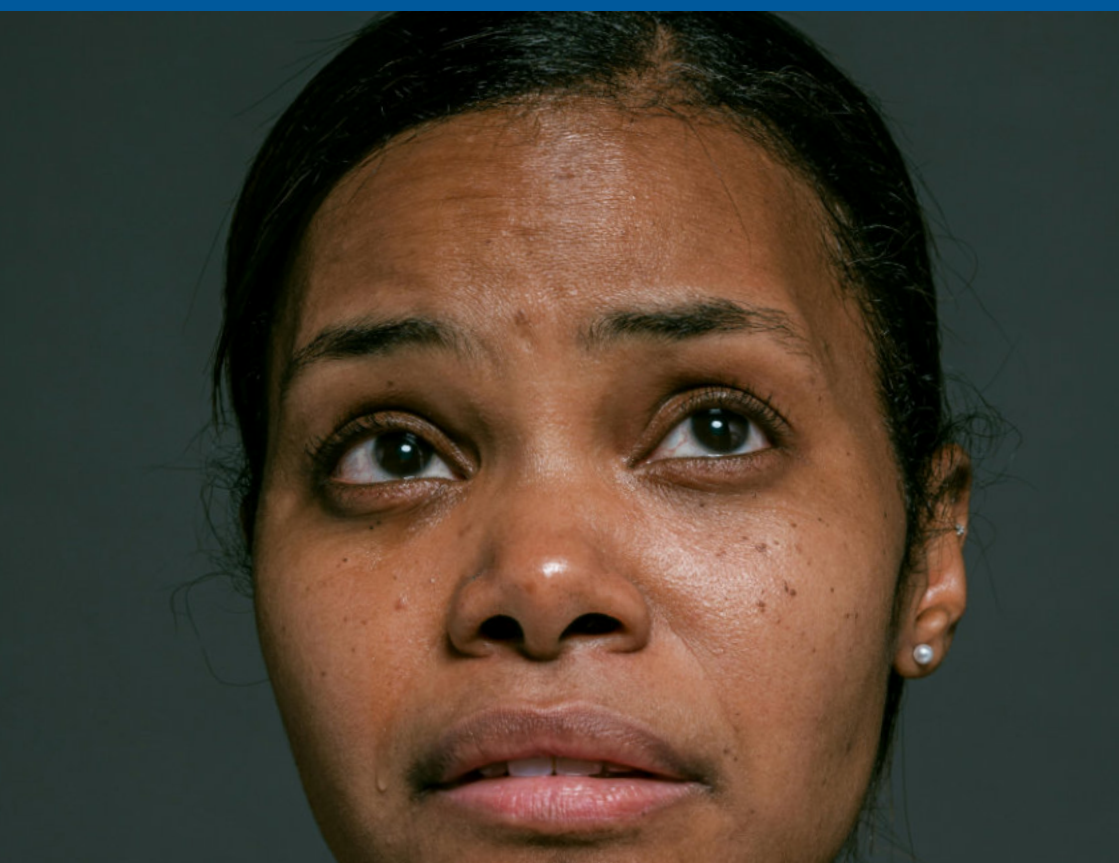


Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

Winter 2024



Not alone

In this edition of Ascend, we are looking at the experience of loneliness. This can be a particular struggle for Christians who are single, although married people are not exempt. There tends to be fewer connection opportunities in churches for single people when they move beyond their 20s and 30s. And this is also a time when many of their friends move on to marriage and having children, and so become less available.

The articles and testimonies in this magazine look at the importance of staying in community, whilst being careful not to over-invest in any one friendship. Jamie and Matt explore how loneliness can be a theological/ intellectual experience as well as an emotional one: Matt explains how he keeps going when he is surrounded by people with a liberal or revisionist view of the Bible. In TFT, we are determined to be a meaningful community for believers, where each person's experience can be made known and understood without shame. We long for the church today to be a place where increasingly single people can belong and experience strong connection with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

By Stuart, TFT Director



Jesus meets my deepest needs

Page 16

Richard shares what he's learned about responding in a healthy way to feelings of loneliness.



Review: The Upside-Down Kingdom Bible

Page 20

Ric explains how this Bible equips us to be well-informed about the areas of biblical ethics most at variance with Western culture today.



Stay in community

Page 22

Mark tells his story of choosing to return to community even after painful experiences in the past.

Being a lone voice

Matthew is a Pioneer Minister for the United Reformed Church (URC), based in Lincoln. He holds to an orthodox view of marriage and relationships that is at odds with his denomination, the URC, which since 2016 has allowed individual churches to register their buildings for same-sex marriage services.

Being a minority voice on same-sex marriage can be very painful. A number of my colleagues have chosen to adopt a position which, in my view, goes against God's word. It comes with a bit of sadness that a denomination which I love, which I've grown up in, which does so much good in the world, would adopt a position which is at odds with God's ordering of our lives and God's design for his people.

It's frustrating because for me it seems so clear that the connection between promoting same-sex relationships goes hand in hand with the decline of the church. As the URC steps away from God's will, as well as God's plan and God's desire for humanity, we have become part of a church that has declined. The irony of that is that so many times I've heard, *"How are we going to thrive as a church in the 21st century if we do not adopt this position, if we show to the world that we are out of touch with them?"*

And yet all that has been done has seemed to increase the problems and hasten the decline within the URC.

That being said, I haven't felt entirely disrespected by holding my ground. Most of the time, there is a level of mutual respect and generosity between the people who hold different views on this thing. Within the URC, there's a certain amount of: *"We do respect you, we even love you and we welcome you to be part of the church. We disagree with you, but we recognise your ministry, we recognise your calling and we are going to trust you and entrust pastoral responsibility to you in the name of the United Reformed Church."*

Sometimes I get the impression from others that people who hold my view are the ones holding the denomination back from who it really wants to be. I don't think anyone would ever actually articulate that, and they may even deny that, but a few things have happened at Mission Council level where it has been said, *"Hold on, you're purporting to have a view which actually not all of us subscribe to and which isn't the denomination's publicised, promoted view."*

But I want the URC to thrive and to flourish not just for the sake of the URC as an entity, but for the sake of the people who belong to it.

There's a sense that I feel attached to these people. If it ever comes to me having to leave because I can't do those things while I'm doing the ministry that God's called me to, it will be painful for me to step away from a denomination in which I have found genuine friendships

and met colleagues whom I respect.

I have had to turn down ministry positions because the stance I hold is in conflict with the stance that a particular church holds. That's perfectly reasonable, but you do wonder if as a result a church which is going to miss somebody faithfully preaching the gospel to them. With so many churches and so few ministers, every church which turns down a faithful Bible teaching minister is another church missing out on regular preaching from an ordained minister.

“These are carefully thought out theological positions and not just reactionary ones.”

It's not just about changing people's theological stance. It's about showing that we really do care, that these are carefully thought-out theological positions and not just reactionary ones. I might not be able to change people's theological stance but I might be able to change their opinion of those who have a different one – and to start to ask questions about the positions that a 21st century URC minister can hold.

The ministers who tend to hold the biblical line on sex and marriage tend to be the evangelicals and are at the younger end of the spectrum. What I think that's doing is showing people that this isn't just a cultural thing. This is not just walking with the culture. As generations pass, we're not becoming less progressive – actually, there's something to be said about the Spirit of God work in his church which involves holding the biblical line and believing a different view.

That in itself sets an example that we don't just have to keep following a particular path. Rather, it is possible to think that the generations below us might have a different stance and it's not inevitable that that things go in in one direction.

Apart from that, I want to be able to share the gospel of Jesus as well. The gospel is more than just we don't do same-sex sex or same-sex relationships. The gospel leads to the whole flourishing of God's people as they turn to Christ in repentance and faith, as they receive new life in his hands. The gospel is their receiving the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, to live and bear fruit in his name, to turn away from sin and to await the hope of the life ever after.

I believe our conviction - which encounters and covers the whole of life – is so refreshing to bring. I think it gives great witness to the people within the denomination to

see that holding this biblical orthodoxy is coherent with the gospel.

If I were to dream big, I'd want to see widespread repentance of those who have turned away from God and His Word, and of those who have given up on evangelism. I'd like to see a grace of repentance, of saying, "Lord, we are sorry. We've got this wrong. We've followed down a path which you never called us to." And for God to open eyes, open hearts, to truly hear what he has to say, and to embrace his word and to love him, and to want to follow in his ways, to courageously stand for the gospel in a world which doesn't want to hear it, and to courageously stand against the grain of culture.

I think that somehow our position on same-sex relationships and marriage is often misconstrued as being graceless. Actually, our position, like everything, should be awash with God's grace as people who are guilty in numerous ways every day of failing to meet God's standards and yet are receiving that grace, and gratefully just saying to the Lord Jesus Christ, "I'm yours, I'm yours, I don't know why, but I'm yours, and I want to live for you."

The article above is based on a longer conversation between Matt and his friend Jamie. Listen to the winter 2024 Ascend Higher recording for the complete discussion.



Being a lone voice podcast

In this extended conversation, Matt and Jamie discuss about remaining faithful when a church denomination has left biblical teaching and how that can make one feel isolated.

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



For man to be alone

It is not surprising for man to be alone

“Suffering is not a question that calls for an answer. It is not a problem that calls for a solution. It is a mystery that calls for a presence.”

I first came across this anonymous quote in a Christian book on medical ethics. The author encourages an incarnational approach that seeks to draw alongside, to suffer with, the other in addressing real world questions of human suffering. One thing that compounds any pain is the feeling that one is alone, abandoned, that there is no one else who understands. This sense of isolation and being unseen, cut off, is the very essence of what it means to feel lonely. However, one of things that has helped me personally to get up off the floor of my deepest moments of loneliness is the reminder that I am not the only person who has felt alone.

In the opening narrative of Genesis, God consistently affirms the

goodness of His creation. The celestial bodies, plants, animals, everything is good. The first thing that is not good is that “*man is alone*” Gen 2:18. Theologians have spilled much ink dissecting the exact meaning of these words which precede the creation of Eve and the Fall. Because of the rest of the Bible and particularly the New Testament, I do not believe that this verse is intended to stipulate marriage for every person. However, at the very least, I think this text tells us that God has created us to be connected to one another in addition to our relationship with Him. This makes sense, since the Bible also tells that we are made in God’s image, and that His nature is intrinsically relational. He is three in one. Thus, it makes sense that being disconnected from one another leads to such pain, especially in light of the Fall and the effects of sin on all aspects of our lives.

Every single person who has ever lived is vulnerable to loneliness. Once I understood this, I realised that my experience of same-sex attraction and singleness was not the

core reason I have at times felt lonely. I used to fixate on how I wasn't in a romantic relationship and felt like I could not enter one. It seemed like I was on the outside looking in. But lots of people feel lonely, unable to fully 'join in with everyone else' for all sorts of reasons that have nothing to do with sexuality or marital status (e.g. educational or class background, physical or mental health problems, nationality etc.) Furthermore, many people also feel lonely who are married, have successful careers, have large families, have prominent positions in church or seem so at ease speaking to new people.

“We are made in God’s image. His nature (as three-in-one) is intrinsically relational”

My intention here is not be fatalistic in suggesting that loneliness can never be avoided! Rather I want to encourage us that, although loneliness is universal, it is not usually inevitable in our specific situations. I believe it is often possible to change our experience of loneliness even if our circumstances do not change.

Not inevitable for man to be alone
Jesus replied: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* Matthew 22:37-40

God’s greatest instruction for each of us is not primarily about work, not about sin, not about thanksgiving, not about worship, not about holiness. It is how we conduct our relationships, firstly with Him and then with others. I regularly try to remind myself of this truth and examine my prayer life to see if my primary preoccupations are the same as God’s! This commandment has obvious relevance to loneliness, since being connected in intimate relationships is the opposite of loneliness.

I used to think the ‘Greatest Commandment’ was odd, as I didn’t understand how love could be ordered. Surely love was feeling we had to find or ‘fall into’, something that happens to us? It certainly couldn’t be forced, otherwise it would be fake and not genuine. And surely the truest love was that of marriage and, if I was single, I was thereafter excluded from giving and receiving ‘real’ love?

The English word love has a broad meaning that stretches from how we feel about our spouses or children to our favourite colour and the weather. However, the Greek language is more specific and the root word agape used in the verse above has a narrower meaning. Two essential aspects of agape are that it is wilful and it is other-centred. The kind of love that Jesus calls us to compels us to act to serve the good of the other, even at a cost to ourselves.

This kind of love is very different to waiting for affectionate feelings to arise. For me, this presents both a

comfort and a challenge. The comfort is that everyone, regardless of the various life circumstances we previously mentioned, is included. The only qualifications required for a life full of love is God, other people and a willing heart. Loneliness is not inevitable!

The challenge, of course, is having a heart that is willing and able to love selflessly. But even in the honest appraisal of our selfish hearts, there is a consolation. God has promised the Holy Spirit to empower us to walk in His commandments. God calls us to overflow with the agape that He first abundantly pours into our hearts. In fact, I think that Jesus deliberately sets the bar so high with His commandments (saying that anger is like murder, lustful glances like adultery etc) so that, if we take Him seriously, there is no way we can have any illusions about being

“He had intense intimacy with Christ when everything else had fallen away”

able to fulfil them in our own strength.

Older English translations which say “*Thou shall love the Lord... thou shall love your neighbour...*” are in some ways closer to the future indicative verb *agapeseis* used in the Greek. Besides an imperative command, Jesus’ words are a promise of what will happen (super)naturally when we become born again and walk in the Spirit.

For me practically, this

understanding has helped to change my mindset when I have felt lonely. Instead of wallowing in self-pity, which is my natural instinct, I have asked the Father to help me look and love outwards. Rather than focussing on my lack of friends, I have been asking God to help me become a good friend to those around me, to open my eyes to new neighbours and to love those I already know more deeply.

What about the neighbours who do not seem lovable? Christ does not omit the commandment in these circumstances. And besides, C S Lewis (in his book “*Mere Christianity*”) lets us into to another blessing hidden in what on the surface seems like a burden:

“Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbour; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

Not hopeless for man to be alone

I have been trying to show how a lot of my previous experiences of loneliness was exacerbated by incorrect views of myself, God and others. However, it cannot be denied that sometimes circumstances outside of our control (e.g. illness, work situations, being geographically isolated, bereavement etc) drive us into intense and extended seasons of loneliness. The Bible is not silent on this subject. The Psalms in particular do not shy away from expressing the moments when it feels like we are alienated not only from other people, but from God

also.

“How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?”

Psalm 13:1-2a

Sometimes loneliness and other suffering can come as result of our own sin and rebellion. But the Bible also depicts deep loneliness experienced by people who are trying to follow the Lord and are exactly where He wants them to be (e.g. Elijah both before and after Mount Carmel in 1 Kings 18-19). Why God allows these moments, or any suffering for that matter, remains a mystery this side of eternity. However, we can be assured that, if we are in Christ, although it may feel like God has hidden His face, He will never actually abandon or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5)

In my experience, and also according to the experience of others, it is often in the moments of loneliness and suffering that we discover the Lord, His sufficiency, the reality of His love, His grace and

presence in new ways. One friend told me about a season of intense loneliness and suffering when he lived alone for several months in a caravan after his wife left with their children. He said that he sometimes looks back at that time with nostalgia, because of the intensity of the intimacy with Christ that he experienced when everything else had fallen away.

This is a shocking paradox, but so is much about the God we serve. In His hands, suffering can turn into glory, shame into honour, death into life. Even loneliness, which seems absolutely hopeless, is not beyond His capacity to redeem.

“His cross is the sweetest burden that ever I bare; it is such a burden as wings are to a bird, or sails are to a ship, to carry me forward to my harbour.” Samuel Rutherford

Daniel cannot understand why he is often asked whether he is South African because of his accent, since he has lived his whole life in the U.K! However, he does enjoy learning languages and meeting Christians from other cultures, so that is why some people think he doesn't seem completely English.

Struggling for present ideas?

Do you have a big birthday coming up? Or a fair at your church? Lynn recently had a big birthday and asked people if they would give her money for a charity of her choice. She gave the money to TFT. She also does the same each year at her church fair. Is this something you could consider doing? If you would like to donate please visit the link below or call 0151 653 0773

truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate



Book Review

“Three or more: Reflections on Polyamory and Consensual Non-monogamy” By Andrew Bunt
£4.95 paperback, 28 pages, 2024 Grove Books

When I picked up this short booklet, my interest was piqued. However, I was also somewhat sceptical of how the subject of polyamory or consensual non-monogamy (where “*all parties agree that the relationship is not exclusive*”) might impact me, my church and the ministry of TFT. By the time I’d finished reading the booklet, it had certainly made me sit up and take note.

In chapter one, Andrew defines his terms and sets out examples of polyamory from popular culture, demonstrating convincingly that there is a growing interest and promotion of sexual/romantic relationships beyond of the traditional format of just two people. Indeed, following our society’s rejection of the biblical concept of marriage between one man and one woman, poly relationships are the natural logical progression.

In chapter two, Andrew explains some key trends in modern Western culture that have led to the growing interest in and practice of polyamory: the reorientation of sexual activity to be mainly about personal satisfaction; the elevation of individual desire; the decline of friendship; and the shifting of modern ethics. This was a reminder to me that we need to rediscover the value of friendships. Indeed, the rise

of polyamory seems to be one more trend that is diminishing the value of friendships: polyamory reinforces our cultures view that intimate relationships must necessarily be sexual or romantic, which is a tragic recipe for insecurity and suspicion for those in platonic relationships.

“After our society’s rejection of the biblical concept of marriage, polyamorous relationships are the natural logical progression”

Chapter three covers the biblical position on non-monogamous relationships. Andrew takes us to familiar passages that define biblical marriage as the one-flesh union of a man and a woman. He also recognises that the Bible does feature polygamous practice amongst God’s people, but points out that the Bible merely describes what is happening rather than promoting it. He also sets out the biblical vision for friendship, showing that true friendship “*might offer a way for the desires and needs that sometimes attract people to polyamory to be met within the bounds of God’s good plan*”.

Chapter four engages directly with the arguments for polyamory, such

as: individual freedom; having a polyamorous orientation; and the idea that monogamy itself is not what we see in the natural world. However, this chapter surprisingly also includes arguments for polyamory that some Christians put forward. All of these ideas are described and then refuted concisely. Readers may want to consult the numerous references for studying them in further detail, especially those preparing to discuss these arguments with others.

In the final chapter, Andrew sets out a Christian response to polyamory. He calls us to adopt a compassionate posture as we set out the biblical vision for friendship and marriage. He also highlights that polygamy is a matter that African churches have been grappling with for years. Perhaps we can learn from their experience pastorally – although we need to be careful to recognise their different cultural setting.

Grove Books, who publish this booklet, have the following strapline: “*Not the last word... but often the first*”. I think that this sums up this book well. Andrew has described very clearly and helpfully how we can think and respond well to the growing practice of polyamory. He has also highlighted why this issue is closer to us than we may think it is. The final chapter touches on the pastoral implications of people in polyamorous relationships coming to our churches. For church leaders reading this booklet, I think the final few pages on pastoral questions will just whet their appetites for further case studies to help them develop their own

church’s pastoral response. A longer book on this subject would certainly benefit from some worked examples to help churches prepare well to welcome and disciple people who bring their increasingly complicated relationships into our church communities.

Amidst all the ideas and questions raised in this book, I was once more encouraged that God’s blueprint for monogamous marriage and satisfying singleness continues to be the truth that our mixed-up world needs to hear.

Stuart is the Director of TFT and the editor of Ascend magazine. He enjoys sharing his home with two guinea pigs, and sometimes envies their simple life.

grove ethics

Three or More

Reflections on Polyamory and
Consensual Non-monogamy





Transforming Loneliness

In the spring of 2020, as a middle-aged single man living alone in London, I was invited by a young family in my church to “...bubble” with them for the foreseeable future, while Covid restrictions began to be implemented. Throughout the various lockdowns, I spent all day every Sunday with them and one evening midweek too. I’d been feeling emotionally low for the previous year, so I don’t think I’m being overly dramatic if I say that it probably saved my life. Four and a half years later, I still continue to spend lots of time with them. I became a member of their family, in a meaningful way, and subsequently have joined them on holidays, have become godparent to the children, and still spend many Sundays with them.

A little over a year ago, they came back from a holiday in Australia with a clear sense that God was calling them to help plant a church in Sydney. Visa restrictions have meant that they have to go soon and so they leave at the end of this year.

I’ve had some time to come to terms with this news, and to consider the losses and the very significant change it will be to our relationship. I don’t take for granted the love and blessing of this family. They have pushed beyond our western cultural norms of a closed nuclear family, and whilst I’d love to be joined to another family at my church in a similar way I’m not expecting it. In time I hope that others like myself would experience the blessing and honour of inclusion into families, as the Church in the West recovers a richer, truer sense of what it means to represent family. You see, church is not like family, church is family! And God sets the lonely in families (Psalm 68:6). None of us deserved to have relationship with God. And yet, we’re not welcomed into his home as mere servants, but into his family as sons and daughters! Acceptance and inclusion into an earthly family reflects the acceptance and inclusion we have by faith in the heavenly family.

The value of loneliness

I used to think that what I needed was to be healed of homosexual temptations, find a wife, form a family and settle down to a “normal” life. Over time, I came to see that many of my married friends are actually jealous of my singleness, and some of my married friends are lonely in their marriage. I therefore reject the idea that marriage is the answer to a happy life and how to stave off loneliness. I also know many single people who are envious of their married friends. For some of them, their belief is that singleness and loneliness are synonymous. I disagree.

“Loneliness is an invitation to consider how we feel about ourselves, about our relationships with others, and of course our relationship with God”

I believe loneliness is an invitation. An invitation to face pain and discover meaning and purpose even there. I believe it is an invitation to consider how we feel about ourselves, about our relationships with others, and of course our relationship with God.

Loneliness brings three invitations

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote in the 1600s,

“All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

Ouch! But that rings so true for me. I am often so ill-at-ease with myself

that I can't sit quietly in a room alone. The emotional pain of not living up to my standards (never mind God's) means I have to distract myself from the hurt and ache with social media or by binge-watching box-sets or doing something else, almost anything else. So, the first invitation is to find peace with ourselves, for “I am not lonely if I enjoy my own company.”

The second invitation is to seek out connection and relationship with others. Here I have another choice. I can either choose self-pity and passivity, or I can choose action, which involves reaching out for friendship and acceptance. Am I lonely because I have neglected to build deep, healthy, nourishing relationships and now I am reaping the consequences? I can feel sorry for myself or I can do something about it. If I reach out, an acquaintance may be busy, or I may be rejected. But if I don't take action, I can't expect to form new friendships. If I opt for sending a message, or making a call and reaching out, there is even greater joy to be found in meeting the needs of others rather than purely seeking to meet my own need for friendship.

I believe this second invitation, to connect with others in the giving and receiving of friendship, builds upon the first invitation to love and enjoy self. Jesus' command is to love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:31). If we love ourselves poorly, then we are likely to love others with the same poverty.

In my twenties, I had friends but I still felt lonely, in part because I

failed to love and accept myself. To love ourselves is not to become inward-looking, but rather it is to adopt the Father's posture towards us, which is that he loves us whilst seeing all of our flaws (1 John 3:1). I fundamentally believe that we are only able to feel loved and accepted by others to the degree that we love and accept ourselves. It didn't seem to matter how much my friends sought to bless and affirm me: I lacked the capacity to receive and retain that love when I failed to adequately love, value and respect myself.

“I seldom experience the benefits of solitude, because I distract myself from the discomfort of loneliness”

Loneliness brings a third invitation, to consider our relationship with God. Jesus is always with me. Heavenly Father is always available: God is living inside me by his Holy Spirit. So why do I feel lonely? Is it because he feels distant, because my heart is turned towards other things, or because I am in rebellion? I've come to believe that God can use our loneliness to let us know we need not only connection and relationship with others, but also that we need deep intimacy with Him.

Perhaps sometimes loneliness is the invitation to find connection and

completion in Christ. What if loneliness was just a reminder that only God can satisfy our deepest longing for connection and acceptance? Am I ready to accept this painful invitation? I am convinced that solitude is very different from loneliness and that there is a deep richness, creativity, nourishment and healing, to be found in solitude. Alas, I seldom seem to experience the benefits of solitude, because I've gotten into the habit of distracting myself from the discomfort of loneliness (which often comes first). The invitation, I believe, is to enjoy time alone in the presence of our maker and saviour, to enjoy the peace of self-acceptance and much more importantly his acceptance.

Embrace moments of loneliness

My “bubble” family move to the other side of the world in the next few months. I hope in the moments of loneliness which may come, that I embrace its invitations and choose to accept myself as I am, because God does. I hope that I choose to reach out and meet the needs of others, and in doing so build deep, lasting friendships. And I hope that I choose to reject the distractions, and instead delight myself with my saviour and redeemer, and so experience the richness and creativity of solitude.

Stuart likes living in the centre of London, but loves getting into the countryside to capture the beauty of the natural world with a camera.

Trusting God in the dark & shameful places

The following poem is Marianne's response to the words of Psalm 23. She writes: "This is me, trying to share my heart honestly to God, pouring my heart out towards Him."

God is my Shepherd,
I want so much more.
He leads me to difficult places,
where there is constant tension
between pain and longing for the impossible

I try to stick to Your way,
but it's hard to trust You in the dark and shameful places.
My heart feels empty.
I am tired of me failing, and this discourages me.

Sometimes I can feel You very close,
but the next moment I feel the deep loneliness again.

I feel incapable of trusting You.
I missed out on so much of what I had hoped for,
and I feel bare and bereaved

I know You are good,
but I am afraid this is going to be it.
I think my life will always be hard and difficult,
filled with longing for the impossible.

But I know, I know,
so I will try to trust You.

Marianne loves to run in the mountains while chatting along with her best friend Jesus.



Only Jesus meets my deepest needs

What is emotional dependency?

Emotional dependency occurs when your emotional well-being becomes overly dependent on another person. Your emotions fluctuate from extreme highs to extreme lows depending on how they treat you or how you perceive them treating you. Emotional dependency expects more from a person than that person can give. It is not a unique experience for same-sex attracted individuals. Anyone can become emotionally dependent on another person.

An emotionally dependent person may experience some or all of these characteristics:

- A. They become easily jealous of the other person spending time with others.
- B. They crave “alone time” with the other person and become frustrated when this doesn’t happen.
- C. When the other person withdraws, they feel irrationally anxious or depressed.
- D. Other friendships fall by the wayside.
- E. They either romantically or sexually fantasize about the other person.
- F. They obsess about the other person’s style, personality, and problems.
- G. They construct all their plans to include the other person.
- H. They become blind to the other person’s faults.
- I. They are defensive against questions regarding the relationship.
- J. They show inappropriate physical contact for a friendship.
- K. They feel as though they can “speak for” the other member.

I can easily feel alone and ashamed in my struggle with same-sex attraction. I believe that loneliness and shame can make me more susceptible to this unhealthy state. It is tempting to place too much

pressure on one friendship to fulfil the need to be known and accepted as I am.

My story of emotional dependency

My pastor and I became friends in 2022. We grew close remarkably quickly as we shared similar interests in music and sports. He enjoys deep conversations and is a big hugger. Both of which I love to participate in as well. However, around April 2023, I began to love those hugs just a little too much. Instead of keeping my physical distance, I “emotionally leaned” into the hugs. I think another reason I latched onto him so tightly was that I was in denial that I experienced same-sex attraction, so I let my guard down. I also feel an intense sense of loneliness at times, so it was nice to have my need for connection fulfilled in him.

“After a long term of loneliness, having someone who ‘gets me’ can cause me to fall prey to emotional dependency”

I believed that if I could be close to this friend, it would lessen my same-sex attraction to other guys and the loneliness I felt because my needs for male affirmation and closeness would be met in him. That need however cannot be satisfied by any man. Only God can truly satisfy that need of mine.

I began to get jealous of him spending time with other friends. This jealousy scared me, and I tried anxiously to fix the situation. I began by completely cutting off all

one-on-one time with him. I tried to show him no emotional reciprocation to his general friendliness. I even would feel guilty whenever it was just me and him alone.

This was not an effective nor a healthy reaction and it seriously put a strain on our friendship. It led to a lot of confusion from his side as well. He confided in me later that he thought that he had said or done something wrong.

It was during that time that I came across a TFT podcast episode on emotional dependency. My relationship with my pastor checked all the boxes. At least I now had a name for it.

I messaged him and said that the reason I was avoiding him was because of emotional dependency. The term was new to him, so I tried to explain it, but it was still a strange concept for him. I was secretly hoping that I would not need to explain the whole picture of my same-sex attraction to him. Pegging it as emotional dependency was somehow less shameful for me. Having a name for it did not improve the situation though.

I believe that the healing journey started when I met with him face-to-face and explained the whole story. I was honest about my emotions and my experience with same-sex attraction. I don't believe that it is always necessary or wise to divulge our attractions to the people we are attracted to, but in this case, the lack of honesty was shipwrecking our friendship.

It still took a few months after that for my feelings of dependency to abate. By God's grace, it has lessened to a degree that it is not a problem anymore. I can only give glory to God for that.

What helped the emotional dependency to abate?

I learned that Jesus must be my source of satisfaction for my deepest needs. We all have deep needs. One of mine is to be known and loved. By placing this core need on someone else, you place great pressure on their shoulders that they cannot bear. Only Jesus can truly fill that gap. This does not mean that you don't find and enjoy other people's love. It just means that you don't expect them to satisfy your deepest need. In my case, it took time for Jesus to change my heart to love Him more than my friend and, at times, it felt like it took forever for change to happen. What I have learned is that God sometimes wants us to sit in the mess we have made to teach us something. As Elizabeth Elliot once said:

He makes us wait. He keeps us on purpose in the dark. He makes us walk when we want to run, sit still when we want to walk, for He has things to do in our souls that we are not interested in.

A very practical step for me was to diversify my friends. In other words, make other friends, even though you may feel as though you will figuratively die without this one friendship. When you only have one friend, you place all your friendship needs on that person's shoulders. If you have a few deep friendships, that helps to spread the load.

How is our friendship now?

By God's grace, our friendship is once again healthy. I know that that is not everyone's experience, so I thank God that it has happened this way for me. I still need to be careful of using him and others to satisfy my deepest need for intimacy.

“It is tempting to place too much pressure on one friendship to fulfil the need to be known and accepted as I am”

How can we handle loneliness before it morphs into emotional dependency?

Loneliness seems to be a trigger for me when it comes to becoming emotionally dependent. After a long term of loneliness, having someone who “gets me” can cause me to fall prey to emotional dependency. Here are some ways in which to handle loneliness before it gets out of hand. A licensed therapist gave me some ideas. None of these ideas are “silver bullets”, but they can help give you some ideas.

1) Bring Loneliness to Jesus

Jesus knows what it is like to experience the most extreme form of loneliness – separation from God, so he can understand our loneliness in ways we don't. You can take your loneliness to him knowing that he cares for you and will never leave you nor forsake you.

2) Connect with Others

A great way to tackle loneliness is to join groups or clubs. These can be anything from exercise groups to online groups. This is a great way to

get to know new people who share a common interest or share a similar struggle.

It is also important to be consistent with connecting with your current friends, even if it is for a quick chat. This can help to deepen friendships and ensure that you don't place too much pressure on a single friendship.

3) Build a Routine

Build a daily routine that includes activities that you enjoy. This structure can help create purpose. It can also ensure that you spend time on activities you enjoy. It may be worth noting that it is important to stay active since exercise has been shown to improve mental health.

4) Practise Mindfulness

Mindfulness or meditation helps you to become comfortable with your thoughts and feelings and happy with your own company.

Activities such as journalling can be useful in this regard.

Conclusion

Besides the lessons that God has taught me as described above, the emotional pain caused me to look for support. I contacted TFT and started attending a Barnabas Group. This support group was instrumental in helping me accept my same-sex attraction and move forward more healthily. It has provided meaningful connections with others sharing the same struggle which has been helpful in diminishing the loneliness I sometimes feel and, in so doing, it has helped hamper emotional dependency.

Richard is a coffee snob who enjoys spending time with friends (preferably at coffee shops). A good workout at the gym keeps him energised. He loves his home in South Africa and enjoys showing people around his beautiful country.





Book Review

“The Upside-Down Kingdom Bible” By Preston Sprinkle, £28 hardback, 1696 pages, 2024 Zondervan

It's easy to feel churlish about study Bibles. There's one for every lifestyle and perhaps every season of life, and the differences between them are seldom obvious. For me personally, the idea of purchasing a whole new Bible just to get the 'study bits' offered in its margins is a little ludicrous. But I've made an exception for the NIV Upside-Down Kingdom Bible, because it has several features that are of great interest to me as a same-sex attracted person with an admittedly counter-cultural worldview. I believe these same features will be of interest to fellow TFT members:

- The study Bible was edited by none other than Preston Sprinkle, president of the US-based Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender. Sprinkle and his organisation are well-known on both sides of the Atlantic, due in no small part to his bestselling books on sexuality and the many materials he has published to equip churches and individuals to minister to those with same-sex attraction.
- Contributors to the NIV Upside-Down Kingdom Bible include several names TFT members are likely to find familiar, such as Gregory Coles and Rachel Gilson. Gregory Coles' *Single Gay Christian* (2017) and *No Longer Strangers* (2021) have become

modern theological benchmarks, as has Rachel Gilson's *Born Again This Way* (2020). Another contributor who may be less familiar but whose work I personally draw great inspiration from is A.J. Swoboda, who published *The Gift of Thorns* earlier in 2024.

- The themes and topics that highlight scripture throughout this Bible are not strictly sexuality-related, but cover a range of 29 themes that are controversial in today's society and even within the Church. A few of the themes are fundamental, such as: baptism, family and kinship, grace, holiness, Sabbath, slavery, and women. But most would be considered timely, and perhaps precariously so, such as: abortion and reproduction, creation care, divorce, mental health, migration, politics, race and ethnicity, science, social justice, and sexuality and gender.

The 29 themes explored in this study Bible appear as sidebars on nearly every one of its 1696 pages. Most themes additionally receive one or more full-page or multi-page articles, interspersed throughout. The sidebars and articles are placed strategically. When I started reading this Bible, I decided beforehand that I would not simply flip through it and read all the sidebars, though I

was strongly tempted to do so! Rather, I committed myself to starting in the Book of Matthew and taking the supporting items in context, pausing to read them as I encountered them. This has taken discipline, but I find that the additions are succinct and readable enough so as to enrich my reading of the biblical text without distracting from it.

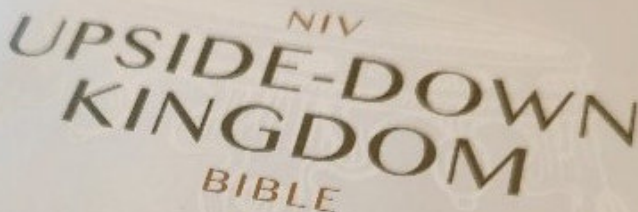
Of course, I made an exception for the handful of sections related to same-sex sexuality, such as the one in the Book of Romans, which includes a full article on the facing page of the first chapter. In response to Paul's firm message against same-sex eroticism (Romans 1:26-32), the article coherently sums up the biblical case for sexuality as a gift reserved for married men and women, and includes a key nuance that same-sex attracted persons will find reassuring:

Paul does not condemn same-sex attraction but same-sex sexual behaviour. (...) It's the act, not the attraction, that's in focus here ('Sexuality and gender', p. 1445).

Other segments on same-sex sexuality and sexuality in general receive a carefully worded defence in light of today's cultural currents. They reinforce biblical truth while extending a proper measure of

compassion. The language is friendly and readable throughout. I find the NIV Upside-Down Kingdom Bible fascinating because it does not reach out to any particular group of people the way other study Bibles typically do, such as women, men, children, teenagers, LGB+ folks, etc. Rather, it aims to remind any reader of the many ways that the Bible speaks to the difficult social questions confronting the world today. Preston Sprinkle says he hopes readers will 'see how relevant the Bible is for understanding the public nature of our faith' (p. vi). He tells us that the title 'Upside-Down' intentionally evokes the cultural subversion Jesus talks about in Matthew 20:26 (*"whoever wants to become great among you must become your servant"*) and 23:12 (*"those who humble themselves will be exalted"*). It bears mentioning that despite its subversive angle, the NIV Upside-Down Kingdom Bible at no point advances a new gospel, new moralities, or new sexualities. For this reason, it is both highly original and deeply refreshing.

Ric took early retirement a couple of years ago and is now busier than he ever was when working. Fortunately, it's mostly doing things he loves, which is great now he doesn't get paid!



NIV
UPSIDE-DOWN
KINGDOM
BIBLE



Stay in community

Is the risk worth it? I hope this article encourages those who have been hurt in past friendships and relationships, to stay in community with others. I suggest that committing is worth it, as we take the risk of being open and vulnerable with others.

The need for connection

At the age of fourteen, I put my faith in Christ. I was born again in the moment that I was led through a prayer of coming to Jesus at a Billy Graham Crusade in Wembley Stadium. This was when Billy Graham came to the UK in 1989. As a fourteen-year-old at secondary school, I knew as a new Christian that I was already questioning my sexuality. My primary-aged innocent girlfriend relationships were now being replaced with sexual attraction to my male peers. This was something I did not admit to anyone or talk about until my mid-twenties.

At that time, I was dating a female Christian from my home church, Sarah (name changed), and we started talking about engagement and how serious we thought the relationship was. I knew in my heart that, as much as I loved Sarah as a special woman in my life, I had to tell her about my same-sex attraction. Sarah loved me, and continued to love me even after I told her this. The grace she showed me at the time has allowed us to remain friends even to this day. I was seeking relationship.

I soon entered into my first boyfriend relationship with Paul (name changed), another Christian I had made connection with through a 'Gay Christian' website. This felt 'safe' as Paul lived a long way from my home town and church as he lived in London. So, we were able to meet and date without anyone knowing: only Sarah knew. Paul and I dated for some time. We met, and even went on a summer break

together. As much as everything seemed ‘perfect’ in this relationship with Paul, I was happy (being in relationship) but not happy (did not have peace). I was struggling with how I could reconcile this gay relationship with scriptures like “*a man shall not lie with a man as he lies with a woman*” (Leviticus 18:22).

“I would not have peace in a same-sex relationship and the eventual separation would be too painful”

With Sarah’s support, Paul and I mutually decided to end our partnered relationship. The day we had decided to do this, we had planned just to spend a pleasant day together. Sarah travelled to London with me on the train, and we spent the day as the three of us. When we said goodbye, we knew it was goodbye for the last time. We had decided no text, no phone contact, nothing, as it would be too painful.

We needed the break to not be ‘softened’ but to know the pain of it. It worked. I can honestly say that, since my mid-twenties, I have not entered into another male-to-male partner relationship. Sure, it would be nice for me as a same-sex attracted man. Yet, I know I would not have peace in it and that the separation that I would eventually go through would be too painful again. That day, when Paul and I said goodbye, being real was emotionally painful for me. I was giving up something I did not honestly want to give up:

connection. Sarah travelled back on the train with me that day. She came out with us that day for two reasons: so that Paul and I would avoid any intimacy; and that I would not be alone as I travelled back.

Seeking support at church

What next? I knew there was a need for accountability outside of my friendship with Sarah. I knew I had to be open and honest about my same-sex attraction to my church pastor at the time. I arranged a time for this. For me, this was a big step. In reality I was coming out to him even before I had told my parents or anyone else in the family. In this moment, I do not know what I was expecting, but I know I was not expecting what sadly happened. I was prayed over in what I can only describe as a “*pray the gay away*” approach, and casting out a demon of homosexuality. This did not help heal my heart, nor did it help to deepen my relationship with God. On the contrary, after this leader had ‘prayed’ for me, he spoke about how good it was that I had told him, so now we could look at me stepping down from the ministries I was serving in at the time. As one of his co-leaders in the church at the time, I knew there were heterosexual marriages with problems in the church at the time. Let me simply say I knew that these marriages ‘had their own struggles’, yet we were not asking those men / women to hand over the ways they were serving. I could not understand why it was even a consideration that I may have to hand over specific responsibilities.

It felt like I was being punished for giving up my relationship with Paul, repenting, and coming in

confession. There was also no after-care, no follow-up support. We did not talk of it any more. The only 'follow-up' this leader did with me was in a moment a few weeks later when the two of us were alone. He approached me with caution, as he checked over his shoulder and surroundings as if about to conduct some secret, and gave me a book titled, "*Coming out of Homosexuality*", saying in an almost whisper "I bought this for you to read". I thanked him for the book, but honestly I never read it. I didn't want a book: I needed him to accompany me, to affirm my position in Christ and walk a journey with me.

Through other events that followed this, I eventually left that church fellowship. I now had the hard challenge of finding another church family, and learning to trust another pastor with my story.

Resolving to stay in community

One of the consequences of living in a fallen world is that we have already interacted with some people who have hurt us. Perhaps, in the case of our families, this may mean they have not fulfilled the role God meant them to fulfil in our lives. All these things leave us with wounds that make us sensitive to trying to reconnect with a community in the future. This is a natural response. In truth, it is God's design for us as humans to have the ability to feel pain and negative emotions.

Without this ability, we would find ourselves in all kinds of danger. For instance, if I picked up a hot metal tray from a hot oven with my bare hand, but had no nerves or sensitivity to pain, my brain would

allow me to keep hold of the hot tray and my hand might become burned and marred beyond use. But, at one time in my early childhood, I would have felt the pain of touching something hot with my bare hand, and the pain taught me to be more careful with hot things in the future.

“I have been able to be open with others and form new relationships that have helped me to thrive”

What I didn't do though was decide to stay away forever from everything that was hot, for hot things exist all around me in the world. I would miss out on some lovely things in life (like food!) if I avoided everything that was hot. It was not God's intention for me to live in an isolated cold environment for the rest of my life. Rather, we need now to approach hot things with caution. If we have been hurt in the past, then it can be more difficult for us to 'approach with caution' in the future, especially if the community (or person) that caused us pain was someone we trusted, such as the church. God's intention for us was to be in relationship with Him and others. God did not intend for 'man' (humankind) to live alone: "*It is not good for man to be alone*" (Gen 2:18). Recovering from a damaged friendship or relationship can be hard, and can keep us isolated if we fall into self-protection. This was my experience.

However, in time I was able to find another church and the pastor there was able to offer the affirmation of

who I was in Christ, as I came as a same-sex attracted disciple of Jesus. Though forming new trusted relationships with people in that new community has taken time, I have committed to it. My new pastor led me to ministries that included TFT to put me into relationship with others on the same journey. I have been able to be open with others about my story and form new relationships that have helped me to thrive. As you take the risk of being open and vulnerable, I pray you will

walk into the blessing of God.

Mark has enjoyed knowing Jesus as his best friend for over 36 years. He enjoys spending time with family and friends. Fun for Mark looks like going to theme parks or the theatre. Time with others, for Mark, is most precious when in small groups, or going on a walk or simply connecting in a moment of prayer over the phone.



We are recruiting Director of TFT

Stuart Parker has been the Director at TFT since 2018, when he took over from Jonathan Berry, and has been doing the role on a part-time basis since 2022. Stuart explained to members at this year's National Conference that he and the trustees are now looking for a replacement for him. It is a rewarding and enjoyable role, but one that will be best served by someone who is able to do it on a full-time basis.

We are now seeking candidates for the position of Director of TFT. This role involves setting the direction for the ministry and managing the staff team, as well as handling governance matters, safeguarding issues and disputes. As far as time allows, there is also the opportunity to get involved in the day to day work of the ministry (eg conferences, Barnabas Groups, Ascend magazine, pastoral work, speaking work, and the appointment/training of Voluntary Workers).

The person should be a mature Christian who can represent TFT's values clearly and winsomely. Further details of the role can be found on our website:
truefreedomtrust.co.uk/jobs

Book a speaker



Is your church wanting to think through matters of sexuality, marriage, singleness, or identity in the spring term? Our Speaking Team currently has availability to come and share the positive biblical vision for human sexuality, alongside personal testimony of their own experience of same-sex attraction.

To book a speaker visit: truefreedomtrust.co.uk/speaking



Review of the 2024 National Conference

As a new person at a TFT event, I didn't know what to expect from this conference. I had never experienced a safe space amongst Christian friends where I could talk openly about struggles with my sexuality - and I had my doubts about whether it would happen on this weekend.

I gratefully accepted my error the moment I realised that I had misjudged what my time at the conference would be like. From the moment I arrived (late, as usual), I felt an incredibly warm welcome. I was shocked to meet someone I knew from years ago as I stepped over the threshold into the beautiful castle where we were staying. I was nervous to think that he immediately knew so much about me, but he hugged me and delighted

in seeing me after so long, and immediately my nerves about the weekend melted away.

“The rest of the weekend was full of laughter with new friends and deep conversations”

The rest of the weekend was full of laughter with new friends, deep conversations about what it means to walk through the Christian life as someone who has same-sex attractions, and teaching that made me think about heaven in ways I had never considered. The conference also gave me an opportunity to talk about things that, as Christians, we often don't create a very safe space to discuss.

There was a seminar on pornography that created wonderful conversation with the friends I had come with and also made while I was there. We talked over laughter and through tears about the difficulties that these issues have brought to our lives, and we were able to openly and honestly confess our struggles to one another. I have never found myself amongst people with whom these conversations came so easily, and I found it to be invaluable. As Christians we should long to have the difficult conversations with one another, as that is what helps us to grow and sharpen our faith. For me, the conference was somewhere where I found that in a refreshingly new way. People I hadn't known 48 hours prior were hearing some of the things I had held closely to my chest for my whole life. I would do all of it again in a heartbeat (but I guess I'll have to wait until next year instead!).

Charis

