

Social Awareness. Living Truth.

Identity and Sexuality – Christianity and Culture

By Graeme Lauber

Culture Shift – How did we get here?

North American cultural attitudes toward sexual orientation have undergone a dizzying change over the past several decades. In a matter of less than 30 years, the word “gay” has gone from a term of insult and shame to one of pride and even of heightened social status. Much of this change has been driven by attitudes toward sexual identity. Not terribly long ago, to suggest that one’s sexuality had something important to say about “who I am” would have seemed absurd, but today it is taken for granted.

The result has been that a church that once was in the mainstream of attitudes toward sexuality now finds itself on the outside. Culture now declares that homosexuality is not just okay, but actually a cause for celebration. Christians who believe that same-sex sexual behaviour is proscribed by Scripture increasingly find that engaging with culture is difficult.

There are many reasons that the landscape has shifted so dramatically. However, two cultural beliefs in particular have contributed to the current situation:

1. *Sexual identity* – In the last few decades the culture has embraced the idea that our sexuality can tell us something important about who we are. Society now places a great deal of importance on our sexuality, and some people can spend quite a bit of time defining the sexuality label they will apply to themselves. This labelling is assumed to identify different kinds of people, and people who take the label “gay” are assumed to be in a different category from those who take the label “straight” and are even different from those who label themselves “bisexual” who are different again from those who are “pansexual”. It is assumed that these differences are inborn and unchangeable. By embracing these different labels, we believe we can assert something of who we are. That these labels refer to very real variations among people is a largely unexamined assumption in our culture.
2. *Sex is essential* – The idea that sex is critical to the emotional and psychological well-being of adults is another cultural assumption that is gaining ground. There is a genuine belief that people need to have the kind of sex they want in order to be healthy and well-rounded. This focus on sexual and romantic relationships has been fostered by countless movies and sitcoms and is rooted in Freudian psychology.

Traditionally, the church has had a role in pointing out that sex is not essential to human flourishing, but we have had a harder time responding to sexual identity. Same-sex sexual behaviour is proscribed by Scripture, and so sexual identity has been perceived as competing with Christian identity. However, since most people

believe that sexuality is unchangeable and that LGBTQ people were “born this way” and sex is essential to well-being, the church’s position has come to be seen as uncaring and even bigoted. This has created a lot of stress and even dismay for Christians who want to both love their neighbour and remain faithful to the Bible.

Sexual Identity in Culture

The language of sexual identity has taken over in culture over the past few years. In fact, speaking of our sexual identity has become so pervasive that few think to question whether or not it is a valid category or think to even ask what the phrase “sexual identity” actually means.

If asked, the average person would likely say that sexual identity has to do with whether a person sees themselves as gay, straight, bisexual or something else. When asked what these categories signify, most people would say that it’s about who a person finds romantically or sexually attractive. We could then ask further questions about things that people hold as part of their identity. Does being gay or straight tell us anything about whether or not the person has sound ethical or moral values? Most people would say that such a question is ridiculous – of course we can’t know about a person’s morals from their sexual orientation. Likewise, most people would say that you don’t have to talk a certain way, or move a certain way, or enjoy a certain type of entertainment in order to be gay.

The reality is that if we interrogate the idea of sexual identity, we find that it has a very limited significance, since it is about who we are romantically and sexually drawn to. And yet our culture has insisted that sexual orientation needs to be an important part of our personal identity and that it refers to different kinds of people. This means that gay people are somehow meaningfully or categorically different from straight people, who are different from bisexual people, and so on. The reason that this is so important is related to the second cultural trend identified above – sex and romance are essential to our well-being. In a post-Christian society, the quest for the perfect partner is the highest goal in life, and so it’s important to know who you’re attracted to in order to know how you will be able to fulfill your purpose.

These ideas can be so deeply embedded that questioning them can feel like questioning common sense so it’s good to know that it has not always been this way. Sexual identity is a relatively recent invention. No one thought of people being divided into categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” until the mid-to-late nineteenth century.¹ Before this, people knew about homosexual acts but did not really think of homosexual people. Early ideas about sexual identity suggested that homosexual people had different brains than heterosexual people and that this meant that they should not

¹ For more, see Blank, H. (2012). *Straight: the surprisingly short history of heterosexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press. NB: Blank’s book is not a Christian book and contains many ideas that are antithetical to Christian belief.

be discriminated against in law. However, to this day no scientist or researcher has been able to find a definitive physical or embodied cause of homosexuality.² These early ideas about sexuality were not refined until the 1930s and didn't enter popular culture for several more decades.

Summary:

1. In our culture, people generally believe that sexual identity refers to different types or categories of people – gay, straight, bi, and so forth.
2. However, the significance of these categories is very limited, telling us little about a person.
3. Sex and romance are of paramount importance in our culture, and so many people believe it is essential to find the right partner in order to be happy.
4. Categories of sexual identity are a relatively new invention, having been developed in the late 1800s.
5. Many people believe that sexual orientation is rooted in biology, and this is often the justification for sexual identity, but science has yet to support the idea.

A Christian View of Sexual Identity

The previous section may already make it clear why Christians should be deeply suspicious of the categories of sexual identity. We do not even have to turn to the Scriptures to begin to demonstrate that sexual identity is not nearly as powerful or important as we have often been led to believe. However, this has not prevented the church from buying into concepts of sexual identity in dangerous ways. Since it's a modern idea, sexual identity is nowhere to be found in the scriptures. In fact, the Bible regularly challenges the contemporary reader's thinking about identity and sexuality.

If we think carefully about sexual identity categories, we can see how the church has actually endorsed and used this idea. It is true that we come to different conclusions than the wider culture, but we begin with the same premise – that “homosexual” and “heterosexual” refer to different kinds of people. The difference is that whereas the wider culture has said that these two different types of people are morally equivalent, the church has said that one type is “bad” and the other type is “good”. Within the church, teaching has tended to focus on homosexuality as perverted and especially broken while heterosexuality has been seen as normal and wholesome. As a result, we have (perhaps unintentionally) created categories of bad people and good people based on sexual identity. However, both through the lens of science and history (as shown above), and through the lens of Scripture, dividing people up according to their orientation is a poor starting point for any discussion of sexuality.

Reading Romans 1 (and 2)

The clearest (and most controversial) of the New Testament's condemnations of homosexual behaviour is found in Romans 1. What this passage has to say about sexuality will be the subject of future papers, so that discussion won't be belaboured here. However,

there is one important point in Romans that relates to sexual identity in particular.

Something that can be overlooked in teaching on Romans 1 is that the chapter can be read as a set-up. Starting in verse 18, Paul is describing unrighteous people who do things that set them up in opposition to God's plan for humanity. For most of Christian history, readers have nodded along with Paul's description and by the end of the chapter many of us are thinking, “Yes, it is true that people are capable of all kinds of bad behaviour. I'm glad I'm not one of those people who engages in shameful sexual sin like that.”

When pointed out like this, most Christians can see how they've been set up for a fall. Unfortunately, when we are reading Romans most of us stop at the end of chapter one rather than reading on to the beginning of chapter two where that fall comes. Even one verse of chapter two will bring us to Paul's point;

Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. (Rom. 2:1, ESV)

In essence, Paul is saying to his readers, “You think these other people are terrible because they have sex with people of their own gender, but don't think you're any better – you're actually in the same boat.” It's a gut-punch that almost always gets overlooked in discussions of homosexuality.

The implications for sexual identity should be obvious. Christians should always abhor any system that divides people up into “good” people and “bad” people. We are all sinners, darkened in our minds and in need of the love and light of Christ. None of us are born closer to the kingdom of God than others. Dividing people into categories is not helpful and Romans tells us that neither Jews nor heterosexuals have a head-start on the path to salvation. Rather the good news of the Gospel is that “all of us have fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) and in need of God's grace and forgiveness. This is a levelling factor that is far more basic than sexual or gender identity. Our need for Jesus informs our identity at a foundational level.

The Power of Story

An important aspect of the way that we understand our identity is the stories that we tell. Stories are the way that we explain how we got to wherever it is we find ourselves today. For example, if I want to explain why I am hobbling around on crutches, I tell a story that includes going on a hike, chatting with a friend while not paying attention to where my feet were, and slipping on a particularly treacherous part of the trail.³ When it comes to identity, we tell ourselves stories all the time, most often to do with our family of origin. If our ability to work hard is part of our identity, we might say, “My parents were very hard-working and showed me the value of a dollar, which is why I have a good work ethic and am good with money to this day.” Very often, we have little anecdotes that illustrate some aspect or other of our identity development.

Very often, important parts of a person's identity are derived from their personal story – such-and-such a thing happened to me, and as a result I am this way. However, there are also stories that our

²For example, see Reardon, S. (2019, August 29). *Massive Study Finds No Single Genetic Cause of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior*. Retrieved from <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/massive-study-finds-no-single-genetic-cause-of-same-sex-sexual-behavior/>.

³For more on how story contributes to identity, see Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989) pg. 48.

community tells that contribute to our self-understanding. Very often young people become interested in the stories of their families as they are developing a sense of self – they want to know how their family came to live where they do and perhaps how their parents met and so on. This is an effort to understand how they fit into a larger story – it is not their personal story, but it is a story that they fit into and that helps to explain how they found themselves where they are. To say to a child, “Your grandfather was good with his hands, just like you” can give that child a sense of place in the world and a sense of identity that is connected with the past.

One of the strengths of a good story is that it works at the level both of our intellect and emotions. When we are told a good story, we will learn something in our heads, but our hearts will also be moved. When I am told the story of how my own grandfather died in his 40s of a heart attack, I learn some facts about a heritage of heart disease, but I also learn important lessons about grief and loss and how fatherhood has been understood in my family. I can know intellectually that I am my father’s son, but the stories my family tells help me to feel the connection to that reality deeply and help me to understand an important aspect of who I am today.

When I become a Christian, I join a new family, and that new family has a new set of stories that help me understand my place in the world. These stories show me how God has dealt with people throughout history, how the story of creation and salvation have unfolded and how we have got to the place where we find ourselves. The stories of Scripture are not meant only to instruct my intellect, they are meant to move my heart, to tell me something about who I am.

In this sense, Christian identity and sexual identity have found themselves in competition. There is no question that many LGBTQ identities are based on good stories. There are many stories out there, but one version of a sexual identity story has the following features⁴:

1. A person discovers or detects his or her sexual orientation as different from those around.
2. The person spends a lot of time in concealment or “in the closet”. This is a time of great suffering.
3. The person, often courageously and even heroically, overcomes shame and declares themselves to the world (“coming out”).
4. The person comes to peace with themselves and may or may not find acceptance from other people.

This story is very compelling. It has the drama of a detective story as a person discovers their sexuality, and it has darkness and suffering that is overcome by heroic effort that leads to freedom and self-acceptance. For an individual, a story like this can affect the heart deeply even if the intellectual aspects of sexual identity (as shown above) are deeply unsatisfying.

While sexual identity has been able to tell good personal stories that move the heart, the church is in a position to tell good community and family stories that move both the heart and the mind. As people hear these stories and realize that they are not just something written on a page but are actually part of the story of the people of God in which I play a part, they can begin to see how their own identity can be grounded in God. The stories of Scripture include stories about

God’s design for sexuality, and it is to the first of these we will now turn.

Genesis and Sexuality

An important aspect of a Scriptural approach to sexual identity is to go back to the story of God’s original plan for marriage and sexuality as revealed in the early chapters of the Bible. In Genesis chapter 1 we read, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” (ESV) With one short statement, Genesis establishes male and female as fundamental categories for what it means to be human and connects these categories to the image of God in humanity. The language and the structure of the verse shows us that there is an important (but mysterious) sense in which our creation as male and female is part of the way in which humans bear the image of God.

In chapter 2, Genesis expands on the creation of humans;

²² And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man.”

²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (ESV)

The categories of gender that Genesis establishes in chapter 1 have now been tied back to sexuality. Eve is literally from Adam’s bone, and marriage is profoundly representative of this fact, as the flesh and bone separated in the act of creation are reunited in the act of marriage. Genesis portrays marriage and sex between a man and a woman as pointing back to God’s good creation and His design for what it means to be human. The Biblical witness is that our biological gender (male and female) is closely tied to our sexuality – the proper use of our bodies in sex. When we tell the Genesis story as a story about our sexuality, we begin to see how we fit into God’s good plan for us and how sexuality is rightly incorporated into sexual identity.

Marriage in the New Testament

Many people have made the comment that Jesus Himself is silent on the subject of homosexuality. This is the sort of red-letter reading of the Bible that most Christians could easily reject (we read the whole Bible, not just the very words of Christ.) However, it may be helpful to note that Jesus does explicitly endorse the view of marriage outlined in Genesis. In Mark 10, when questioned about divorce, Jesus says;

⁶ But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, ⁸ and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate. (ESV)

With this quote, Jesus not only affirms the Genesis account of gender, sexuality and marriage, but, in just a few words, he elevates the sanctity of marriage as two people of the opposite sex joined together by God.

⁴ For more on LGBTQ stories, see, *Saxey, Esther. Homoplot the Coming-out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity.* (New York: P. Lang, 2008), 40-53. This is not a book written from a Christian perspective.

The Genesis statement also appears in Paul's instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5. Here, Paul connects the Biblical vision of marriage to Christ's relationship with His church. This is entirely consistent with the Genesis account – under the old covenant marriage pointed to God as the loving creator; in the new covenant, it additionally points to God as the loving redeemer. In Ephesians, Paul is picking up on a theme repeated over and over and over in the Bible of marriage modelling the relationship between God and His people. Marriage is not a mere analogy or symbol of the way God relates to us; it runs far deeper than that. Paul warns us, however, that the precise nature of the connection between this relationship and marriage is a mystery (Eph. 5:32). Here we see that the story that was begin in Genesis is expanded and woven into the story of the New Testament.

Summary:

1. Romans 1 and 2 show us that dividing people into categories based on "good" and "bad" is a mistake. We are all equally in need of God's saving grace in Christ Jesus.
2. Stories can be an important source of personal identity.
3. In its very first chapters, the Bible tells a story that establishes marriage as between a man and a woman and shows that this points to God's role as creator.
4. In Mark 10 (cf. Matt. 19) and Ephesians 5, the New Testament affirms and expands on this definition of marriage and makes it clear that it is a sexually exclusive union.

Action for Churches – What Can We Do About It?

There are several steps that churches can take to respond to the challenge of sexual identity:

Challenge Cultural Assumptions

Earlier we said that current attitudes rest on two key assumptions: that sexuality can tell us something important about our identity and that sex is essential to human flourishing. Challenging these assumptions and building a Biblical and Godly vision for sexuality is an important aspect of the church's witness on these issues.

First, the church can testify to the fact that sexuality does not signify categorical distinctions among people. The church can sometimes be guilty of telling LGBTQ people that their sexuality is not their identity (and that they need to find their identity in Christ) but then go on to treat those same people as though their sexuality is actually very important. One of the most significant ways we've done this is by suggesting that it's important for gay people to become straight.

However, if we say that sexual identity is not really very important, then to be intellectually consistent we must also say that gay people are not meaningfully different from straight people.⁵ If the sexual identity of "gay" competes with Christian identity, then so does the

identity category "straight". To think of ourselves as being defined in any way by our sexuality is a mistake that we need to reject for all followers of Christ, not just a few. Christians all share the same identity. On one hand, that identity is "sinner": everyone's sexuality is broken in some sense; everyone is subject to the breakdown of lust or of using physical pleasure as a substitute for real love; everyone is in need of Jesus' healing and restoration. The precise nature of the need will vary from person to person, but the fact of the need is the same for everyone. On the other hand, and much more importantly, a Christian identity means that we are all loved by God as His children. Jesus stands ready to provide the forgiveness and healing that we all so desperately need. He meets each one of us right where our need is the greatest. We are all in need of forgiveness and restoration, and through Jesus, God provides all of that and more. This is a simple statement of the gospel that can easily get lost in the debate.

People may object that "straight" people are closer to God's design of marriage and sexuality, however, it is this perspective that has communicated that homosexual behaviour is a "worse sin" than other sexual sins such as fornication, adultery and lust with someone of the opposite sex. God's will is not that men would lust after women or that a woman would fantasize about being with a man other than her husband. God's will is that we would be free of lust and devoted either to celibacy or our opposite-sex spouse (see Matt. 5:27,28; Mark 10:2-9; 1 Cor. 7; Eph. 5:25-33; 1 Tim. 3:1,2). This Biblical vision of devotion is impossible for all people without Jesus' help in restoring our hearts, minds and actions. Purity, whether in marriage or in celibacy, comes through our complete dependence on Jesus. This is true for all Christians whether they are same sex attracted or have heterosexual desires. Being heterosexual does not give anyone an upper hand on morality.

This has implications for our view of the sinfulness of same-sex desire. We all have desires that pull us away from God's plan for marriage and sex. Same-sex desire is neither more nor less sinful than any desire for someone other than our opposite-sex spouse. God holds us accountable for what we do with our desires – indulging them in fantasy or action. Same-sex desire (like heterosexual desire) is about the nature or direction of the temptation to fall away from God's plan.⁶ Having same sex attraction and yet putting those desires aside and choosing not to act upon them in either thought or deed is no different in eyes of God than to have opposite sex attraction and yet to choose to not allow your mind to entertain lust or to act upon your desires. Choosing to follow God's directives for purity and sexuality is a costly obedience for both straight and gay Christians.⁷

None of this is to say that sexual orientation is unimportant. In fact, it is a significant part of our lives, especially for people who find that their attractions do not fit the "normal" category of straight. My own same-sex attractions have taken years to walk through, and these feelings have shaped many aspects of my spiritual life as I have tried to sort out what they mean for my relationships, for my ministry and for my walk with the Lord. Often the effects of these

⁵ For more on sexual identity, see Paris, J. W. (2011). *The end of sexual identity: Why sex is too important to define who we are*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

⁶ James 1:14,15 talks about the way in which our desires lead to temptation and sin. Some will read this passage and interpret it to mean that temptation and sin are entirely different things. Others will understand the passage to be saying that bad desires lead to bad thoughts and actions. Whichever way we read this passage, we can all agree that James is pointing to the goodness of God. God does not toy with us by setting a goal for us and then put obstacles in our way – He loves us and gives us gifts to support us as we seek to follow His plans for us.

⁷ Yarhouse, M. A., Zaporozhets, O. (2019). *Costly obedience: What We Can Learn from the Celibate Gay Christian Community*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

attractions are the result of the fear, isolation and shame that I have felt. However, my sexual feelings have also forced me to think deeply about what it means to be a man, about the role and importance of marriage and celibacy in the church, and ultimately they have driven me into a desperate dependence on Jesus to live a Christian life day-to-day. These deep valleys have to be walked through, they cannot be avoided, and Christians are called to walk these paths together.

Secondly, the church needs to show the world that sex is not required for personal well-being. Our Lord was a man who had a fulfilling life that was full of love, but He never married and He never had sex. Sexual fulfillment is not the chief end of our humanity. While the church has generally sought to keep sex in its rightful place, we have sometimes been guilty of elevating marriage above where it belongs. Where the world has said that sex is necessary for human happiness, the church has simply substituted marriage and encouraged people to get married as a sign of maturity and completion. This has been done in spite of Paul's statement that a person who marries does well, but a person who remains single does even better (1 Cor. 7:38).

There may be many people in our churches who will not be able to marry for all kinds of different reasons. These reasons may include that they have not found someone of the opposite sex to whom they are attracted, or that they have a lifestyle that is not conducive to marriage. Sometimes a person may even choose not to marry in order to devote themselves to God's work. In every instance, the church is called upon to support the vocation of singleness and celibacy by being the family of God for people who are unmarried. Every human being longs to be important to at least a few other people. We all need to be loved and to experience emotional intimacy with others. Single people should be able to turn to the church to have their needs for love and belonging met.

Build Community

Community is non-optional if the church is ever to offer a realistic option of Biblical sexuality. But community is not only essential to support the single/celibate vocation, it is important to every aspect of the Christian walk. Knowing that we are members of the family of God is an important aspect of Christian identity, especially when we know we can bring our whole selves, the acceptable and unacceptable, to that family.

Many of us have experienced pressure at church to pretend that we're someone we're not, and church leaders, far from being immune from this pressure, are actually especially prone to it. There are certain expectations of what a holy life will look like, and we all want to measure up. Some of these problems are caused because we have forgotten the first part of the gospel – the part where we understand that we are all sinners dependent on Jesus for healing and transformation.

To help people grow, the church needs to be a safe place for them to bring the brokenness and difficulties they face in their life. This is different than being a place where people can say whatever they want and expect unqualified support and enthusiasm. It means that people have at least one safe place where they can be honest when they know their spiritual life isn't going very well. It also means that everyone has

someone to walk with them through moments of doubt, failure or sin with the goal of restoration, healing and freedom.

The best way to create a community where people can be honest is to model it. Leadership needs to be bold in being vulnerable so that others also have permission to open up. This is always a tricky balance, since people will hesitate to follow someone they think is a mess, but sincerity and authenticity from leadership that does not stray into neediness can go a long way to creating the community that Scripture envisions.

Care for the Whole Person

To really sustain a person, personal identity needs to affect a person at the levels of both the head and the heart. As we've seen, through the stories it tells, LGBTQ identity can work powerfully at the level of the heart but is actually very limited when it comes to intellectual rigour. Christianity, on the other hand, has powerful tools to move both the mind and the emotions, but we have not always done a good job of caring for the emotional lives of the people in the pews. Many Christians understand their faith intellectually, but their hearts are not deeply engaged.

If there is one lesson that the New Testament teaches us over and over, it is that people are changed when they open their hearts to an encounter with Jesus. People's identities are transformed from adulterers, thieves, demoniacs, persecutors of the church and even fisherman to disciples of Jesus and members of the family of God through meeting the Saviour. By offering opportunities for encounter with God, churches can begin to help people with the same identity transformation. Fortunately, these types of opportunities are becoming more and more common in churches through encounter weekends and hearing God seminars.

When people have an encounter with Jesus, their story is changed in new and exciting ways. They now have a personal story that is integrated with the stories of the Bible and the community of faith that has the ability to move the heart every bit as much or more than the stories told by LGBTQ identity. Every story of encounter with Jesus is precious and holds power to make lasting change in peoples' lives (Rev. 12:11).⁸

One final word – the only hope for humanity is found in the person of Jesus Christ. It is important to remember that the church is not called to bring people to a particular view of sexuality. Rather it is our first priority to bring people to Jesus. We are not called to grimly keep our desires and wishes in check until we finally get to heaven, we are invited to enjoy a relationship with Jesus right now. We are not called to live our days in loneliness and isolation, we are called to find love and connection with God and with His people. It is only as the love and beauty of God in Christ Jesus fills up our hearts that our identities are transformed, and we find that our desires for other things, including same-sex relationships, are displaced. Churches don't have to do anything special to minister to same-sex attracted Christians, they simply need present Christ and provide genuine opportunities to encounter Him in spirit and in truth.

⁸ There are a number of excellent books of same-sex attracted Christians recounting their walk with Jesus. Two excellent examples are: Hill, W. (2017). *Washed and waiting: Reflections on Christian faithfulness and homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Bennett, D. (2018). *A war of loves: The unexpected story of a gay activist discovering Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

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Editorial Comment:

The SALT Commission (Social Awareness Living Truth) is grateful to the author for providing us with their academic and personal exploration of this topic. We encourage all readers to prayerfully consider how to integrate this culturally relevant information into their Biblical worldview and ministry context.