

Ascend

The True Freedom Trust Magazine

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Sharing Life as Friends

Abby and I have been sharing a house for about 14 years now. People often ask us about how living together works, and what advice we'd give to other same-sex attracted Christians looking to live communally.

It's clear that sharing life with others is a Christian principle; the Bible talks about us being family. Indeed, we are the body of Christ and we belong to each other. Clearly, there's much more to Christian community than just weekly meetings or catching up every now and again. We're to be deeply involved in each other's lives.

In our culture (and sometimes church), we are often presented with a false choice between a romantic relationship on the one hand, or isolation and loneliness on the other. We've really devalued friendship but, as Christians, we have a unique opportunity to live

in a radically counter-cultural way that is infused with the love of Jesus. Many single people choose to live alone, which is entirely appropriate for some, but that isn't the only option. For others, sharing with a Christian friend can open doors to godly companionship, a richer spiritual life and a counter-cultural witness to God's goodness. So what do we need to think about if we're considering this step?

Firstly, it's important to recognise that close friends sharing a house should do so in the context of the local church community. There is a danger that friends can become emotionally dependent on each other and look to each other to meet needs, rather than looking to Jesus and his church. Biblical friendship has Jesus at the centre, is outward-looking rather than insular and exclusive and seeks to include and serve others.

Examining Our Motivations

It's important to examine our hearts before God and think carefully about why we want to share. As Jeremiah says: *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* Jeremiah 17:9

We must allow God to expose any ungodly motivations and we should seek wise counsel and prayer from the wider church community. Emotional dependency and sexual temptation are both risks that shouldn't be taken lightly and should be talked and prayed about before committing to sharing. I have found that sexual temptation, in general, was much worse when I lived on my own and that it's fairly minimal now because I'm experiencing healthy physical contact in a range of friendships, and I'm not isolated or lonely. But we're all different and, for some people, sharing a house with someone of the same sex would be an unwise temptation. Even if sharing is likely to be a positive thing for both people, it's important to have reached a certain level of spiritual maturity and confidence, and a mutual commitment to honour God and keep the friendship pure.

Ongoing accountability is vital. Abby and I both have wise people who we can pray with regularly and can share any difficulties with. I have people who will ask me tough questions to challenge me in my faith and holiness, and we are both in different prayer triplets. We also make sure that we both cultivate our individual relationships with God and set aside time to pray and read the Bible together.

Being Transparent

One of the things we were concerned about was how our relationship

would look and how to describe our situation to others. The way I describe my friendship with Abby sometimes depends on context (for example, I might say sister, housemate, friend, companion). I prefer 'friend' as it's an opportunity to model a biblical friendship that challenges some of the cultural ideas of friendship.

Being transparent and taking opportunities to explain the relationship often leads to gospel opportunities, and we always try to prevent people from drawing wrong conclusions where possible. (For example, when showing people around the house, they can see our separate rooms. With lots of people I just outright tell them that we're not in a sexual relationship).

One of the really wonderful things about sharing has been involvement in each other's family lives. I've been on holiday with Abby and her sister and brother-in-law and she's been away with me and my mum, dad, sister, brother and their spouses and kids. It could be tempting to go on holiday only with each other, but we want to include others in our plans, so we often go away with Christian and non-Christian friends and family.

Sharing and Supporting

Another big blessing that has come from sharing is being able to support one another through ill health. Abby has had numerous major surgeries and I have Bipolar Disorder which is sometimes tricky to manage, so it's great to be able to help each other through hard times and be able to look after others who come to stay with us.

Sharing possessions is another biblical principle that living together enables

us to put into practice. I find the account of the early church in Acts very inspiring: *“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”* (Acts 2: 44 – 45)

We have a joint account for household finances and inevitably we have quite a lot of shared belongings, as we’ve lived together for so long. But we both believe in sharing things more widely as everything belongs to God anyway. Therefore our possessions belong to the wider church and our other friends too, so they are to be used to help them.

Being able to share household tasks is another blessing. We’ve been able to divide up the jobs into things that play to our strengths and that we like doing (so Abby cooks, and I do all the finances). The problem is that neither of us likes dusting!

To sum up; sharing a house can be a wonderfully life-giving experience providing that our focus isn’t just on getting our relational needs met through one other person, but that our homes are outward-looking and other-involving. We all thrive when we can involve a range of friends from different backgrounds and of different ages in our lives.

By Anne

Anne works for Living Out - a charity providing teaching, stories and resources on Christianity and same-sex attraction - and heads up mission at her local church. She has been a long-standing member of TFT and a VW.

You can read the story of how Anne and Abby came to share a house on the Living Out website.

The theme of this Ascend is sharing life with other people. Little did I know, when first planning this edition, that many people of the world would be entering an extended lockdown, where close contact would be restricted to only those people in our immediate households. For some introverts in large households, this has meant too much people contact and has left them desperate for some peace and quiet! But for many single people, particularly those living on their own, this has been a time of pronounced isolation. The suspension of hugs and pubs has taken away the coping mechanisms for many.

I hope that the articles and testimonies in this magazine will inspire each of us to consider how better to connect with others. This might be through considering a house-share, holidaying with others or understanding better what it means to have spiritual brothers and sisters.

In this new online age, we are putting on an online workshop called “Never Alone” for those who are feeling isolated, tempted or anxious. We hope that the biblical principles shared will be relevant beyond the current lockdown and that the event will be an encouragement to all who attend.

By Stuart, TFT Director

Becoming A Son

I grew up in a family that sometimes attended the village church, although sometimes only at Christmas and Easter. At the age of 8 I started boarding at all-boys schools. I remember, aged 12, anxiously saying to myself, “There’s something wrong with me. I’m made to love boys, not girls.”

From the age of 13, I moved to a boarding school rife with homosexuality. There were many liaisons between older boys and younger boys. I was not attracted to older boys, but I must have wanted a father-figure and so allowed myself to be “courted” by some of them until it became embarrassingly clear that I was not really looking for a sexual relationship. By the time I left that school, I was 90% homosexual.

After leaving school, while staying in London, I was stopped by a woman one evening who asked whether I believed in God and knew why Jesus died. I recounted it to a friend as an amusing incident. However, about five days later, I saw the same woman elsewhere. She didn’t remember meeting me, but did give me a gospel of John.

Later, reading that gospel in my room, I understood the message of eternal life as a free gift, based on forgiveness. It had the ring of truth. However, at that time in my life, I was very troubled by a horrible fear of death, and I was surprised to find the idea of eternal life almost equally frightening. I was caught out either way.

Suddenly I grasped that what makes eternal life attractive is Jesus Christ. I would be enclosed in him, in a bubble of protection, as if in a womb. With this

sudden insight into his loving nature, joy welled up in me. Assuming that my life would now change, I threw my tobacco and papers out of the window of my 5th floor flat. Still, the next day, nothing had changed, so I soon restocked.

After that experience, I read through the whole of the New Testament, but the only sentence I understood was Hebrews 2.15, “He came to free those who, through fear of death, had been living all their lives as slaves to constant dread”. That was me!

“I suddenly realised that what makes eternal life attractive is Jesus Christ”

False Starts In New Zealand

On my gap year in New Zealand I was homesick and missing the warmth of family. While there, I worked on different farms for short spells. Arriving at each new location, I would locate the churches and decide which to go to on the Sunday. While fruit-picking near Nelson, I went to a church which believed that baptism is essential for salvation. After being asked there, “If you crashed your car on the way home tonight, unbaptised, where would you spend eternity?”, I was fearful that God might deliberately arrange that. After all, they knew more about Him than I did! I suddenly dropped my arguments against it and agreed to submit to baptism there and then, for safety’s sake. However, I soon regretted it, and felt foolish for doing something that I didn’t really believe.



Whenever I attended a church in New Zealand, as soon as the music started, tears would course down my cheeks. I used to sit in the front, so that no-one could turn round and see me at close quarters. I couldn't understand why I was emotional, but I now know it was God touching me.

At a dairy farm I stayed with a cold, unfriendly family who saw me solely as a farm labourer. The son, who ran the farm, had a terrible temper; I once saw him break a broom handle beating a cow, drawing blood from it. I was miserable. There, in my room, I read a book by David Wilkerson that I had found in a bookshop. I decided to follow his suggestion for seeing God perform a miracle in order to be free from solo-sex. His steps were to admit you were helpless, ask God for help and expect a miracle. To my surprise, days and then weeks went by without falling into my old habit.

I remember one evening, in that family's living room, the inaudible TV showed Kermit the Frog sitting atop a

globe, looking glum. He had the world, yet he was miserable. Without knowing why I was suddenly choked up and had to go to the privacy of my room. I did not realise that God was speaking to me but, looking back, it was an illustration of Mark 8.36. I had wanted to use my gap years for travelling but "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul?"

Although I asked Jesus to be my Saviour many times over a month or two in New Zealand, I never felt like I had been born again. I didn't trust him enough to invite him to be my Lord.

A Feeble Faith

Back in England that summer, I just about held on to my feeble new faith but could not bring myself to tell my family. At university, in the autumn, I was dismayed to hear the doctrine of predestination for salvation. Surely, if I were really 'elect', God would not have let me, as a teenager, commit the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. I was convinced that I was a fake Christian. God seemed

capricious and inflexible. I had been free from solo sex for about six months, but one day I used a coin toss to ask God whether it was something I really needed to abstain from. Seven times the coin landed the same way, telling me “don’t” but, on the eighth toss, I finally got the other side of the coin. That was the answer I wanted, so I ignored that coincidence and got enslaved again.

One day I asked a slightly older student to pray for me to receive the “baptism of the Holy Spirit”. He laid hands on my head and said that, if I had any sounds like language in my mind, I should speak them out, but I had nothing like that. Afterwards, alone in my own room, I decided to try. I made five or so random syllables when suddenly something tripped and a fluent unknown language was flowing from my mouth. Because I did not trust that God

“Seven times the coin told me “don’t”. On the eighth toss, I finally got the other side - that was the answer I wanted”

had accepted me, I assumed that it was not the real thing, even though I had never been able to do that before.

As a new Christian at university, I did not allow myself to entertain any homosexual fantasies. If I met a young man with my idea of good looks, I would be anxious. Although, in retrospect, that was more a fear of being tempted than actual temptation. Somewhere along the line my sexual orientation changed, without a battle, apart from trying to

discipline my thoughts. Was I “healed” or was I never really homosexual? Perhaps my former same-sex attraction was simply because I had been in an all-male environment in my teen years. Whatever the explanation, I was now troubled by only the occasional attraction to a man and found it easy to turn away from those thoughts. I was very lucky compared with those who struggle for years with same-sex attraction.

Learning To Trust

My identity as a Christian had all but fizzled out again by the end of my 20s. However, realising that my approach to life had been very unsuccessful, I decided to start trusting that God loved me, even though I could not feel it. Eventually, I trusted him enough to make him my Lord as well as my Saviour and found the joy of being a Christian for the first time.

I made a close friend who was taking steps towards God, yet who was outside the normal religious mould. We used to talk very openly about our lives, including our day to day failures. One regular failure in my life was the porn channels in hotel rooms on lonely business trips. I was defeated time and time again so, on seeing my friend after one such trip, I had a choice of concealing my failure and losing that precious openness, or suffering the embarrassment of confessing. I chose confession and he would say “no condemnation”, referring to Romans 1:17. My struggles make me smile now. When I entered a hotel room, I would put all the ads for the porn channel out of sight and tell Jesus that what I really needed most was Him - more than the pressing urgency of my own desires. I even tried asking a hotel in advance, at the time of booking, for the porn

“When I entered a hotel room, I would put the porn channels ads out of sight and tell Jesus that what I really needed most was Him”

channel to be disabled in my room but was told to mention to the receptionist at the time of check-in. That wouldn't have suited me! After a few years, the unpleasant addiction to those films that I despised was broken. I was free. I was still troubled for a number of years by indulging in solo-sex while asleep, almost always waking at some point, but that eventually ended too. The key for me to lasting freedom was the phrase “Not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit” (Zech 4:6), said not in a religious way but in a relationship way, reminding

myself of God's willingness to win my battles for me.

Today, I enjoy my relationship with God so much. I focus on His love for me and see myself as a son and a friend, much more than as a servant. Every day I take time to remind myself of His pleasure in having a son. The Bible says graciously that whatever we have sacrificed for His sake He is well able to make up to us in other ways in this life or the next (Mark 10:29).

By John

John is new to TFT. He can always knock a meal together in less than half an hour. He loves history, nature, time with people, time alone, long journeys (but not by car!). He can't bear to sit still for too long.





Podcast Review

Life On Side B Podcast

Available at www.lifeonsideb.com

(Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts and Spotify)

Labels

L*ife on Side B* is a podcast that looks at the lives of same-sex attracted Christians who believe in the traditional sexual ethic of the Christian faith.

The podcast provides a unique window into what it is really like to be a Side B Christian. The language of ‘Side B’ and ‘Side A’ refers to same-sex attracted Christians and their different views on how God sees gay relationships. ‘Side A’ describes Christians who believe God affirms gay relationships, whereas ‘Side B’ refers to Christians who believe God has designed sexual and romantic relationships to be only between a man and a woman, and therefore live according to that view. This could be through celibacy or a mixed-orientation marriage. These labels came from the ‘Q’ Christian Fellowship (formerly known as “The Gay Christian Network”) as a way to differentiate how people see themselves. As you can imagine, there is a lot of debate about whether these labels are helpful or a stumbling block.

Those opposed to using labels would say they are confining and may also legitimise sin. Some would say ‘Side A’ and ‘Side B’ are not two equally valid sides of the same coin, and that God is clear on what He thinks about same-sex relationships and so we should be too. Whether you see ‘Side B’ as helpful or unhelpful language, these questions of

identity and how we relate to God and others are big topics discussed on the *Life on Side B* podcast.

Variety

Each episode explores the joys, beauty and challenges that come with living in this counter-cultural way by interviewing a diverse selection of men and women on their experiences of faith and sexuality. How can we find community in church life? What is it like to be in a mixed-orientation marriage? How can singleness be life-giving? How do we define ourselves when it comes to gender identity? These themes and more are explored on the podcast each month.

The podcast is hosted by Josh Proctor, a former ‘Side A’ pastor, who left his same-sex relationship to follow Jesus wholeheartedly. The real strength of this podcast comes from the testimonies of people who know what it is like to follow Jesus in both a world and church culture that often doesn’t feel like a safe place to discuss these experiences. One of the most significant challenges I have faced is living with this tension between a culture that is moving away from a biblical ethic, and a church that elevates homosexuality as the worst sin. Where do I fit in, and how do I live this out?

This is exactly what makes *Life on Side B* so relevant and relatable. It is rare to hear stories of Christians who have had similar experiences to mine. Since discovering the podcast, I now no longer

feel alone, and that's something to celebrate!

Although the fresh image and branding of the podcast are aimed at a more youthful US audience, I love how the content itself connects across all ages and nationalities. (There is even a Spanish episode).

My Highlights

In episode one, we meet Meg, who talks about what it is like pursuing God together as she lives in a celibate community. Her thoughts about God's design for friendships and intimacy challenges us to rethink what family means and how we can become a house of hospitality for those who struggle to find belonging.

Episodes four and five provide a fascinating insight into what it's like to be the straight spouse and the Side B husband in a mixed-orientation marriage. Lisa and Dean's story reminded me how sometimes God calls us to live distinctive lives that might not always look conventional to society but can be a powerful signpost towards Him. In episode fourteen, Bekah talks about her experience of adoption and fostering as a Side B, middle-aged single parent. How does she explain her story to her children? In a society confused by gender and sexuality, questions of how we bring up children who are navigating these conversations have never been so relevant and needed.

Conclusions

For all its grace-filled openness in letting listeners make up their own mind about the stories, instead of telling people what to think; *Life on Side B's* greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. In several episodes exploring celibate



partnerships and gender dysphoria, I found the hosts could have presented a more biblical perspective. I think if you are new to this conversation and haven't worked out what you believe, there is a danger you could be misled into thinking there are grey areas, when in fact God has given us clear black and white teaching in the Bible. Future episodes exploring parts of the Bible that some find uncomfortable would do well to help listeners be more discerning, as well as providing a pastoral resource for friends and pastors in understanding and knowing how to support same-sex attracted people.

Overall, the *Life on Side B* podcast brings a refreshing voice to the church, encouraging you how to thrive, not just survive, as a Side B Christian. I highly recommend adding it to your next playlist.

By Lucy

Lucy is a graphics and video designer. Besides pretending that being on Instagram all day is a real job, she can be found dancing at music festivals or writing biographies about herself in the third person.



Sacred Siblings

There is something special when it comes to the bond between siblings. Reflecting on the great relationship I have with my two brothers, that unique bond is clear to me. Whatever our different beliefs, values and interests, there is loyalty between us that stands the test of time. There's an underlying, unspoken, sense of goodwill toward one another. At least, I think there is (I haven't consulted my brothers!).

Of course, many are not so blessed to have those great family relationships. Indeed, ever since Cain's jealousy was aroused against Abel, there have been feuding brothers. Just think of the British media's intrigue in covering the Gallagher brothers, the main men in Oasis (incidentally, the best music group of the 90s!). It seems to me that there is an acute sense of pain when family relationships go wrong. Broken families cause a visceral reaction. They are just not meant to be.

Maybe this is why we can often use the unique relationship between siblings as the benchmark for other

significant bonds. After all, isn't blood thicker than water? Aren't soldiers at war a band of brothers? Just think of the song, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother", covered by The Housemartins (incidentally, the most underrated band of the 80s...). That song speaks of a profound relationship one can enjoy with a friend. When that relationship exists, almost reflexively, people grasp for the words of brother or sister to describe it.

With that in mind, how should we react to the description of Christians in Scripture as brothers and sisters? Well, these three broad truths will help us to begin to understand the amazing implications of having sacred siblings.

1. God is our Father

Biological siblings share biological parents. In the same way, as spiritual siblings, Christians share a common Father. The beauty of this fact manifests in so many ways. But before we get to that, the exclusiveness of the claim may stick in the throats of many.

It seems to me that one mark of liberalism is applying wonderful biblical truths universally. When that's done, biblical revelation is robbed of its beauty and meaning. John Stott, for example, often spoke out against how the liberal theology of his day applied God's fatherhood to the whole of humanity. Stott rightly pointed out that God's fatherhood isn't universal. We can draw this implication from the words of Jesus, "...you belong to your Father, the devil..." (John 8:44).

Without universal fatherhood, there is no brotherhood of man (something John Lennon struggled to imagine (the last music reference, I promise). Of course, we can have loving, meaningful friendships with those who don't know Jesus (I'm so grateful for those friends), but to be a spiritual brother or sister, one must share a spiritual Father. In Christ, the eternal Father becomes our Father, and Jesus, the eternal Son, becomes our brother (Hebrews 2:11). Through Christ, if one calls God Father, one must recognise the brotherhood he shares with others who do the same.

There is an objective "setting aside" of those who share God as their Father. Christians are a holy nation, a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), a household of faith (Galatians 6:10), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27).

By looking at the relationship we have with our heavenly Father, we can correctly perceive the kinship we share with other believers who experience that relationship too.

2. Adoption is by Grace

Having recognised the limit of God's Fatherhood, it is worth drawing our attention to how one becomes a

member of His household. Clearly, no child earns the right to be adopted. The parents' love comes first. The same is true spiritually. Because of Christ, we are adopted by grace, through faith (Ephesians 2:8). Jesus became man so that in dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3–5) man could partake in God's nature (2 Peter 1:4) and join His family.

“We grasp for the words of ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ to describe a profound friendship”

The implications of this gracious calling are profound. Only God defines who is in his household. Only through Jesus — the way the truth and the life (John 14:6) — can we experience adoption. Only by God's residing Spirit can we cry 'Abba! Father!' (Romans 8:15). How, then, can anyone bar entry into God's family? The boundaries of who our brothers or sisters in Christ are cannot be drawn on ethnic, class, gender, social, denominational or educational lines (Galatians 3:28).

Sadly, maybe under the surface, such differences can easily divide Christians. I've never heard a parent admit they have favourites, but too easily we can rank our spiritual brothers and sisters. In contrast, to call each other brothers and sisters affirms our common worth. To mix our metaphors, although there are different gifts, each member belongs to the same body (1 Corinthians 12:20). The weaker members must be given greater honour (1 Corinthians 12:24).

3. Christians are family

In the same way that Israelite families had obligations towards one

another — think of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5–6) or the relative who acts as a financial redeemer (Leviticus 25:25) - we must reckon with our obligations to our spiritual family too.

These responsibilities are to manifest in good works, “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10). They manifest materially, “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:10).

As Christians, our bond of unity is also underpinned by purity. Spiritual kinship informs our ethics, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters, in all purity”. (1 Timothy 5:1–2).

Notice how all-inclusive the verses above are. The commands apply to every Christian because they are all kin. We can see that this is one area where a Christian concept of being brothers and sisters is different from the broader cultural one, where sibling language is only deployed for unique, intimate relationships.

That said, the household of God will provide a foundation for those in it to enjoy a special bond. The unity that all Christians share can blossom into a beautiful intimacy between certain brothers and sisters, a spiritual friendship if you will. Concentric circles of intimacy are natural. Let us remember, however, that these relationships are precious precisely because, at root, my Christian friend is,

and will always be, my brother or sister. They are family, and this family is my primary community.

I wonder if that is how you view the Church? It’s worth observing that people find solace in many different communities. Affiliations can arise through nationalism or political ideology. People speak of the ‘LGBT community’ to describe a movement where they feel a sense of belonging. Although we should recognise where the Church has failed to live up to its calling, Christians can affirm that no other grouping or affiliation can come close to the bond that Christians share.

At my previous church, I always appreciated trips to the pub with the other church members after the service. It was here where we got to know one another. We were an eclectic bunch. A friend made the point that no other institution or movement would bring people together in the way the Church does. Only God could do such a thing.

Whatever our differences, whichever members of God’s household you get on with best, as Christians we are a spiritual family. We share the same Father. We share the same adopted status. These truths alone should stir us to live out our familial obligations towards one another.

In light of all this, let’s ask God our Father to help us grow in love towards all our sacred siblings.

By Rob

Rob heads up TFT’s speaking ministry, regularly speaking at churches across the UK. He enjoys spending time with friends and studying Hebrew in his spare time.

ASCEND HIGHER PODCAST LAUNCH

Articles in Ascend often need to be ruthlessly edited down to fit within the required word count. To give space to discuss certain articles in greater depth, the TFT staff team will be recording occasional podcasts under the banner “Ascend Higher”, covering the issues raised in a more conversational style.

Two members of the staff team, Stuart and Rob, recorded a pilot episode of “Ascend Higher” using Rob’s article from this edition, “Sacred Siblings”. The result is a discussion of roughly 30 minutes, and we’d be very interested in your feedback.

To hear it for yourself, search “Ascend Higher” wherever you get your podcasts and subscribe to receive all future episodes. Alternatively, visit the following page on our website: truefreedomtrust.co.uk/podcasts



MORE READING ABOUT SHARING LIFE TOGETHER

“True Friendship” - In this short book, Vaughan Roberts describes the features of meaningful, biblical friendship and gives us practical advice and questions to reflect on and apply in our lives.

“True Community” - Carefully explaining biblical passages, Jerry Bridges sets out a vision in this book for what Christian community should look like in the twenty-first century.

“The Gospel Comes with a House Key” - Rosaria Butterfield presents what she means by ‘Radical Ordinary Hospitality’ in this book. She calls us to open up our homes and our lives, in order to connect with people and to earn the right to speak into their lives.



They're all going on a Summer holiday, but am I?

Summer is here, and people are planning, going on, wishing they were on or hoping to have some kind of holiday.

For many years I struggled to take any significant time off as a holiday; it was almost seen as a sign of machismo and pride that I could tell people how many days holiday I had lost at the end of a year, or how much I was carrying over. Little did I realise that they were looking back at me as if I was mad, not something special. Fairly obviously, I didn't spend much (or any) time thinking about God's intention as regards holidays.

At first glance, the Bible seems to say very little about going on holiday, certainly in the modern secularised sense of jetting off to a sun-trap for a

“As we age, it gets more unusual to ask friends if they would be interested in a holiday”

couple of weeks to “get away from it all”. But the word ‘holiday’ comes from the joining of two words: “holy” and “day”. It is a day (or days) set aside from the regular day to day work or labour. Of course, this dates right back to creation, to the first holy day of Gen 2:3 – “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done”. As the Bible unfolds, more celebrations and feasts were set aside to celebrate and act as a reminder for all that God

had done. Holidays are part of God's intention for his children, taking time out from the normality of life to rest, enjoy something different and spend some time remembering what He has done for us.

So what about me?

Having recognised the importance of holidays, and that God actually wants us to take them, we come to what is, for many, a significant issue. Going on holiday can be challenging for single people, as so much about going on holiday seems geared towards families or couples. Adverts on TV portray young families enjoying all-inclusive fun and games, usually by the pool, or a couple having a romantic dinner in a beautiful location.

So what happens for single people as regards going away, and not just to the sun and the sea?

There are often “single supplements”, and penalties for single rooms; there is the awkwardness of sharing a room (or even an “Austrian-style” bed) with a friend; and even having to ask people whether they want to go with you, along with the risk of rejection. OK, there are a few positives. You're free to travel alone and go exactly where you want, and there are cheaper breaks outside peak times and school holidays. For many, going on holiday alone is nothing to be worried about: backpacking across Asia, filling social media with exciting photographs from exotic locations, maybe even joining in on a charity project somewhere. Or sitting in a comfy chair with a good book or box



“What if you are expected to share sleeping accommodation with others of the same sex?”

set all day with no interruptions and no-one saying they are bored. But for many, holidaying on your own can be really lonely, especially eating dinner alone. It can be a stark reminder of the partner and children you don't have. Others may end up not bothering with a holiday if the prospect of going alone feels more like a punishment than a treat.

Maybe I can?

If heading off alone isn't for you, there are options.

There are group tours and all-inclusive package holidays. From exploring the Greek islands to trekking in Nepal, there are holidays to suit every taste. Some people go with friends, but there will always be other singles who are keen to make friends. So consider what adventures you've always dreamed of, and make them happen.

For others, there are specific interest groups that might fit your personality and hobbies. I have friends who are keen cyclists and annually one goes on a group cycling trip to watch parts of the Tour de France. The organisation is all done for them and they look forward to it all year.

The best holidays I had as a single person were with friends. With the advent of social media you could post a message to a limited/closed group of people asking if anyone would be interested in arranging a holiday with you and others. You might feel a risk of rejection if no-one responds. But, by asking people to message or call privately, you are dipping your toe in the water. This is something that happens naturally, almost by osmosis, in younger people's groups, but as we get older seems less "usual". However, you might discover the opportunity to join in with a family at a cottage they have booked, or with a group already putting something together. You don't have to join them for the whole time, and you can still do your own thing (as well as doing the odd bit of baby/child sitting). Be careful. You might end up organising the whole holiday for a group of single people!



Risk vs opportunity

When single people go away on holiday together, there can be temptations that come with being in close proximity with others. Those who are same-sex attracted have some particular challenges if they are expected to share sleeping accommodation with others of the same sex. How do you protect yourself from those temptations and thoughts when outside the day to day relative safety of familiar routines where you are surrounded by people, your job and everyday responsibilities? Temptations can range from going to or being invited to the wrong sort of

“Let’s have healthy checks on our lives to keep us out of the weeds of sin”

bars or saunas, to lusting on beaches, through to porn on a hotel TV. Many people find airports and travelling a real-time place of temptation. Holidays can be times of indulging the wrong types of appetites, where it might not seem to matter as much. As Marcus Tullius Cicero put it, “The devil finds work for idle hands to do”. David

famously found this out. In 2 Samuel 11:1, it states how he took a holiday: “In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king’s men and the whole Israelite army. But David remained in Jerusalem”. What followed was the temptation with Bathsheba. So taking time out also allows the mind to wander. How can we protect ourselves against this?

Positive peer pressure

One of the most helpful ways of safeguarding ourselves is to be held accountable. Some times the word “accountability” can be a buzz word in Christian circles, and many may be confused about its exact meaning, but in this case it simply means having healthy checks on our lives that help to keep us focused and out of the weeds of sin. It might include telling someone about the temptations you fear, and the risks you are most concerned about, or just having a regular checkup as to how your walk with God is going. It is, in a sense, positive peer pressure! When you are away on holiday, knowing you are going to have a daily “chat” with a friend can keep you focused on doing what is right, and away from those temptations. In these days of instant messaging, WhatsApp and

Facebook Messenger, you can keep in touch with your “ally” (accountability partner) throughout the holiday. Going through the most challenging time of my life I had an amazing friend who messaged me “hugs” every morning and throughout the day and then wished me “goodnight” every evening. Just having him asking how I was doing gave me support and strength when needed. Being there for you doesn’t mean they have actually to be there in person!

“We don’t have a holiday from God – rather, it is a place to root ourselves more in him”

A refreshing break

To take us right back to the beginning: God’s purpose behind a holiday for you is that you should be refreshed, revived, and have the time to spend with Him. Time to remember what He has done for you and thanking Him for his love for you. Being on holiday is not a holiday from God. It is a place to root ourselves more in him, not less, while having fun! He wants us to take holidays, to enjoy them and for them to be “holy” days.

By Jon

Jon is a professional proofreader and copy editor, who asks that you don’t look at the grammar and spelling in this article too closely.

Gary’s Story

“Back in the 1990s, the Lord led me into a ministry of writing to those behind the (then dissolving) Iron Curtain, who wanted pen-friends in the UK. This gave me immense purpose and some of the most meaningful friendships of my life came out of it. It is always a great blessing to go and visit them and simply to take Jesus to them in the way (by God’s grace alone!!) that I walk and live, which leads to openings for spiritual conversations.

In terms of same-sex temptation, going with an attitude of “What can I give?” rather than “What can I get?” out of each holiday became an immense blessing to me, and greatly diminished the strength of these feelings. My Russian friend in Yekaterinburg in the Urals is an extremely attractive guy, but the basis of our friendship has a deeper foundation than physical attractions. So sexual temptations have rarely been an issue for me because we have had such a strong, open and intimate true friendship for over ten years.”

Christian holiday companies and groups

www.101holidays.co.uk/singles

www.oakhall.co.uk

www.goldhillholidays.co.uk

www.christianguild.co.uk (mainly UK)

www.springharvestholidays.com

Steadying our Friendship

She sort of crept up on me, as did the idea of “doing life together” with her. I had known her for a few years, and we had struggled separately and privately with times of attraction to one another, but in 2007 we became closer and more open. After we admitted there was an attraction, very quickly we were in a real struggle. In the beginning, it was a rollercoaster, and the sexual temptation was very much headline news.

Pursuing godly wisdom

The thing is that we so enjoyed each other’s company and we were really good friends. It was such a blessing to have that companionship and camaraderie, to be able to horse about and just have fun. It felt like it would be such a gift if we could share a home that was OUR home, but we simply weren’t sure that we could. We had made mistakes, and I knew that I couldn’t enter into a sexual relationship with any kind of peace because God said no to that path. But it did feel like such an “un-lonely” option if it were possible to do it with a smile and a nod from God, through His Word and in His wisdom. Maybe we could band together, and somehow get rid of “that thing” that prowled around us sometimes and live and enjoy life together without it. So, we prayed separately and together. We allowed the Lord to hold onto us, and we held onto his true Word. We spoke to wise and close Christian friends. Both of us were encouraged by our vicars to be in a one-to-one Bible study with astute godly women. I started to meet regularly with a wonderful no-nonsense older Christian woman who asked me tough questions. (and as time passed and things evened out I asked her

tough questions too, which I enjoyed immensely!)

And then there was my wonderful sister who really loved us and knew us both well. Her continual encouragement was for us to stop UNLOVING each other and to commit to LOVING each other; to act in sincere love. It wasn’t loving to keep stirring her sexual desire which would steal her peace in the Lord, or to keep allowing my mind’s eye to wander over those fantasies that fed the addict its heroin. I needed to purify myself, put down the needle, with all

“It felt like it would be such a gift if we could share a home”

the strength He gave (and I had not an ounce of it... so thank God for His mighty power). To stop subtly engaging her in that exciting atmosphere of sexual desire. That look. That touch. Those words that were spoken in a certain way.

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart.” - 1 Peter 1:22

I had to press out and love more, bigger, richer than this singular sexual focus. I had to redefine my idea of love in the light of scripture. That was hard. To do what I needed to do “in order to LOVE her sincerely”.

Delighting in ordinary living

Thank God for his mercy as he worked with us, in us, and for us to renew our minds and the struggle subsided. There was a flourishing of something much more open and tangible. As we clambered off the rollercoaster, and instead took off on a long drive to wherever with the top down, we felt joy and lightness and were having so much fun along the way. The temptation to generate or sustain a sexual atmosphere became a very distant and occasional thing, and finally petered out altogether. We were experiencing good friendship and a good connection without it, and it felt better and more nutritious.

And as we lived, we started to see the value in ordinary living and unentangled robust connection. Not too sensitive. Not too serious. I had to begin to learn new lessons in love. She needed to have different friends, not just me! We needed to keep things mixed up a bit. That was a good thing, not a threatening one. We needed to

“The temptation to sustain a sexual atmosphere finally petered out altogether”

reach out and be open for other friends. We both needed to enjoy knowing and connecting with others. And as I learned more about how to love better, I started to take delight in seeing the top 7204 pictures from her day out with her friend Jane, and she learned to listen to my detailed views on what were the clearly extraordinary plot-lines in the latest Marvel movie that I had gone to see with my friend Helen.

Continuing to pursue purity

During this time, we have also spent some time living apart. Not for lack of love but because it seemed a healthy move to make. I think the Lord wanted to further work on some slightly too “coupley” dynamics in our friendship.



“It’s important to acknowledge that this isn’t a pretend marriage - we are side by side rather than face to face”

He has been kind to work on those things slowly, as and when we can bear them.

Something important for us to acknowledge and live out is that it isn’t a pretend marriage. We are side by side, not face to face. We try to allow for and understand each other’s differences and honour each other’s separateness. I can’t ask her to promise to stay with me “until death do us part” because that doesn’t work well for a friendship even when you agree to “do life” together. It needs to be life together on and in God’s timetable.

There are still more lessons for me to learn in loving. I still feel like I have just scratched the surface. I am sure there

are ways that I think I love where I don’t love at all. And so, we negotiate and grow as people separately, as sisters in Christ’s family and in a friendship that can flourish in the light of the true God who is there, and who loves us more than we could ever imagine.

By Sandra

Sandra is an active member of her Church in Leyton where she sometimes leads evening music on guitar. But if it’s a toss-up between music and sound desk, the sound desk wins - because it has more twiddly knobs. She also enjoys cycling and walking, but again cycling wins because the bike is as interesting as the scenery.

TFT are committed to including a range of honest personal testimonies in Ascend. But what may be a wise decision for one person may not be wise for someone else. We would always counsel those looking to share a house together to be honest with one another about their motivations and vulnerabilities as well as seeking advice and accountability from other wise Christians.

Giving Notice

We recognise that many people’s finances are under pressure at the moment, and that this may have a negative impact on our future income at TFT. We are working hard to adapt our teaching and pastoral support to make them increasingly accessible online. But we do need continued funding, in order to develop resources and to make these freely available to all. If you are able to support our work financially, we really appreciate it.



Review: “Connected” Women’s Conference



In February, I was delighted to attend the very first TFT women’s day conference. Before our day of teaching, sung worship and group time had even begun, I was encouraged purely by the number of women in attendance (about 30) and struck by how wonderfully God had grown the TFT women’s ministry over the years. As a same-sex attracted Christian I often feel out of place trying to live faithfully for Christ in a society so affirming of gay relationships, so to meet with many other women seeking to live counter-culturally in this way was heartening!

Given this, it was apt that our theme for the day was “Biblical Hope for the Lonely”, with some fantastic teaching on the topic by Jeanette Howard. Loneliness was helpfully defined as the mismatch between the relationships we have and those we want (whether that’s a perceived or actual mismatch). Many seek to resolve that mismatch through the good gifts of marriage and children but, ultimately, the loneliness gap can only be filled with Christ. We may often feel like we have drawn the short straw with our same-sex attractions, but Jeanette argued how in many ways we have the best deal going! For many of us, without marriage and children to distract us, we are given the opportunity

to get that much closer to Christ, as we are driven to confront our loneliness.

Jeanette laid out a helpful framework for us to think this through: in Christ we are called to believe, behave and belong. As Christians, we have been brought to believe in God’s saving love and so now seek to live in obedience to Him as we behave. Yet so often we don’t fully claim the promise to belong. We know in our heads that we have received the “Spirit of sonship” (Romans 8:15), yet our deceitful hearts try and tell us

“Loneliness is the mismatch between the relationships we have and those we want”

that we remain orphans. I have been challenged since the conference to claim the promise we have in Christ of adoption, and to know that I am who God tells me I am. I have been trying to remember that His voice is the authentic voice and that abundant life can only be found in Him - therefore living counter-culturally in His name is always worth it!

By Ruth

Ruth enjoys cycling or running along the river where she lives, drinking wine (in moderation!) and teaching young children about Jesus.

“When our deceitful hearts tell us that we are orphans, let us claim Christ’s promise of adoption”

Supporting Single-Person Households

I'm sure that all church leaders are very aware of those among their congregations who are most vulnerable, whether that vulnerability be age, underlying health conditions or mental health concerns. But I wonder whether there might be another vulnerable group which can be overlooked: singles, and in particular, single-person households.

For many single people, our relational needs are primarily met through our experience of the church family community. During the Coronavirus lockdown, many people in family households have found increased opportunities for family time. But, for some of us, it almost completely removed those opportunities, particularly for those who live on their own. If they are not required to go into a workplace where they will see others, lockdown has meant almost no in-person contact with others.

So, how can church leaders look out for singles and those in single-person households, both during lockdown and in the longer term? Here are a few quick thoughts.

Ask your singles

The first idea is simple, but somehow not always obvious. To know how to best serve your singles and single-

person households, pick up the phone and ask. This is a good question for church leaders (and especially those who are married) to ask at any time.

Consider single-person households in your online activities

One legacy of the Coronavirus lockdown is more church gatherings online. Give some time to thinking about how you can best include and serve single-person households through these get-togethers. Two quick examples:

1. It's good to acknowledge the different situations of those engaging with your online church activities but try to avoid talking about people being on their own. Rather than saying, 'You can take part in this with your family or on your own', try something like 'You can take part in this in your household whether big or small'. The former suggests that those in single-person households don't have family, which is exactly the opposite of the message we should be seeking to convey. We want our singles to know and experience that even if they are physically isolated, they are part of a wider family.

2. When it comes to engaging with live streams, especially those that involve group participation (e.g. prayer meetings), encourage people to invite those they know will be on their own to join them as part of their household via video call. Virtual presence will never be the same as physical, but this is a simple way we can invite people to experience being part of the church family.

“Make sure that single people know how they can reach out for help”

Think about practical support

Those living in single-person households will often be more isolated because they don't have people to look after them or get supplies if they become unwell. Make sure that single people know how they can easily reach out for help if they need it.

“Single people do have family - the church”

Also, help the whole church to know that it's ok to reach out for help whoever they are. Those who are young and healthy shouldn't feel they can't reach out for help because they are not recognised as a vulnerable group. Keep affirming that church is family, a family who are meant to be there for and help each other. Do everything you can to make it easy for people to reach out for help.

Think about relational support

To help singles and those living on their own to feel relationally connected, think outside of the box. One single friend made the observation that, on calls, people tend to gravitate to talking at depth, but friendship is about so much more than talking. Think creatively about ways to spend time together making use of modern technology.

During the Coronavirus lockdown, I have enjoyed a weekly online pub quiz with a group of friends via a group chat on WhatsApp. A friend used FaceTime to take people with her on her daily walks; two single friends who were due to spend a Saturday together in London decided still to spend the day together via video call; they talked, ate and went for a walk together. I even heard of people offering to loan their pets to single people for a few days. The isolation faced by many single-person households during the lockdown continues to present huge challenges for singles and those seeking to love them, but perhaps it also presents churches with the opportunity to step up and be family for everyone, both in the midst of the pandemic and then onwards.

By Andrew

Andrew serves as an Assistant Pastor in Hastings and Bexhill and is also a speaker and writer with Living Out. He loves helping people to understand and apply the Bible and loves wrestling with big cultural issues, often posting on the thinktheology.co.uk blog.

A version of this article originally appeared on Think Theology (thinktheology.co.uk) on 7 April 2020





Book Review

Why does God care who I sleep with? by Sam Allberry
(The Good Book Company, 2020) 128 pages
£7.99 paperback, £6.91 Kindle

Sam Allberry has written a short book explaining the meaning of God's boundaries for sexual morality. In a culture increasingly at odds with the Bible's teaching on this subject, we need more than just to know what the Bible's rules are. Rather, we need to be aligned with God's heart on this matter, so that our hearts and minds can be convinced that, "the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places" (Psalm 16:6).

Allberry starts by showing us the common ground we have with our secular culture on sexual morality – sexual abuse is wrong and non-consensual sex is wrong. He then goes on to suggest that everyone knows deep down that sex has more meaning than just a physical act. The Bible explains that the "one flesh" union between two people profoundly and permanently changes their relationship – so sex needs to be stewarded very carefully within the right setting. Allberry brings us the analogy of fire: it warms us wonderfully within a fireplace (its proper setting) but, when we play around with fire and ignore the rules of fire safety, then it can leave behind great destruction. And so it is with sex. Sadly, our society has lowered our view of sex to a mere commodity – something we are entitled to – rather than what it should be: the giving of the whole of oneself within the lifelong marriage of one man and one woman. Outside of this God-given context, the whole gift cannot be fully given and so falls short of God's intention.

In case this leaves us thinking that this teaching is rather old-fashioned, Allberry very helpfully sets out what a positive and transforming message the Christian teaching of sexual morality was in New Testament times. It highlighted the importance of dignity, mutuality and consent to a Roman culture that often dismissed such values. Christian sexual morality has never been fashionable and will always be revolutionary.

There is a helpful pastoral chapter in the middle of the book ("What if I've really messed up?") that uses David's prayer of repentance (Psalm 51) as a model for deep penitence. This brings us daily hope that through such repentance our hearts can be transformed from desiring sin into having a greater desire for God.

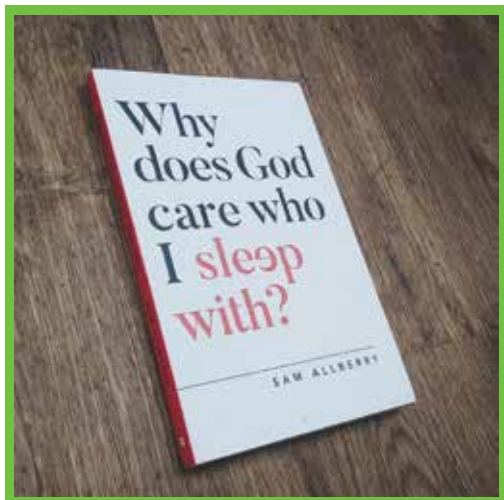
My favourite part of the book was chapter 9 ("Isn't love enough?"). This turns the secular argument of #lovemeanslove on its head. Allberry shows us that our culture's elevation of love is correct as far as it goes, but also profoundly superficial in its contraction of the true meaning of love. Yes, we need to display love in all that we do (1 Cor 13:1-3), but we have massively underestimated what true love is. Our culture has turned to fickle Hollywood sentimentality rather than learning about true costly love from the One who personifies love (1 John 4:7-8). When we measure ourselves against the biblical standard of love, we all fall well short. The surprising truth is that by ordering our love in God's ways (which means

sometimes saying ‘no’ to our strong desires) we always end up loving other people more:

“Obedience to [God] will never mean we end up loving people less. We might [be] wanting to love someone in the wrong kind of way, and God isn’t so much calling us to love them less as to love them differently, which will really mean loving them more” (p.114)

Indeed, when he explains the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31), Allberry argues that we can only truly love other people (12:31) when we are first loving God wholeheartedly (12:30). In this, he answers the titular question (“Why does God care who I sleep with?”) by showing how the two elements of the Great Commandment belong inextricably together:

“God cares who we sleep with because he cares that we really do love each other well, and that might mean loving in a different way to how we feel... God also cares that we know his love. Just as our love for one another is bound up with our love for him, so too human sexuality is designed to be bound up with God’s love for us. In fact, it’s meant to be a signpost to it.” (p.120)



In the final two chapters, Allberry describes the story of who God is and his involvement in this world as a galactic romance. Jesus is the bridegroom and we are his bride. Marriage and romantic fulfilment can easily be mistaken for the greater reality it is meant to point us toward:

“Christian marriage has a purpose for and benefit to the husband and wife, but it also has the wider purpose and public benefit of being a shadow and foretaste of what God is offering to all people in Jesus.” (p.134)

The same-sex attracted reader is left waiting until the last page of the book to read a brief testimonial from the author about his own same-sex attractions and his commitment to costly celibate singleness.

This book asks some very relevant questions for our day and presents some profound answers from the Bible. It is short and easy-to-read, which I always love in a book. However, I would advise any reader to be wary of motoring through it in a couple of hours and moving on. This book contains genuinely countercultural ideas that will not be easily absorbed by hearts and minds steeped in the values of our surrounding culture. I certainly benefitted from it more on my second reading than the first, and it would be a good book to study and pray through in a small group.

By Stuart

Stuart is TFT’s Director and the editor of Ascend magazine. He has a large collection of scrap wood and is confident that eventually every piece will have its day.



Should I Stay or Should I Go?

The church is key to the Christian life. However, sometimes we find ourselves in a position to consider leaving a church for reasons other than relocation. This is a decision which should never be taken lightly since as family in Christ we are called to live in a close community. Nor should we ever leave a church without instantly seeking to join another – too many people fall between the cracks.

The Bible is silent on how and when to leave a church; at the time the New Testament was written most settlements probably only had one church. There probably wasn't even an option to leave a church for false teaching – instead, the churches in Revelation chapters 2-3 were charged to reform it from the inside. By contrast, many of us in the UK have a choice of good churches within driving distance. So, if we are dissatisfied, how can we identify whether we are at an unhealthy church, or whether our expectations are unreasonable?

False teaching

The only explicit identifier of a "bad" church in the Bible is one which defends or promotes false teaching. The Bible

stresses the importance of accurately and fully teaching the Word of God, with the awareness of the gravity and responsibility of the task: "if anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God" (1 Peter 4:11). As church members, we share responsibility with leaders to identify and exclude false teaching and teachers. The challenge is that this is rarely black and white: preaching can be true, but imbalanced, it can omit key truths, or be shallow – and sometimes it's just too full of ego. We need the Spirit's discernment – and to know our Bibles.

For those with same-sex attraction (SSA), there's an extra dynamic to consider. Does the church hold clearly to biblical teaching on sexual relationships? Does it walk the TFT-tightrope between "everything-goes" liberalism and the "God hates gays" faction on the other? If the former; it's worth honestly considering whether this is a safe place to pursue a godly lifestyle without being led astray. If the latter; consider whether fear of being "found-out" or judged just for having SSA is preventing deeper relationships from forming.

Other (good and bad) reasons for leaving

My intention is to encourage you to stay in your church wherever possible! However, there may be valid reasons for leaving, other than false teaching, although the following should not be read as a justification to leave in every scenario. Leaving a church should always be distressing – a sign that we have genuinely invested.

Relational Issues

Since the church is intended to be family, if we experience persistent loneliness and friendlessness despite actively trying to build relationships, leaving may be a wise choice since “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). It is also possible to be neglected by a church. James writes:

“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? (James 2: 15-16)

“My intention is to encourage you to stay in your church”

The New Testament writers were passionate in their concern for their readers – and in particular for their spiritual welfare (e.g. 1 Thess 2:17 – 3:13). Friendship and discipleship relationships (e.g. Titus 2:3-8) are also key to Christian growth, but perhaps particularly for those who have “left home or brothers or sisters ...” including due to same-sex attraction. Rosaria Butterfield urges Christian communities

to be hospitable and support those who might be tempted to return to affirming gay communities.

A common reason for leaving a church is due to conflict. We should be careful to not leave as a way of punishing the church (in terms of withdrawing presence, service or finances). Wherever possible, we should seek to be reconciled, practise biblical conflict management (e.g. Matthew 18: 15-20) and forgive our brother or sister. Leaving can be discouraging and confusing to the people left behind, and can cause significant damage to a church. It’s easy to believe the grass is greener on the other side and that the people or programmes are “cooler” or “a better fit” at another church, but they are probably just as weird and difficult in reality! It takes years really to get to know people, and will also take time to be entrusted with areas of ministry.

An additional relational issue may be finding ourselves constantly attracted to someone at church and thus distracted from church and worship. Alternatively, we may be inappropriately pursued by someone. Pray about it, and if possible talk to the leaders. Ultimately the safest option may be to leave that church and join another.

Leadership Issues

Often people leave churches due to issues with leadership. Indeed, God does set a very high standard for the teaching, behaviour and lifestyle of leaders (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:1-7ff, Titus 1:5-9), which few fully live up to. Regardless, the New Testament calls us to:

“Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” (Hebrews 13:17)

To our modern ears, quick to take offence at the slightest sign of overbearing behaviour, submission

“We should search ourselves for signs of consumerism”

to authority has little appeal. But so long as our leaders are shepherding, teaching faithfully, discipling and being hospitable, however imperfectly, we should seek to submit humbly. If there is a clear issue with an area of ministry, or the leader has a clear blind-spot, we should humbly present it to them, but in a way that reinforces their leadership. God’s plan may be to use us to influence the church and bring about godly change, rather than running away. If we are in conflict with them, we should present our concerns and seek to be reconciled, since we may discover common ground or a misunderstanding! But if the reconciliation fails, we should consider whether we can remain and not be divisive, since we are called to unity.

Few of us find ourselves in churches where the minister knows more about same-sex issues than we do(!). Still, we should at least expect leaders to understand some of the nuances of the biblical position, and not make idle judgemental or homophobic comments. In a perfect situation, we should have

leaders who we feel safe to discuss our SSA with and who can give good advice. But it’s good to remember that there are always people we can talk to in TFT if our church can’t provide support.

Obviously, we should never leave a church to indulge in a sinful lifestyle! Hebrews 10:26-31 is clear that no sacrifice for sins is left for the one who deliberately, persistently and unrepentantly disobeys God. We are more likely to indulge in a sinful lifestyle if we surround ourselves with people who reinforce the “rightness” of our wrong behaviour, rather than those in the church who could encourage and rebuke us. Similarly, if we are under church discipline for sinful behaviour, we should submit to it, even if it means being expelled in order that we come to our senses (1 Corinthians 5).

Service and Evangelism

Peter writes that “each one of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10). Our gifts are not things we should force on people – “I am going to use my gift of tea-making at all costs!” (à la Mrs Doyle) – and different gifts will be applied at different times in our lives, and not always the ones we want. But we should always humbly serve in some capacity.

We should search ourselves for signs of consumerism; for example, leaving a church due to a dislike of music, liturgy or style of service without justification (such as consistently unbiblical lyrics). Church attendance and church family is a commitment and is not something we should treat lightly.

Donate a Year's Subscription

Each quarter we deliver over 750 Ascend magazines free-of-charge to our members, donors and partner churches. The printing and postage of Ascend to one recipient for a year costs £4.44.

If you enjoy Ascend and want to see it bless more people, why not consider donating the price of an Ascend to TFT at truefreedomtrust.co.uk/donate



Healthy churches should have an evangelistic focus since we are commissioned with making disciples of all nations. Consider whether you would be comfortable bringing unbelieving friends along. Are you confident that they would hear, and be rightfully challenged, by the gospel and is the teaching accessible and clear for the uninitiated?

Personal Faith

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, consider: are you growing? Are there signs of fruit in your life? We should take responsibility for our relationship with God, and engage in meaningful Bible study and prayer times, but a bad church experience may impact our faith or even lead to doubt in God's goodness. Talk to God about how you feel, ask for clarity in how to relate to people at church and ask for His leading.

Conclusion

Leaving a church should never be a quick or casual decision – and our motives should be weighed to see if they are valid. Seek the counsel of a few friends who are ideally not members of your church, so as to prevent gossip and the spread of dissatisfaction. We should always ensure we talk to the

“We should never leave a church to indulge in a sinful lifestyle”

leaders before leaving, rather than just disappearing, and work together to try to find a way to stay. Since, in almost all circumstances, it is better to have a less-than-ideal church than no church at all, ensure there is a suitable local alternative before taking the leap, and seek to put down roots as swiftly as possible.

A big temptation in leaving a church is to vent to all who will listen and try to justify leaving. Instead, we should say some quiet goodbyes, strive for peace, and show respect and humility. Walk with God as you make the transition, listen to him and take the positive learnings into your new church.

By Jem

Jem is using lockdown to explore the surprisingly pleasant walks on her doorstep and is learning to bake. Initial results confirm a suspected absence of natural talent.

Sharing Life More Deeply

Same-sex attracted Christians who are committed to celibacy often live alone, and this can be lonely. While some feel that this is the only way for them personally, others really want to find a way to share life with others. This article looks at the principles and practicalities of sharing life with other people at a deeper level than the typical church/work relationships.

Finding a long-term housemate

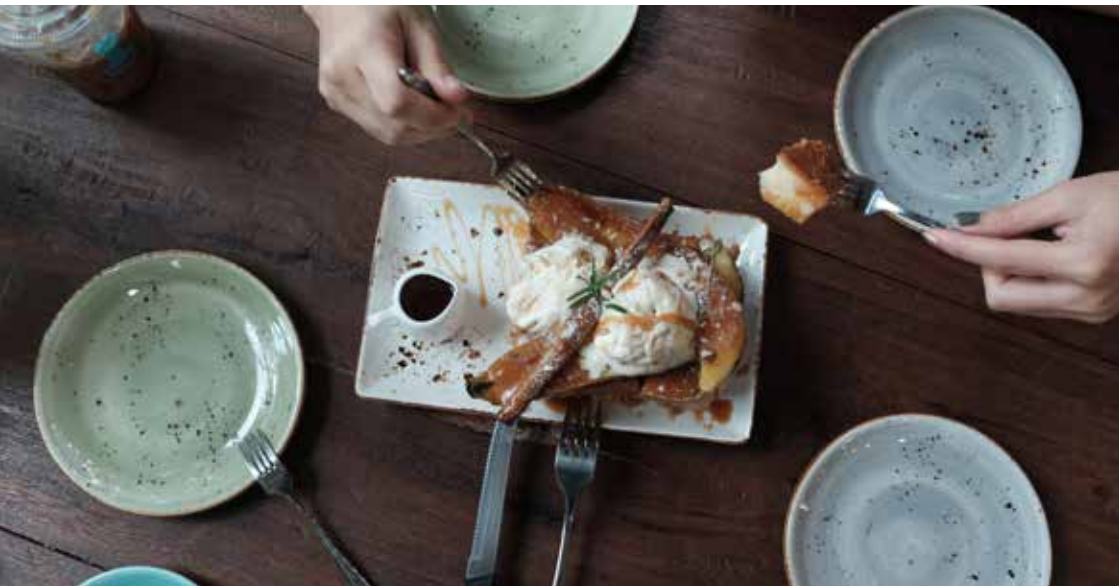
We are not talking here about taking in a lodger or sharing a house for convenience, but a significant commitment to share life as well as the living space. It would be unwise to choose just anyone who happens to be available. The two of you must know each other well and get on with each other, 'warts and all'. All parties involved also need to understand fully and completely what they are taking on and talk through the details of spending a lot of time in close proximity throughout all life's ups and downs. They must be totally honest about their motivation for sharing and be transparent with

themselves and their friend(s) about their expectations about living together and what boundaries to set.

Some people might find sharing a house too intense or fraught with temptation. Another option would be to move close to other members of a church community, perhaps as part of a church planting project, and arranging with others to share meals, house-keys, pets, and so forth.

Agreeing on the details

It is a big thing for adults to give up their independent living and share a house, but a much greater commitment for them to combine their assets and buy a house/flat together. This is an arrangement which cannot be easily reversed, and it is very important to anticipate together the possible future life events that could lead to one person needing to withdraw from the arrangement and how that would be handled fairly for both people. Even if they are not buying a house together, it is still important to consider how



much of each person's possessions become common property. Of course, none of these arrangements are the same as a lifelong "till death us do part" relationship, so there needs to be a way of dividing up common assets if one person needs to move on in the future.

“You must know each other well and be totally honest about your motivations for sharing”

Staying outward looking

It would be easy for two good friends sharing a home to focus all their energies on each other, but they must watch out for it becoming exclusive or emotionally dependent. Each person must have other friends and be involved in some different activities. It is an opportunity to model good wholesome friendship and to demonstrate a better love than the world does. It will look different from the Christian nuclear family, which has marriage (and perhaps children) at its heart.

Community and Ministry

A shared house offers a wonderful possibility for using the home for mission and fellowship. More space to accommodate guests and more hands to prepare food allows greater opportunities for hospitality (1 Peter 4:9). If it is big enough, then visitors may stay overnight and this makes the household more transparent to observers. A more significant step is to keep an open house, where friends may just drop in, but of course, this needs some boundaries. This outward focus will help the house-sharing friends not to become exclusive or inward-looking.

Your home may still not look like an 'ordinary' family home, but it is different rather than inferior. It will allow you to do things differently and reach a different set of people. Even married people may like to have somewhere to go outside of a clamorous home.

Of course, a rich and abundant spiritual life is fundamental for all of us. But Christians sharing living space must keep Christ as the focus, praying and seeking God together. As well as each person developing their personal relationship with God, it is good for fellowship and prayer to be an important part of home life (Acts 2:46).

Considering the appearance

Any pair of friends sharing a home will have to consider the impression they give to others – both Christian and non-Christian – and of course, especially if they are both openly same-sex attracted. This is perhaps easier to navigate where the household consists of more than two people sharing. There will inevitably be some misunderstandings and disapproval and only so much explanation that can be given. But Paul writes, “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality” (Eph 5:3). So, we must work hard to dispel any rumours or suspicion, however ill-founded. Remember that the reputation of the church is at stake and, by association, the name of Jesus. But those who are confident in what they are doing can give an honest

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account, model good friendship and take the opportunity to share the Gospel through this radical pure living within God's boundaries. There needs to be proper accountability to one another and also to other Christian friends. It may be wise to discuss this arrangement in advance with a church minister or elder.

Foreseeing the challenges

The most obvious challenge is that of sexual temptation. This should be worked through candidly in advance of living together. If one person has a strong attraction to the other, then the whole arrangement is almost sure to be unwise. The Bible says, "flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor 6:18), and moving into a shared house with someone you are strongly tempted to sleep with cannot be described as fleeing!

More generally, it is simply not easy to share living space with anybody. There will be friction, misunderstandings, hurts, need for time out etc and these things must all be faced and worked through. The Bible calls us to "bear with one another" (Col 3:13) and repeated forgiveness is an essential habit within a healthy household.

It is also good to talk through coping if one person is ill (physically or mentally) or faces serious financial or family problems.

"We must journey closely with Jesus - all others are just travelling companions along the way"

Holding lightly to this world

Remember that you are friends, not spouses. Sometimes friendships change and friends move on for good reason. Perhaps one person's work or family situation will move them elsewhere, or God may call them to a new place. Perhaps more painfully, the other person may get married or you may decide together that the living arrangement is simply not working out as expected. This is hard to face and reminds us that only God is 100% reliable. By investing in other relationships and getting involved in church, you can prepare for the inevitable disappointment that this would bring. So, enjoy the companionship while you can, hold everything lightly (1 Cor 7:29-31) and keep open to God.

In the end, nobody can meet our varied and diverse personal needs, including loneliness. Only God can do all that, and so we must journey closely with Jesus. All others are just travelling companions along the way.

"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33).

By Paul

At the TFT National Conference in October 2019, five members of TFT came together to contribute to a seminar Sharing Life Together. Anne, Abby, Caz, Sandra and Tim shared their stories of their various house-shares and of 'doing life together'. This article is a summary of the principles shared during that seminar.

Is It Wise To Share With My Same-Sex Friend?

Here are eight questions you could ask yourself and your friend as you navigate towards a decision as to whether it's wise (or not) to share a home with your same-sex friend. These are questions that should help you to examine your heart and discern how seriously you take your relationship with the LORD.

1. Have you asked God for wisdom in this matter and are you prepared to accept 'no' as an answer? (James 1:5)
2. Will sharing a home with this friend help you grow in your love for the LORD and for other people, or is there a danger that an unhealthy, exclusive relationship or feelings could develop? (Exodus 20:3 and Proverbs 4:23)
3. Does this friend share your values or might they be a bad influence and lead you astray from following Jesus wholeheartedly? (1 Corinthians 15:33)
4. How convinced are you that your motives for wanting to share a home with this person are pure and have you prayed and asked the Lord to test your heart in this matter? (Proverbs 16:2-3)
5. Is there any romantic or sexual attraction (current or historic) between you and your friend and, if so, how can you do everything possible to flee from and avoid sexual immorality? (1 Corinthians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 4:3)

6. Are you willing to seek counsel from other wise and trusted Christian friends in this matter and listen to dissenting views? (Proverbs 15:22 and 19:20)

7. What do your church leaders think about the proposed home share and are you willing to submit to their authority as those who keep watch over you and must give an account to the LORD? (Hebrews 13:17)

8. Do the proposed living and sleeping arrangements risk damaging your gospel witness by giving the wrong impression to unbelievers? Might it be better to share a home with two or more people to reduce any such risk? (Ephesians 5:3, Colossians 4:5)

By Jonathan

Jonathan was formerly the Director of TFT. Now with his own garden, he wonders if his dream of owning a Husky dog is a step closer to becoming reality.

These questions were originally part of an article "Is It Wise To Share A Home With My Same-Sex Friend?" published on the TFT website in March 2018

My Church Support Group

Some years ago my church, in discussion with TFT, decided to set up its own same-sex attraction support group. Our group meets three to four times a year for dinner together, a discussion around a topic/article and then prayer. A few of our members have been attending the group since the beginning, but most have joined for a season while they have been living in the area or studying at university. There have been regular comings and goings of people, but the support group has provided valuable stability and a rhythm

“I don’t have to explain why close friendships can come with complications”

to the year. As I reflect on what it means to share life together, I am struck by how important this support group has been for my own growth as a Christian and for sharing life with others. Three reasons spring to mind: the group is made up of people who ‘get it’, it helps us to feel more part of the church family and we take care to point each other to Jesus.

People who ‘get it’

One of the reasons I find our SSA support group so helpful is that I’m among other people who ‘get it’. We may have different personalities, ages and backgrounds and we may even struggle with different aspects of same-sex attraction. Still, there is an ease of being understood and of not having to explain the basics. We all want to follow Jesus with our whole lives, including our sexuality and we have the privilege

of getting to know each other beyond the politeness of small talk. My friends who don’t experience SSA are often wonderful, but they don’t always know what to ask me about my experiences of SSA or how to respond when I tell them. I can end up feeling even worse rather than better, if those friends who don’t ‘get it’ are unable (perhaps understandably) to relate to my situation. At the support group, I don’t have to explain why close friendships can come with complications, or why housing is as relevant a topic as lust. I’m among people who ‘get it’.

Part of the family

Our group is hosted by a married couple, neither of whom experiences SSA. We have been so blessed by our hosts’ hospitality over the years - their welcome, their care and their delicious dinners - but more than that, being hosted by a married couple has helped our group to feel more part of the wider church family. I can find it hard to be single in a church where that is not the norm for my age. I’m thankful that I

“It has been a real treat to be invited over by a married couple who show us that we are family”

have heard good messages from the front of the church, such as reminders that everyone is part of the church family and that family days are for all of us, not just family units of mums, dads and children. But it is one thing to be told this and another to be shown it. In a culture where it is normal for

married couples to invite other married couples over for dinner, and families go on holidays with other families, I have sometimes felt like I belong a little less than others. For members of our group, it has been a real treat to be invited over for the evening by a married couple who make an effort to show us that we are family, who tell us that they are encouraged by us and who genuinely seem to enjoy our company! Church family is supposed to be beautiful in how diverse and counter-cultural it is, and I think we get an important glimpse of that at our support group meetings.

Pointing to Jesus

We take care in our group meetings to point each other to Christ and not just to enjoy each other's company. As we discuss topics or articles together, we encourage each other to keep going in our Christian faith. We remind each

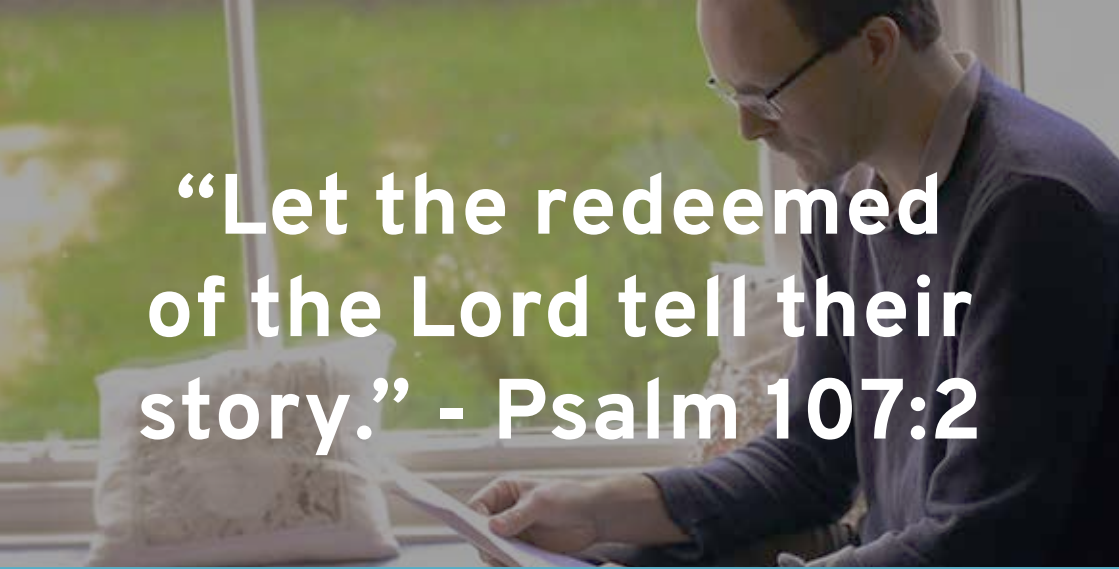
other that we are loved by our Heavenly Father and that He sees Jesus when He looks at us and we pray that the Holy Spirit will work in us to make us more like Jesus day by day. Sometimes it is disheartening to realise that your prayer requests are the same as last time, but we are not promised quick transformation! It is easier to notice a change in others, of course and to point out where God has answered prayers. We need each other for that. I find it especially encouraging to see other people with the same struggles as me persevering and hearing them talk about the Lord's goodness and faithfulness with palpable joy. Their example points me to Jesus and demonstrates that I can trust in the Lord for the strength I need to follow him and live a godly life.

By Hannah

Hannah came to faith in her mid-twenties and works for a Christian charity. She makes excellent guacamole and her taste in trainers has been described as 'party on your feet.'

“It is easier to notice a change in others than in ourselves - we need each other for that.”



A man with glasses is sitting at a table, reading a book. He is wearing a dark blue sweater. The background shows a window with a view of greenery outside. The text is overlaid on the image.

“Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.” - Psalm 107:2

Can we help tell your story?

True Freedom Trust has always recognised that sharing our personal stories of following God can be powerful, especially when our obedience has been personally costly.

We would love to encourage the church with more testimonies of how God has worked in the lives of ordinary people. This is more important than ever, as many see the prospect of a celibate life as unrealistic and miserable. We want to tell the stories of those who have found God’s provision and hope in the midst of the challenge of obedience.

For some people, this might mean recording you on video. Our team can do all the filming and editing work. We will put you at ease throughout the process, so that you can focus on telling your story. And if you only want us to show the video to a restricted audience (perhaps at a members-only conference), we would respect these conditions.

For others, you might be more comfortable with doing a sound recording or writing out your story in words.

Whichever format you prefer, we can work with you to communicate it in the best way possible. Our experience is that the process of telling your story is both a faith-building exercise for you and a great encouragement for others.

We want to share the experiences of same-sex attracted Christians who can testify that it’s possible to have a satisfying AND an obedient life.

If you would like to explore the best way for how you might share something of your story, please do get in touch with Harry or Stuart from the TFT staff team. Let us use our stories to “encourage one another and build each other up.” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

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