticed that something was not right. He suggested to my parents that I go for counselling to sort through the issues that were clearly causing me distress. My parents organised for me to see a local Christian psychologist. We worked through the OCD, and he gave me some useful techniques to deal with the negative emotions, the most noteworthy being that instead of confessing to get rid of the unwarranted shame and guilt, I needed to remind myself of God’s love for me. That, as well as some meds I was put on, really helped. My mood greatly improved and the OCD also decreased.

I am thankful to my parents who continued to love and support me despite not knowing what to do. I am thankful to my counsellor who reminded me of the gospel. I am also thankful to God whose Word brought great comfort to me at that time. The Psalms came alive to me too.

Here are some instances of what I have learned along the way:

### **Temptation is not intentional sin**

Everyone is tempted differently depending on their make-up. Some are tempted to eat too much, some struggle with greed, others with envy. However, just because one is weak in a particular area, does not mean that they are sinning by being tempted. Even Jesus was tempted with his own unique temptations (Matthew 4), yet the Bible makes it clear that He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15). In the same way, just because we find members of the same sex attractive, does not make those attractions wrong. It becomes a sin if you entertain it through something like lust or porn.

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## **“OCD is not something you can combat on your own”**

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### **Feelings can be deceptive**

Until recently, I believed that if the feeling was strong enough, then it must be God who is causing it. For example, if the feeling of guilt is so strong, then it must be God convicting me. That lie did mean that I was at the mercy of my feelings. Following that line of thinking meant that I was forced to obey whatever the feelings told me to do. If I was overcome with an intense sense of guilt, there would always be something that I could do to make it go away (i.e. the compulsion). However, that compulsion never did decrease the feelings for long. The feeling would resurface again a few days or weeks later.

### **Don't be afraid to ask for help!**

OCD is not something you can combat on your own. Find a few trusted friends whom you can chat to; chat to a counsellor or your pastor. I have needed my friends to help me sort out the truthful thoughts from the lies.

### **Fight the OCD using God's Word**

For me, one of the reasons the OCD feelings have so much weight is because I convince myself that if I do not obey the compulsions, God will reject me. Bible verses that speak against that are, for example, Jeremiah 31:36-37:

*“If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the Lord, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.” Thus says the Lord: “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the Lord.”*

God will only abandon me if the heavens above can be measured and the fixed order falls apart. We can be assured that we are safe with God and our very lives are safely hidden with Him in heaven, where no one can steal them away (Col 3:3). We can be sure that He will never abandon us.

Your “core fear” might be something else. Let me urge you to find verses that will encourage you with truth to counteract any lies you may be believing.

### **My current experience with OCD**

Ironically, while I was writing this article, I was experiencing OCD like I experienced at high school. I hadn't been on medication for OCD for many years, but I needed it. That was the only thing that gave me significant rest from the thoughts and feelings. Honestly, I was angry with God for not healing me as I needed. I had expected Him to take the thoughts and feelings away as I prayed to Him and read the Word, but that is not how He chose to help me. He chose to help me through medication. He gave many intelligent men and women talents and insight to create these medications. God does not always heal in the supernatural way that we sometimes expect.

This was also a very humbling experience as I learned that all my methods and means of dealing with my disorder did not work - some of them being religious means. It left me realising how dependent I am on God for everything.

*Richard is a chess-loving software engineer, who enjoys relaxing behind the piano in the evenings. He loves deep, meaningful conversations with his friends at local coffee shops.*

## **Becoming a Regular Giver**

*Could you become a regular giver to TFT? Regular contributions to TFT help us plan and budget well. There are different ways to give regularly via the bank, CAF or Stewardship. If you work we can also claim gift aid on your giving, helping us claim 25% on what you give. If you would like to give regularly why not contact the office and discuss how you can do that?*

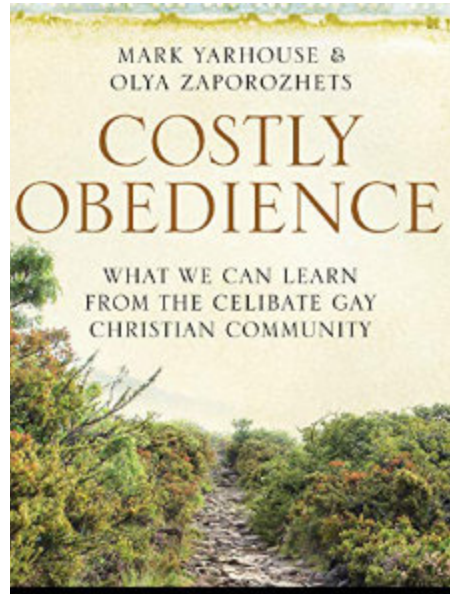
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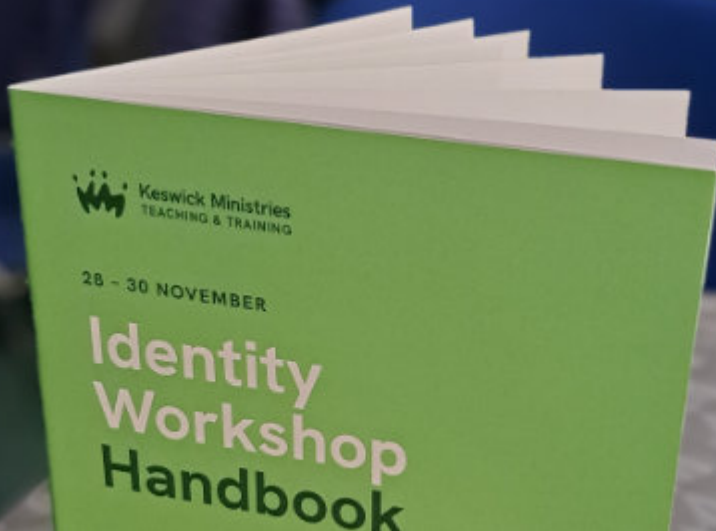
## How emotionally tough is celibacy?

In our research, we considered whether it is healthy to live a celibate life. We realize that people's answers to this question are usually based on assumptions about sexuality and the role of sexual expression and intimacy in the life of an individual. We tried instead to provide an empirical answer to what we see as an empirical question. We were pleasantly surprised to report that celibate gay Christians are doing as well as they are on various measures of depression, anxiety, stress, and well-being. This was generally true even in cases in which those in mixed-orientation marriages appeared to pull the average scores "up" for the group.

Of course, the fact that many celibate gay Christians are doing better than we might have expected does not negate the challenges of those who are struggling. Diversity can be found among the experiences of celibate gay Christians, just as it can be found in the experiences of the general population. At the same time, it is clear from our research that celibate gay Christians are not all necessarily bound to emotionally unhealthy lives by virtue of their celibacy. These findings can inform our discussion of how best to respond to celibate gay Christians both at an individual level (person to person) and at a corporate level (in the church).<sup>1</sup>



"Taken from the book "Costly Obedience: What we can learn from the celibate gay Christian community" (pages 110-111) by Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets, Copyright ©. 2024 by Mark Yarhouse. Used by permission of HarperCollins Christian Publishing. [www.harpercollinschristian.com](http://www.harpercollinschristian.com)



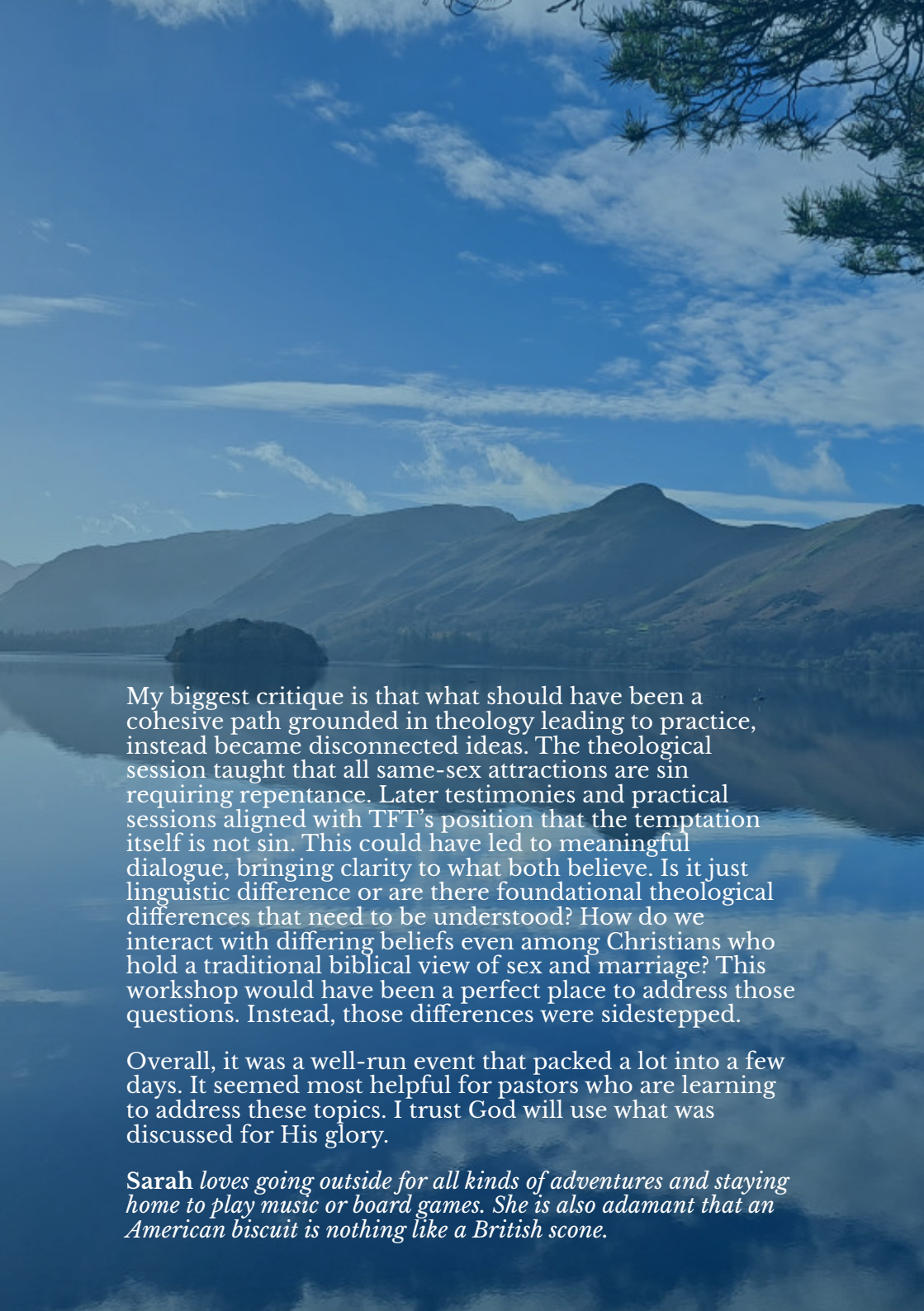
## Review: Keswick Identity Workshop

**I** dentity is not a melting pot of everything that describes us nor is it a competition of what is most true of us. Rather, it is ordered and structured. The gospel and our relationship with Christ reframe everything else that is true about us. This was the starting point at the Identity workshop at Keswick Ministries in November 2023. This three-day event was purposed to help Christian leaders engage well on topics of identity, sexuality and gender with clarity, truth, wisdom and compassion. Teaching sessions included a historical context, theology, psychological and scientific perspectives, legal policies, pastoral considerations and church practice. Small group discussions and a choice of breakout sessions allowed further dialogue and

practical considerations.

I found the pastoral and church practice sessions most helpful with case studies and practical application. I had a TFT speaking engagement the following day, at which I found that the examples from the workshop sessions on apologetics and church practice were already shaping the way I answered questions.

I also appreciated hearing from a person who had detransitioned after coming to Christ, and how he later returned to living as the gender God had given him. It was beneficial to think more about transgender people and their struggles, rather than just focusing on same-sex attractions.



My biggest critique is that what should have been a cohesive path grounded in theology leading to practice, instead became disconnected ideas. The theological session taught that all same-sex attractions are sin requiring repentance. Later testimonies and practical sessions aligned with TFT's position that the temptation itself is not sin. This could have led to meaningful dialogue, bringing clarity to what both believe. Is it just linguistic difference or are there foundational theological differences that need to be understood? How do we interact with differing beliefs even among Christians who hold a traditional biblical view of sex and marriage? This workshop would have been a perfect place to address those questions. Instead, those differences were sidestepped.

Overall, it was a well-run event that packed a lot into a few days. It seemed most helpful for pastors who are learning to address these topics. I trust God will use what was discussed for His glory.

*Sarah loves going outside for all kinds of adventures and staying home to play music or board games. She is also adamant that an American biscuit is nothing like a British scone.*