

Gay Youth? - Youthwork Article

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Thirty years ago it was never talked about in society, let alone our churches. Today, it's all over the TV and the media and with shows like *Queer as Folk* attracting high ratings and critical acclaim, the issue of homosexuality is mainstream and accepted by large parts of society, if not in the church. But what should our response as youth workers be, not just in teaching around the area of sexuality but more importantly, dealing pastorally with those youngsters in our church for whom this is a personal issue?

In this article I will begin by surveying the debate over the Scriptural texts and then move on to examining the pastoral work that needs to be done when dealing with this subject and teenagers who may be struggling. I certainly don't intend to be comprehensive or to provide you with a quick-fix solution to this issue, but I do hope I will provoke you to start to think deeper about this issue and how you should respond to it, on a theological, pastoral and practical level.

The Debate over Sexuality

At present there is a furious debate amongst theologians as to what the Bible does and doesn't say about homosexuality. The traditional viewpoint is that the Bible forbids all kinds of homosexual activity. But what are the texts that are pertinent to our understanding?

The first reference to homosexual activity is the destruction of Sodom (hence "sodomy") and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. Although Jude 7 tells us that these cities were destroyed for sexual immorality and Peter talks about the cities being made an example of because of their ungodliness, the common objection to these passages being actually about rape and not homosexual activity per se should be taken into account. If one wanted to build a case against homosexual activity, Genesis 19 is not the best place to start.

The verses in Leviticus and the coverage by Paul in Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 6 are much stronger cases against homosexual activity. The Leviticus passages (18:22 and 20:13) use the words "arsenos" and "koites" in the Greek translation which literally mean "man" and "lying sexually" and these are picked up by Paul when he uses them to create a word "arsenokoites", which he uses in 1 Corinthians and in 1 Timothy. In the NIV this word is translated as "homosexual offender" and "pervert" which adds a moral opinion to the act that is not explicitly present in the Greek at that point. The ESV uses the phrase "men who practise homosexuality", which understands that the word "arsenokoites" does not in and of itself imply sinfulness.

That having been said, the context of 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy clearly show that such actions (arsenokoites) are wrong. The "arsenokoites" will not inherit the Kingdom of God, together with idolaters, thieves and adulterers. It does need to be pointed out here that Paul is not implying that a single act of "arsenokoites" will disbar one from the Kingdom, in the same way that a single act of theft or idolatry will not either. What Paul is talking about here are specific life-style choices, all of which bring one in danger of losing the Kingdom. For Paul there is no difference between somebody who proactively engages in "arsenokoites" and somebody who is persistently and unrepentantly greedy or drunk.

A common objection here is that "arsenokoites" does not actually mean all homosexual activity, but only activity around prostitution and temple rituals. For some this allows Paul to be condemning incorrect homosexual behaviour and not consensual acts, but such an approach doesn't really get to grips with the roots of the word "arsenokoites", the fact that Paul has created

this word and he has done so from the Leviticus condemnation of all homosexual acts. Paul's etymological link with Leviticus is alongside his theological link.

Romans 1 presents an even more compelling injunction on homosexual activity than these two uses of Paul of "arsenokoites". Paul's citation of homosexual behaviour is as an example of the way that humans have left the path that God wants them to be on. Men are inflamed with lust for one another, not because they are intrinsically evil as homosexuals, but rather because of the general corruption of the world. Homosexual attraction is seen here as simply one aspect of the way that the original intent for humanity has been corrupted through humanity's rejection of God (Romans 1:18 -23). Homosexual behaviour here is one specific example of the general fallenness of verses 29-31 and not a special case of "super-sin".

Of course, not everybody agrees with these interpretations. Books like Michael Vasey's "Strangers and Friends" have attempted to readdress the Biblical texts and in particular challenge the meaning of words like "arsenokoites" and "malakoi" as referring to all homosexual practice. Rather, Vasey (and Boswell and Countryman as well) would argue that these proscriptions are more to do with issues like pederasty (sexual activity with boys) rather than all homosexual activity. When tackling the verses in Romans, the argument against the traditional line is that those who have "exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones" are natural heterosexuals who have turned to homosexual practice. The prohibition in the eyes of Vasey (and Rowan Williams, the new Archbishop of Canterbury) is not upon homosexual activity per se, but rather heterosexuals engaging in homosexual activity (and vice-versa). Williams manages to argue a coherent theology of sexual intimacy in his lecture "The Body's Grace" and then, making the above assumption about Romans 1, applies it to homosexual activity. Even if one takes the traditional line of homosexual activity, The Body's Grace is well worth the read, if only to understand where the new Primate of the Church of England is coming from.

It's worth mentioning before we leave behind the issue of what the Bible says that Robert Gagnon, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, has written the definitive conservative understanding of the texts in his book "The Bible and Homosexual Practice". Although a long read, it carefully examines the arguments of those like Vasey, Williams and Boswell and verse by verse tackles each of the issues and is well worth the time if you want to get to grips with the Biblical texts themselves.

Gay or not Gay?

If the popular view holds, then people's sexuality can tend to be classified in a very polar way – you are either homosexual (sexually attracted to those of the same sex) or heterosexual (sexually attracted to those of the other sex). The reality is that sexuality is much more complicated than this simple bi-polar model. Though some use the label "bisexual" to describe those who are sexually attracted to both sexes, most people's sexuality is an individual thing. We are Petersexual, Martinsexual, Joannasexual. Within that personal sexuality, shaped by our own experiences and circumstances, may appear elements of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Also, as our sexuality is personal to ourselves, in the same way that tastes and desires change over the years, our sexuality can fluctuate as new experiences come our way.

This is especially pertinent in our understanding of teenagers' sexuality. Though the old idea that most boys go through a homosexual stage is now no longer advanced by many, teenagers are in the process of forming their sexuality, shaped by their childhood and present experiences, and as such a homosexual experience during these formative years does not necessarily mean an adult homosexual orientation. As hormone ridden bodies are more susceptible to emotional stimuli, it is not surprising that individual events in teenagers' lives may trigger one-off sexual responses. This is particularly pertinent for teenage boys, at a time when the sexual organs seem to have a life of their own!! I have spoken to a number of teenage boys who have normal heterosexual attractions

but have had uncontrolled sexual reactions in changing rooms. On the whole, these are not signs of homosexual attraction but simply untamed sexual libido.

Another factor to bear in mind when discussing labelling of sexual preference is that Scripture is deathly silent on the subject of sexual orientation. Whereas Scripture clearly defines (and affirms as equal – Gal 3:26 -29) people as being of different sexes, races, cultural groups, never does it mention orientation. The entire Scriptural debate over homosexuality is to do with sexual activity, not sexual preference. From the texts in Leviticus to the Romans passage, the condemnation is couched in terms of activity, not orientation.

This is hugely important, because often young people (and sadly those older as well) hear the message that homosexuality, the sexual orientation, is itself intrinsically sinful. When teenagers find themselves in a situation where they experience homosexual attraction, this can cause huge amounts of self-hate and loathing.

One boy who I've spoken with, Mark, asked these simple questions, "Why did God make me this way? Why did God create me sinful?" These questions came from a perception of homosexual attraction itself being sinful, rather than homosexual actions. It is often this guilt and shame, guilt and shame that some parts of the church do nothing to counter that is the first issue to be dealt with when dealing pastorally in this area. It is also this guilt and shame that may very likely prevent a teenager struggling in this area coming to somebody for help in the first place.

At its core, we need to help teenagers struggling with sexuality to come to a healthy understanding of their identity, warts and all.

Sexual and Personal Identity

As we discussed above, the current framework that our society operates in is a bi-polar world of sexuality. You're either gay or straight (and a "lucky" few are bisexual) and once you've worked out which you are, that's the life that you lead. Since teenage years are particularly formative, establishing an identity based upon sexuality can be one way for teenagers to locate themselves in the world. Often, homosexual feelings lead to a sense of dislocation from a teenagers peer group, with the consequential lack of identity that the peer group brings. This identity with the peer group amongst teenagers is not necessarily created simply by hanging out with friends and joining in their activities, rather it is the very self-identification with others in that group. If a teenager is experiencing homosexual attraction whilst his/her peer group is experiencing heterosexual attraction, this can lead to a level of dislocation with the teenagers' peers, even if the teenager is an established part of the group. There is nothing so self-alienating as being different.

This is the reason why the gay community values "coming out" and "gay pride" so highly. Many people growing up with homosexual attraction feel an increasing sense of non-identification with same-sex peers (and, as we will see below, in many cases homosexual attraction is a consequence of non-identification with same-sex peers, not simply a precursor) and that leaves them feeling in a void as to who they are. Amongst boys struggling with homosexuality there is often a keen sense of difference to other boys, even if that difference cannot be identified. Many of the teenagers I have spoken with have identified a lack of identity at the root of their sexuality issues. "Coming out" is an opportunity to establish an identity. Now, instead of being adrift on a sea of sexuality and personality, the "gay" individual knows who they are. They have a story, a meaning, a purpose, an identity. "Gay" becomes something to be proud of, not necessarily because there is great pride in simply being homosexual, but rather because it helps explain who they are. It is an explanation of their situation and emotions even if it is not a validation.

It is important not to underestimate this psychological effect. Sexual identity is a crucial factor in the establishment of any teenager's understanding of their being and an identity that makes sense of a teenager's emotions can be an important tool in establishing adult beliefs and behaviours. If you have the time, root out a copy of Andrew Sullivan's essay "Virtually Abnormal", which is a remarkable piece of writing on gay identity. Andrew Sullivan is a gay catholic writer who is HIV positive, whose articles on the nature of sexuality are informative and challenging. Sullivan is honest enough to be open about the causes of homosexuality and shies away from advocating a purely nature based hypothesis.

As Christians however, we need to be aware of what the Bible says about identity. Psalm 139:14-16 tells us that each one of us is a unique creation of God's, "wonderfully and fearfully made". A basic identity as a human being lies not in sexuality but simply in being human. As such, regardless of their sexual orientation, all teenagers are 100% lovingly crafted and shaped by God. Whilst this may at first seem obvious, getting a grasp of this is fundamental in laying the foundations for any pastoral work in this area.

The more pertinent question that a teenager might ask you however is "Is it right for me to identify as a 'Gay Christian'". This raises all sorts of issues. Such a question is not in itself asking for a validation of homosexual activity, simply a way of describing the orientation that a teenager finds him/herself with.

It is interesting in this regard to see whether Scripture ever identifies people as "X Christians". Passages like Galatians 3:28 seem to indicate that labels such as "Jewish Christian" or "Female Christian" do not really make sense in the framework of the Christian community, because they create boundaries that the gospel intends to bring down. In the same way, a label such as "gay Christian" establishes a theological identity that is not necessarily valid. On a first level, Christians are identified simply by being Christians. On a second level, the label "gay" brings in a sub-identity that then takes it's validity from the main identity (i.e., the statement "gay Christian" implies that the label "gay" and all connotations based on that is as valid as the label "Christian").

This is an important concept for youngsters to get their heads around, because words are powerful things and can deeply affect our self-awareness and identity. For many teenagers, self-identifying as "gay" can lead to a solidification of that identity. This is especially vital in our modern society that polarises sexuality and demands that people identify themselves as either gay or straight.

How do we then as youth-pastors help teenagers struggling with self-identification as homosexual? Well, what I have written above is not meant to be a denial of what a teenager is actually experience. Teenagers who are struggling with their sexuality need to be open and honest about the situation they are in. Denial is not a route to healing. Rather, the issue is whether the particular aspect of the fallenness of humanity that the specific teenager is dealing with should be allowed to dictate that teenager's identity. Christian teenagers struggling with sexuality need to be pointed to passages like Hebrews 10:8-14 that show that despite any current fallenness as a human being, Jesus has made the perfect sacrifice for their sins and that God views them as redeemed human beings. Their current fallen feelings and emotions (and all teenagers have fallen feelings and emotions around their sexuality, even if not in homosexual areas) do not prevent them in any way being a Christian and being loved by God.

What causes Homosexuality?

This is possibly the question that most youth pastors want to know and I guess a number of you have jumped straight to this paragraph. If we know what the causal roots of homosexuality are then surely it should be an easy job to sort it out?

The argument between the “nature” and “nurture” camps of homosexual development has been going for over a hundred years and will probably continue after most of us are pushing up daisies. What I will do here is swiftly outline the key “nature” arguments and then spend a bit more time in the “nurture” area, explaining current thinking amongst Christians working pastorally in this field.

The nature arguments can be broadly divided into genetic, biological and biochemical. The most popular theory is that homosexuality is somehow genetic and this has been supported by reports of discoveries of gay genes by scientists. The truth is a bit more subtle. Genes are causal only in combination with each other, and the widely trumpeted “gay gene” was actually a genetic sequence in an area called Xq28 on the X chromosome. Although Hamer, the publisher of this research, received much publicity when the initial paper was produced in the July 1993 issue of *Science*, there was a substantial body of criticism of his work and the claims were quickly discredited. As a commentator in the *New Scientist* wrote, “Hamer's gene, whatever it turns out to be, is neither necessary nor sufficient to determine homosexual orientation”. Hamer himself later said “There will never be a test that will say for certain whether a child will be gay. We know that for certain”.

If there is no gay gene (and with the human genome project almost complete this is more and more a certainty) then is homosexuality biologically determined? Scientists like LeVay have argued that certain parts of the brain are different for gay men compared to heterosexual men. However, LeVay's conclusions from his work on the hypothalamus was never repeated by others, and he also drew criticism for not being certain of the sexuality of the men whose brains he examined (he assumed that all those who had died of AIDS were gay).

Others have argued that homosexuality is caused biochemically. Scientists like Dornier have claimed that prenatal hormonal influences may affect homosexuality. However, most of the research in this area has been done on animals and little proof exists of any effects on humans.

Beyond “nature” causes there is also a large school of thought, not all Christian, that seeks a “nurture” explanation for homosexuality. In this viewpoint, homosexuality is caused by events in a person's childhood that cause an emotional, psychological “malformation” of normal sexuality. Drawing on the work of some post-war psychologists, Christian counsellors like Elizabeth Moberly and Leanne Payne have built a model of sexuality development that seems to fit the experiences of many Christians who experience homosexual attraction. Briefly expressed, the theory is that some event or events in a child's life cause it to disconnect from a normal understanding of its sexual identification. Around puberty, the underdeveloped sexual identity becomes skewed and becomes orientated towards what it lacks. Simply put, a boy who does not have a strong enough male identity becomes sexually orientated towards men in order to have what he is not. Elizabeth Moberly calls this a “same-sex relational deficit” and Leanne Payne describes the sexual attraction that follows as “sexual cannibalism”, the desire for that which one wishes to be (as cannibals seek to eat only those who qualities they wish to ingest).

What can cause such a disconnection from proper sexual development and identity? Payne et al put a large amount of the focus upon the child's relationship with its same-sex parent. For examples, boys learn what it is to be a man from their father and from his interaction with other men, and then from the child's own interaction with it's same-sex peers. If something prevents the boy having a proper male role-model then the process of self-identification and security in being a man may not take place. This can be for several reasons – an absent father, a father who is present but emotionally absent, a father who unintentionally belittles the boy's maleness, a mother who is too dominating and overpowers the relationship between the boy and his father. Even individual events can be powerfully formative. One teenager I spoke to remembers a time in his nursery when the other boys would not allow him to play cars with them. It was at this point that he chose to emotionally disconnect himself from his same-sex peers (they did not want him so he did not need them) and this pattern of disconnection continued up-to and through puberty,

when his valid needs for same-sex affirmation and identification manifested itself as homosexual attraction.

If such models of homosexual development are true, then leads us to an acute observation. Homosexuality is not the problem itself, rather it is the symptom of an underlying malaise, that of immature self development. Dealing pastorally around the issue then is to help a teenager to discover the root issues in his/her life and to bring healing into those, not just specifically homosexual attraction. At its core, such pastoral work strikes at the heart of the identity of every Christian, not just those struggling with "gay issues". As Leanne Payne writes, "The healing of the homosexual is the healing of us all".

What many Christians have found, including myself, is that bringing God's healing into the deepest parts of our lives can transform someone's sexuality. As the underlying issues are dealt with, the symptoms (i.e. homosexual attraction) can dissipate and in some cases disappear. Some find that homosexual attraction vanishes entirely; some find that whilst present, it simply becomes less of an issue in their life. For youth pastors, there is a difficult job when working in this area of not holding out impossible expectations (a complete "cure" of homosexuality) whilst also offering some hope. Teenagers are especially vulnerable and impressionable and can form opinions and future preferences and practices on the slightest of provocations.

Moving On

There are a number of excellent resources for exploring this issue further:

UK Organisations Dealing with this Issue

True Freedom Trust
www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk
PO Box 13
Prenton
Wirral
CH43 6BY
0151 653 0773

Living Waters
www.living-waters-uk.com
PO Box 1530
London
SW1W 0WF
020 7630 1044

GHOBE
www.ghobe.org.uk
P.O. Box 5511
Inverness
IV1 2ZH
01463 226 966

Further Reading

Bergner, Mario – Setting Love in Order
Comiskey, Andrew – Pursuing Sexual Holiness
Keane, Christopher – What Some of you Were (An anthology of testimonies of healing from homosexuality)

Medinger, Alan – Growth into Manhood
Moberly, Elizabeth – Homosexuality, A New Christian Ethic
Payne, Leanne – The Broken Image