

Theology Matters

A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry

Vol 14 No 3 • May/June 2008

The Family of God and Healing Same-Sex Attraction

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The Human Family and the Family of God

There is no better metaphor to describe the Church than the one the apostle Paul used. He described the Church as the “people, body, and dwelling” of God.¹ The Church is the family and “home” of God because God calls us his sons and daughters: “I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty” (I Cor. 6:18). Jesus described those who follow him (the Church) as his own family:

“Who are my mother and brothers?” And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mark 3: 33-35).

The image of God is described in relational terms as male and female (Gen. 1:27) and as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 16: 5-11). God created a people for himself through the family of Abraham in which the Messiah, Jesus, came into the world, and later God “adopted” Gentiles into this family of God—not through a human bloodline—but through the blood of Jesus.

In love he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ.... Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” So you are no longer a slave, but God’s children; and since you are

his children, he has made you also heirs. (Eph. 1:5; Gal. 4:6-7)

The idea of “family” is not just a social construct but a theological truth.²

It is God’s Word of creation that upholds the basic humanity of family, and it is God’s work of covenant love that outlines the contours of family as the form of humanity that reflects his own image and likeness. We view the privilege of parenting and pleasures of human love and sexuality as the social and spiritual realization of God’s divine purpose for marriage and family. From the perspective of the church, as the new family of God, the human family is liberated from its own failures and fears, and each person is affirmed as having a place in the kingdom. Through Jesus Christ, the brother to whom we are connected by grace, we are all brothers and sisters. We are family.³

We cannot escape the fact that we as human beings are connected to other people. Who we are and what we do affects the people God has put into our lives. This is especially true in the context of our families.

A person’s identity is formed in the family of origin. In fact, until puberty it is hard to think of ourselves apart from our family. It is here we pick up the majority of our attitudes, beliefs, and values. Our

self-concept is shaped by what we believe our parents think of us.⁴

Because of this reality, it is imperceptive to think that same-sex attraction in an adolescent or adult has not been shaped in some way by the dynamic in his or her family of origin. In turn, if broken familial relationships contributed to a person's unwanted same-sex attraction, it would follow that restored familial relationships via the family of God would contribute to his or her healing.

The Male and Female Same-Sex Struggle

Male homosexuality plays out differently than female homosexuality; however, the formation of gender-identity and the underlying root causes of same-sex attraction are very much the same in men and women.

First, before explaining the common root causes of same-sex attraction, it is important to note that there is no evidence to show that homosexuality is genetic.⁵ There may be inborn personality temperaments in men and women which may make them more susceptible to experiencing same-sex attraction, but there is no conclusive scientific evidence that same-sex attraction is in-born.⁶ However, if it is proven to be so in the future, this will not prevent us from exercising our freedom to overcome our genetic predispositions, just as we fight the genetic predisposition toward diabetes, obesity, and baldness.

Although same-sex attraction has not proven to be genetic, it has proven to be involuntary. Those who fully embrace homosexuality and those who have chosen to turn away from homosexuality consistently testify that their same-sex attraction was not a choice. No one chooses to have same-sex attraction, though we may choose to act on this attraction and take on a homosexual identity.

So what causes same-sex attraction? Is it important to discuss causation at all or should we just bypass causation and focus on behavior change, spiritual formation, and living congruently with our beliefs and values?⁷ Raw science may not conclusively prove whether homosexuality is caused by nature or nurture,⁸ but ample research via interviews, testimony, and the personal experiences of those who have struggled with same-sex attraction or who have had children with same-sex attraction have shown us over and over again that the common underlying factors of same-sex attraction for both men and women include family dynamics (particularly the relationship with father and mother), personality temperament, peer labeling, sexual abuse, and spiritual and cultural influences.⁹

It is important to discuss the causation of same-sex attraction because it is in these contributing causes that

we find the healing antidote. If it is true that relational brokenness contributes to unwanted same-sex attraction, then it is relational wholeness that will decrease this attraction and fill the legitimate need for emotional connection with the same-sex that the homosexual relationship promises to fill but ultimately fails to fulfill.

Although spiritual and cultural influences are certainly contributing factors in homosexual behavior, the majority of this article will focus on family dynamics, gender identity, emotional dependency, and sexual abuse as it relates to the formation of same-sex attraction in an individual. I have found that it is too easy and not completely accurate to attribute the homosexual struggle solely to pro-gay cultural influences and spiritual warfare. It is tempting for parents who have children who are gay-identified to only go down these two roads, but they do so at the expense of finding healing in their own lives.

Conversely, it is also important not to underestimate the legitimate spiritual battle that we as Christians and our children face in the very pro-gay culture that we live in. Our response is to get on our knees and pray for ourselves and our children as we never have prayed before, while not forgetting that spiritual warfare is directly connected to the natural world—to our past wounds, emotions, choices, and trust/distrust of God. The good news is that God has given us the authority and power to overcome our past and our sin as we humble ourselves, confess our failings, and allow God to mold us into his image.

Family Dynamics

For too long the Christian church has condemned homosexuality as being solely the product of a fallen, perverse, and secular world when the reality is that we as Christians have contributed to the causation of homosexuality via our own individual sin and brokenness. Many of us have merely reacted negatively to the occurrence of homosexuality and retaliated in anger toward the gay community, when we should have asked: "Why are our children struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction?" "Have we as their parents contributed to their struggle?" and "What can we do to help them?"

Although hotly debated, ignored by secular media, and dismissed in recent years by the American Psychological Association,¹⁰ research has consistently shown that one of the primary contributing factors which can lead to unwanted same-sex attraction in some children is emotional wounding between the child and same-sex parent.¹¹ It is becoming more understood in the Christian Church that "the homosexual orientation—same-sex attractions or feelings—is not a sin itself, but a symptom that comes from

emotional wounding as a child.”¹² Dr. Elizabeth Moberly, research psychologist and author of *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic*, explains that the homosexual drive is a “reparative drive” which seeks to fulfill legitimate same-sex needs for love, security, and identity—needs that are normally met through attachment to the parent of the same sex.¹³

For a boy, his father is the most important figure in his life, and for a girl, it is her mother. The wounding does not have to be intentional, necessarily. Absence and emotional detachment can be as wounding as overt physical, sexual, or verbal abuse for some children. Also, siblings respond differently to their parent’s behavior, personalities, and interests, and what may negatively affect one child has little effect on another.

Although every person’s situation is different, there are many causative factors of homosexuality which are similar in men and women with same-sex attraction. The following are some of the primary preconditioning factors for male homosexuality:

- hurtful experience with father (cold, distant, disinterested, critical or rejecting) —father’s lack of acceptance of his son as a young male
- mother’s rejection of father’s masculinity and over-involvement in rearing son
- boy’s sympathizing and care-taking of his mother
- sexual violation or experimentation, incest or molestation
- exposure to pornography, media influences
- personality temperament, negative body image
- peer labeling, harassment or alienation
- fear of—or inability to relate to—the opposite sex.¹⁴

The following are some of the primary preconditioning factors for female homosexuality:

- hurtful experience with father and/or mother (mom fails to fulfill her role as nurturer; dad fails to protect by being passive and/ or unavailable)
- an unhealthy family environment (any dysfunction causing the child to perceive the world as unsafe and threatening)
- sexual abuse, incest, rape
- neglect, abandonment, rejection
- unmet needs for love, acceptance, gender identification and validation
- absence of nurturing, lack of protection, verbal abuse
- personality temperament (insecure, alone, empty, energetic/ hyperactive, creative, bright, intuitive, keenly aware of surroundings, self-protective).¹⁵

It is helpful to note that these factors do not always lead to same-sex attraction; they can lead to other problems. However, what is important to see is that these factors

are present in the majority of those who experience same-sex attraction.

If you are a parent with a child who has same-sex attraction, it may be very hard for you to read this. However, the healthiest response is to humble yourself and take an honest look at yourself, your family, and your past family history with open eyes and an open heart. Not everything in this article applies to you, and yet some things will directly apply to your situation. Ask God to help you discern so that you will not take on unnecessary guilt or, conversely, respond in fear and denial. Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, in his book *A Parent’s Guide to Preventing Homosexuality* writes:

The vast majority of parents [of children with same-sex attraction] are well-intentioned and loving and want the best for their children.... [However], we all make mistakes as parents...second, our personality limitations may have had little in the way of ill effects on one child in the family and yet, to our shock and dismay, they can prove seriously detrimental to our next child. Third, how we relate to our children typically reflects the type of relationship we had with our own parents.¹⁶

What is often seen (not *always* but *often*) in the families of men and women who struggle with same-sex attraction is the “classic triadic relationship” between the mother, father, and child (boy or girl).¹⁷

In this situation, the mother often has a poor or limited relationship with her husband, so she shifts her emotional needs to her son. The father is usually nonexpressive and detached and often critical as well. So in the triadic family pattern we have the detached father, the overinvolved mother, and the temperamentally sensitive, emotionally attuned boy who fills in for the father where the father falls short.¹⁸

This theory is often maligned by gay activists and is discredited in the main-stream media; however, the actual research has never been disproved by alternative studies.¹⁹ Although, in some reported cases mothers have been found to be less involved and emotionally disengaged rather than overly involved in their son’s life, the negative father influence seems to be overwhelmingly consistent in the majority of research.²⁰

This “triadic relationship” can happen between a mother and daughter. Women with same-sex attraction, in many cases, have had mothers who (often unwittingly) relied on their daughters to meet their emotional needs, when it should have been the other way around. In many cases, a mother who does this may have a strained relationship with her husband, may be divorced and may be a single mother, or may be a woman who has not dealt with her own childhood wounds. In each case, a child is put in the position to

care for the parent and in so doing forfeits his or her childhood in many ways.

In addition to her relationship with her mother, a girl's relationship with her father is critical in her emotional and sexual development. She will measure men and, most importantly, God, in light of her father, unfair as this may seem. Her relationship to him is also one of the most important relationships in her life, and if a father is not there for her because of divorce, working long hours, emotional detachment, or if he is too present through verbal, physical, or sexual abuse of any kind, then she will in turn, emotionally detach from him. For many women, the result of a strained relationship with her father are deep feelings of rejection and undesirability, the inability to trust, respond and relate to men, and feelings of anger and resentment not only toward her father but, unfortunately, toward men in general.

Being a parent is not easy, and there is no perfect parent outside our heavenly Father. We can only try to do our best, ask for forgiveness, and learn from our mistakes. That is all God requires of us. The reality is that many parents of children who struggle with same-sex attraction carry deep wounds from their own childhood. Their relationship with their own mothers and fathers has often been strained and very painful. To place on top of that a failed marriage, rejection, infidelity, or physical and verbal abuse from a spouse can be devastating.

In these cases, all a parent may have left is his or her children. It is no wonder a mother or father may go to them for love, affection and emotional support. However, children are not to carry their parents' psychological burdens for them. It is abusive to put a child, adolescent, or teenager in the position of acting as surrogate spouse, counselor, or best friend.²¹ It is destructive to the child's gender identity and emotional well-being. It forces the child to forfeit a large part of his or her childhood, and in many cases it leads to future unwanted same-sex attraction.

Emotional wounding can come in any form and in any degree, but when it comes, the result for the child is consistent: the child will defensively detach (emotionally) from his or her parent. A son will defensively detach from his father and a daughter will defensively detach from her mother. (Sometimes children will defensively detach from both parents.) What this defensive detachment does is leave an emotional void (or longing) in the child's soul for that parent—for the love and respect of the father and the nurture and approval of the mother.

When puberty hits and hormones become entwined with emotion, this emotional void may become sexualized.²² A boy's need for emotional connection

and intimacy with the father is left unmet (in varying degrees) and so his hunger for male affirmation becomes sexualized in an attraction to other boys. A girl's need for emotional connection and intimacy with her mother is left unmet (in varying degrees) and so her hunger for female nurture and affirmation becomes sexualized in her attraction to other girls. (The attraction to those of the opposite sex comes in varying degrees from exclusive attraction to bisexuality.)

Another contributing family dynamic which can lead to the development of same-sex attraction is in marital disunity between a child's father and mother. It is estimated that Christians get divorced at the same rate (if not higher rates) than non-Christians.²³ Domestic abuse, substance abuse, addictions of all kinds, and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse are found in our Christian homes and in our churches. Why are we surprised, then, when we see Christian children, including children of conservative clergy and elders, struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction?

Christians need to find ways to prevent homosexuality from besetting their children, and the best way to do this is to insure that they, as husband and wife, have an honest, healthy and Christ-centered marriage. Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, in his book *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, reports: "Rather often, couples who come to a therapist looking for help with their child are experiencing disharmony in their marital relationship."²⁴ Another prominent researcher, Irving Bieber, also observed that some boys "become victims of their parent's unhappy marital relationship.... In a scenario in which Mom and Dad are battling, one way Dad can get even with Mom is by emotionally abandoning their son."²⁵

Children of divorce and children who grow up in homes where Mom and Dad are at odds, find themselves caught in the emotional pain of their feuding parents. For example, Chastity Bono, a famous lesbian and daughter of celebrities Sony and Cher, reveals the tension she felt growing up with her divorced parents in her autobiography *Family Outing*:

In a way, I think I was the son my father never had.... When my father encouraged my tomboyishness, my mother would get annoyed. I think in some ways they acted out their frustrations with each other through me; my father would aggravate my mother by encouraging my boyish behavior, and my mother became more and more uncomfortable with me because she saw me mimicking my father.²⁶

We see the destructive results of parental sin in lives of the families of God in the Bible. Abraham and Sarah's use of Hagar as a surrogate mother led to sibling rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac and the eventual banishment of Ishmael from his own family, particularly from his

father, Abraham. Isaac and Rebecca distrusted each other and favored one son over the other, which led to deception and the banishing of Jacob from the family in order to keep Esau from killing him. Jacob's favoring of Joseph at the expense of his other sons, led to them almost killing Joseph while further estranging them from their father. King David's adultery led to God's pronouncement: "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you." Indeed, because of David's sexual sins, his multiple wives, and his inability to fully love and discipline his sons, calamity fell upon David through their subsequent sexual sins and rebellion.

In the New Testament, Ephesians 5 and 6 teaches that a husband and wife are to yield to and trust one another out of reverence for Christ, wives trusting their husbands and husbands loving their wives unto death, as Christ loved the church. Children are called to obey their parents, and yet even Paul saw it fitting to add this command: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children." Exasperate means "to make angry or resentful, to embitter." Paul understood the dynamics of family—dynamics between husband and wife and parent and child—and how important healthy familial relationships are in creating healthy children.

Gender Identity

The severity and intensity of same-sex attraction is not the same for every person. For some, their sexual attraction is exclusively toward those of the same-sex and for others, their attraction is for both men and women. Alfred Kinsey observed that there is such a continuum, and the pro-gay community also acknowledges this fact.²⁷ The acronym GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered) demonstrates the reality of this fluidity of same-sex attraction. This reality challenges the assumption that people are innately and exclusively gay and can have no sexual feelings for the opposite gender.

The reason for this fluidity lies in a child's experience of identifying and emotionally connecting with his or her gender. This identification happens at a very early age.²⁸ For this reason, we hear people who have struggled with same-sex attraction admit to having known they were gay as a child, and we hear of transgendered men and women pronouncing they always felt as if they were born in the wrong body.²⁹ What these men and women are really describing is that at an early age, when they were supposed to have identified with their own sex, they didn't.

This inability to identify with one's own gender has less to do with genetics and more to do with relationships. Amazingly, there has been no scientific support that would lead to the conclusion that a boy or girl is born gay or transgendered, despite emphatic insistence from

our pro-gay culture that this is so.³⁰ However, simply talking to someone who struggles in this area and asking him questions about his past will reveal that there were developmental and relational reasons which led a child to detach from his or her own gender and identify with the opposite gender. This detachment occurs in varying degrees from bisexuality all the way to gender reassignment.

Masculinity for a boy must be imparted to him by another man—preferably his father.³¹ This doesn't mean that if a father plays ball with his son his son will become masculine. Not all fathers are athletic. Men who dance, cook, decorate, act, and design are no less masculine than a corporate executive or professional athlete. Masculinity is imparted to a son when a father lets his son know that he approves of him, that he is proud of him, that he loves him, and he wants to spend time with him. A boy will want to be a boy when he knows that he is accepted by the most important male role model in his life: his father.

Overwhelmingly, men with same-sex attraction consistently report not being athletic or not liking sports as a kid. Many feel that they were not able to measure up to their more athletic brothers or peers. Consequently, many were labeled "fag" or "sissy." Many gay men have had fathers who love sports and who may have expressed disapproval for their son's lack of interest or ability, or they simply ignored their son's interest in other activities. For example, a father, who was shocked when his son told him that he was gay, confesses:

In recalling my son's childhood and adolescence, I can look back and see the void that was always there. I never realized it or even thought about it before. My son did not have the same interests as me, and after about age ten, I aborted efforts to direct him to areas of my interests. I realize now how much in error this was. That was the time I should have done whatever was necessary to enhance my relationship with him. I abdicated his rearing to his mother, while I spent more time and effort with his younger brother.³²

What also happens in cases like this is that the son will defensively detach from the father (who he has perceived to have rejected him) and he will sometimes attach himself to his mother or his mother will become overinvolved with her son.³³ As he spends time with her, is protected by her, and cultivates the same interests as her, he gender identifies with the feminine. For many gay men, the world of the feminine is safe; they feel more comfortable around girls and have girl friends rather than boy friends because for them the heterosexual masculine world is a threat. It is a world in which they do not excel or in which they have not been accepted, and so they reject it. The stereotypical feminine behavior and the identification and

understanding of the world of women doesn't just happen; it is formed early in life.

However, this is not the case for all men who experience same-sex attraction. Not all men with same-sex attraction are overtly effeminate. Some are very masculine and some are average guys. Some relate to and understand women and some resent women and are misogynists.³⁴ In the case of the latter, these men have not found the world of women safe or appealing at all. They often have had mothers who were disinterested, controlling or manipulative, and who may not have taken responsibility for their actions, and so they do not trust women and, therefore, in most cases, have not gender-identified with the feminine. What they do share in common with their more effeminate peers (with whom they may have relationships) is their craving for emotional bonding and intimate connection with men.

Likewise, girls identify with the feminine through their mothers. If their mothers are downtrodden, passive, abused or abandoned by their fathers, their daughters may perceive femininity as an undesirable liability. If their mothers are dominating, controlling, angry, manipulative, or narcissistic, a girl may perceive femininity as unattractive and threatening. In each case, the girl may not want to embrace her own femininity because she does not want to be like her mother.³⁵ A daughter may empathize with her mother and love her; she may even experience a very close (almost best friend) kind of relationship with her mother, but the reality is that the girl is not being mothered but is mothering. At the same time, the daughter has begun the process of disparaging her own emerging femininity through the negative experience and emotions of the most important feminine role-model in her life.

In addition, mothers who are highly insecure, who disapprove of themselves—their attractiveness, desirability, position in life, and value as a person—may project this negativity onto their daughter. The mother may love her daughter deeply but be critical of her in the same way she is critical of herself. Often, the mother doesn't realize the damage she is doing not only to her daughter's identity and self-worth but to her own. A mother writes:

My greatest failure...was not listening, really listening, to my daughter. I knew so little about nurturing, and practically nothing about connection or communication. My way of parenting was to talk "at her," not "to her." It wasn't long before all I could hear was my own voice. I now know that I was so needy myself, I had little left over for anyone else.³⁶

Also, mothers who are successful, driven, and perfectionist may demand perfection from their daughters. Some daughters can live up to their mother's expectations and others can't. It is usually the daughter

that can't measure up who defensively detaches from her mother because of this undue pressure to perform and perhaps compete with a "golden" sister or brother.

What usually happens when a girl defensively detaches from her mother, is that she will attempt to go to her dad for approval and nurture. If the father connects with her emotionally and approves of her, then the daughter begins to gender-identify with her father and will sometimes take on masculine behavior and appearance. If she is already more masculine, the father may approve of her desire to be like him and engage in sports, and he may treat her like a son. This may seem harmless to the dad, but it only reinforces her unhealthy desire to detach from the unsafe world of women in which she can not measure up and which she generally resents.

On the other hand, some women who have developed masculine characteristics and behaviors do so as a defense against sexual abuse and rape.³⁷ These women have found that the world of men is not safe and accommodating, but threatening. Therefore, they have developed a false masculinity as protection against further abuse. Also, many lesbians identify with the radical feminist movement because of the hurt and emotional abandonment they have experienced from men.

Just as not all gay men are effeminate, not all lesbian women are masculine. Just as boys can detach from their fathers and attach to their mothers, so girls can defensively detach from their mothers and go to their dads. However, some girls who go to their dads for approval and connection find that their fathers are indifferent or emotionally detached.³⁸ In this case, the daughter may not gender-identify with her dad, but she may not necessarily gender-identify with her mother, either. Sometimes girls in this situation can develop a "third sex mentality" where "she knows she isn't a man, but she doesn't feel like a woman either."³⁹ Many women in this state suffer negative body image and low self-worth.

According to Nicolosi, "Gender—our sense of maleness and femaleness—is not merely an arbitrary social construct. It is, rather, a basic and essential way in which we humans participate in society and express ourselves within the real world."⁴⁰ It is not about wearing dresses and catching footballs so much as it is being comfortable and confident in the gender God has assigned to us.

Embracing our gender glorifies God. In the first chapter of Genesis it says, "And God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." All that God created, he pronounced "good," so it would follow that being female is good and being male is good. To discard our femininity or masculinity—to reject it—is to reject

a part of the image of God in us and who he made us to be.

Emotional Dependency

For men who experience same-sex attraction, their desire is often visually cued. Men can be tempted by same-sex desires by simply looking at the body of another man. Men who act out on their same-sex attraction often do so in anonymous encounters devoid of emotional connection. This is not unlike men who have never struggled with homosexuality. Men, by nature, are more visual and act-oriented when it comes to expressing their sexuality.⁴¹

Women who experience same-sex attraction, on the other hand, often fall into lesbianism within the context of a relationship. These relationships can sometimes emulate a mother-daughter relationship where one woman is the care-giver to another woman. Often, lesbians are drawn to take care of needy women. They were programmed to do this with their mothers, and it is in this kind of emotionally dependent relationship where they find a sense of value and identity, and it is where they get their emotional needs met.

Emotional dependency can also be called “emotional idolatry.”⁴² Idolatry is when we worship something or someone that gives us (or promises to give us) all that we need. When a person is in an emotionally dependent relationship, he or she relies on another person to be his or her *sole* source of love, security, and identity. We see this happen in same-sex friendships (which often leads to a homosexual relationship) and in heterosexual friendships as well (where one person is more emotionally invested in the relationship than the other). It is important to differentiate between healthy interdependency and unhealthy emotional dependency.

Some signs of unhealthy dependency in same-sex or opposite-sex friendships are: viewing other people as a threat to the relationship, preferring to spend time alone with this friend and becoming frustrated when this doesn't happen, becoming irrationally angry or depressed when the other withdraws slightly, losing interest in other friendships, experiencing romantic or sexual feelings leading to fantasy about this person, being unwilling to make short or long-term plans that do not include the other person.⁴³

Depending on another person is not necessarily idolatry, however. We are called to live in relationship with one another and to care for and provide for one another. However, to put all of our trust and expectation for provision and love and identity onto one person is unhealthy. The reason it is unhealthy is that no one can reasonably be the answer to our emotional and spiritual needs except God. Only God our Father can fill this role because only he has everything good and is everything

good. All human beings fall short.

Therefore, when we expect a person to be God for us, we will be sorely disappointed. Unlike friendship, marriage is intended to be exclusive and deeply intimate—a “one flesh” union where the two (a man and a woman) become one. However, even in marriage emotional dependency can occur. The reason so many marriages fail is that we often enter marriage with the expectation that our spouse will be perfect and meet all of our emotional needs. We can also put this expectation on our children. The result is that we end up suffocating and abusing the ones we love when they do not measure up to our expectations and meet all of our needs.

The only emotionally dependent relationship we can afford to have is with our Creator and Savior. Only he is worthy of our worship because only he can be the sole source of love, security, and identity that we desperately need. We were meant to worship someone and that someone is Jesus Christ. All others fall short. Understanding this gives us great freedom to have healthy relationships with other people.

When we go to God with our need and expect him to meet it, we lift a great burden off the people we love. We free them from having to save us when they do not have this ability. Ironically, however, we find something amazing happens. In freeing them from having to be everything for us, we often find that in that freedom they are empowered to love and care for us. In turn, we can love and care for them. When we let God “save” others (and us) we are free to love people without the burden and guilt of being God to them.

So many homosexual relationships are short-lived because the need that a woman or man is trying to have met in a gay relationship can never be truly met. In a homosexual relationship the man or woman is looking for affirmation from his or her father or mother and from the masculine or feminine world at large. This is a tall order and one that can never be met in another person. Men and women can also do this in heterosexual relationships where a woman tries to gain the affirmation she may not have adequately received from her father through her husband, for example, and a man can look to his wife to be his mother. In either case, disappointment and resentment is the inevitable result.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is another powerful contributing factor in the development of same-sex attraction and homosexual behavior. Although many people who have been sexually molested or abused may not become homosexual, a large percentage of those who are homosexual have been sexually violated either by

someone of the same sex or opposite sex.

In a study in the Archives of Sexual Behavior (2001) researchers found that 46% of homosexuals and 22% of lesbians reported being homosexually molested as children/adolescents with the mean age of 11 for boys and 13 years of age for girls. This is compared to much lower rates of homosexual molestation among heterosexuals: only 7% for heterosexual men and 1% for heterosexual women.⁴⁴

This is not to be confused with the percentage of lesbian women who have been molested by heterosexual men. Statistics for sexual abuse among the general female population in the U.S. are 17%⁴⁵ to 25%,⁴⁶ but for lesbian women they are much higher—with one survey reporting up to 66%.⁴⁷

Dr. Stanton Jones, author of *The Use of Scientific Research in the Church's Moral Debate*, states that “experience of sexual abuse as a child...more than tripled the likelihood of later reporting homosexual orientation.”⁴⁸

For men, sexual molestation can be emotionally and physically traumatic and further solidify a boy's homosexual identity. Some men who were seduced and molested during adolescence by an older man reported to have enjoyed it,⁴⁹ but what they are really revealing is that they were in such need for male attention and connection that, though the sexual encounter was a violation, it superficially met his need to connect on an intimate level with another man. However, along with this superficial bonding comes a deep distrust of and resentment against men in general.

For women who have been violated by men, they, too, come to distrust and resent men. In addition, some women who have been sexually violated will reject (often unconsciously) their femininity because they see it as a liability. In the mind of a girl who has been abused (sexually, physically or verbally), she sees her femininity as weakness and the very thing that provoked the abuse, and so she rejects this aspect of herself and takes on a hard, “no one will push me around” false masculinity, which serves to protect her from further hurt.⁵⁰

A woman can also fall more easily into lesbian relationships when there has been abuse in her history. Anita Worthen and Bob Davies, ministry leaders to those who struggle with same sex attraction, state:

In women, abuse can lead to a deep fear and even hatred of men (if the perpetrator is a male). Men are no longer “safe.” The woman's deep need to connect with another individual leads her right into close relationships with other women, often women who have been wounded in similar ways. This sets the stage for lesbian bonding to occur.⁵¹

It is not surprising, then, to hear of famous gay men and women, men such as Rock Hudson and Greg Louganis and female celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres and Rosie O'Donnell describe their own abuse. What is surprising is that their abuse is never considered (by themselves and the secular media) to be a factor which may have contributed to their homosexuality.

Jesus made a powerful statement about the abuse of children in Matthew 18:5-9. He called a little child and had the child stand among the disciples. Jesus said, “Whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned into the depths of the sea.” Jesus continued:

Woe to the world because of the things which cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.

For those who have been sexually abused, knowing that God hates this abuse and will avenge it is a huge part of the healing process. Many people who have been abused cannot get past the fact that God allowed abuse to happen to them when he could have stopped it. Many victims of abuse when they were children prayed for God to rescue them, and yet the abuse continued. People need to know that God is a just God and that what happened to them will be punished. Either the perpetrator will be punished (whether in this life or in the next) or he will confess and repent of his sin and allow Jesus to take his punishment. The choice is his.

Likewise, forgiving our perpetrators is a choice many victims of abuse must make in order to find healing. When we allow Jesus to atone for sin, we are free to forgive. Forgiveness is impossible without the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ because without his sacrifice there is no justice. Justice requires a payment for sin, and the payment for all sin comes through Jesus Christ. By forgiving our perpetrator we are not saying, “What you did to me was okay.” Instead, we are saying, “Because Jesus forgave me of my sins, I can forgive you for the sin you committed against me.” Forgiveness frees the victim from her perpetrator and relinquishes her from having to seek revenge, for “‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’ saith the Lord” (Rom. 12:19).

Healing, Reparative Therapy, and Christianity

The term “reparative therapy” has gotten a lot of bad press. The pro-gay community believes that this term connotes repairing the homosexual as if something were inherently wrong in this individual. Actually, though, reparative therapy focuses not on repairing a deficient human being but, rather, it focuses on helping people repair “relational deficits” so their legitimate need for emotional connection and gender identification can be met in non-homosexual relationships.

Psychoanalytic literature has long acknowledged that the homosexual drive is actually a “reparative drive”—one which “seeks to fulfill needs that are normally met through the medium of the child’s attachment to the parent of the same sex.”⁵² Elizabeth Moberly writes, “In this sense, the homosexual love need is essentially a search for parenting.”⁵³ If parenting is what a man or woman needs who struggles with same-sex attraction, then a person has no greater parent than his or her heavenly Father.

It is not by coincidence that the vast majority of ministries offering healing to those struggling with same-sex attraction are those of the Judeo-Christian faith. It is because we are the only ones who have a God who calls himself “Abba” or “Daddy.” God knows that our greatest need is to be deeply loved and properly parented because we are created to be his children, and He is our perfect parent.

The main approach to most Christian “ex-gay” ministries is to restore in men and women the truth that they are loved by God as “Father” and they can go to him first and foremost to fill their need for love, security and identity. Exodus International member ministries, for example, are not brainwashing camps that prey on the vulnerable. No one is forced to attend without consent, and the mean age and background of people who participate in these ministries is late thirties, well- educated, motivated, and highly religious.⁵⁴ Claims that these ministries do irreparable damage to people are also unfounded.⁵⁵ In fact, the opposite has been reported to be true in a recent study by Stanton Jones and Mark Yarhouse in *Ex-Gays: A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation*.

Some Christians may be skeptical of psychoanalysis and family systems theory, and they may be wary of putting unnecessary blame on parents, but in my own experience struggling with homosexuality, in the myriad of conversations I have had with parents of children who struggle with same-sex attraction, and in talking with men and women who experience same-sex attraction, I see a consistent pattern in its development.

Mel White, a Christian man who is a gay activist and author of *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*, virulently opposes the notion that male same-sex attraction is a reparative drive to fill unmet emotional needs for male intimacy and a father connection.⁵⁶ Yet, listen to his own words as he describes his first sexual encounters with men:

In the darkness Mark and I undressed and climbed into bed. I didn’t know the first thing about making love to another man. Even the thought of anal or oral sex with a stranger repulsed me. The whole process seemed awkward and alien if not evil.... But I was determined to go through with it. *I had wanted to love and be loved by another man for so long, nothing else mattered* [emphasis mine].⁵⁷

Thomas was God’s gift that night, and as I relaxed and thanked God for the gift, I began to experience a quality of relief I had never known before. *I was a lost child who had suddenly been rescued by a loving adult*, a fugitive who could stop running at last, a weary traveler who had finally found his way home [emphasis mine].⁵⁸

It is no secret that “a person’s identity is formed in the family of origin” and that our “self-concept is shaped by what we believe our parents think of us.”⁵⁹ Moreover, the Bible shows how broken families produce broken children. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, is replete with examples, many of which were among the families of the patriarchs.

The Scriptures emphasize in the Old and New Testaments the sanctity of healthy, God-centered families and the importance of a healthy relationship between parent and child. In fact, it was through the human family that God decided to come into the world so that he might save the world. He did not beam himself down to earth or land via a divine space craft; instead, he chose to come to earth through the womb of a girl and grow up in a family with a mother and father and brothers and sisters.

When it comes to the efficacy of reparative therapy, God, himself, is the ultimate reparative therapist. His goal in the death and resurrection of Christ is to repair our “relational deficits”—the most important being our relational deficit with him. His goal as Father is to bring us, his children, back to himself.

It is not by coincidence that the last words of the Old Testament are these: “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6).

Healing Through Healthy Relationships

Male homosexuality has been explained in the field of psychoanalysis “as an attempt to ‘repair’ a deficit in masculine identity.”⁶⁰ Likewise, female homosexuality can also be explained as an attempt to repair a deficit in feminine identity. Kaplan (1967) writes:

It seems apparent that some homosexuals choose as sexual objects people who have characteristics—physical, personal or both—in which they themselves feel deficient.... Dissatisfaction with the self, with the way one is...measured against internalized standards about how one would *like* to be...may be one of the major roots of some homosexual feelings and behavior.⁶¹

Men and women with same-sex attraction have a great need to connect emotionally with those of the same sex. Unfortunately, this is done via homosexual or emotionally dependent relationships. When a man or woman seeks help with their unwanted same-sex attraction, there is the misguided assumption (sometimes on their part and sometimes on the part of others) that being with those of the same sex in friendships or as roommates should be avoided so as not to fall into a gay relationship again.

However, unlike an alcoholic who should refrain from drinking, people who struggle with homosexuality should not stay away from same-sex relationships. Quite the contrary; they should seek out healthy, non-erotic, relationships and be encouraged to make friends with those of the same sex who have not struggled with same-sex attraction or who have found substantial healing from same-sex attraction. It is in these non-erotic same-sex relationships that healing can be found because the legitimate need for same-sex bonding can be fulfilled without the accompanying erotic baggage.

Men with same-sex attraction have a deep need to feel like one of the guys, and women with same-sex attraction have a deep need to feel like one of the girls. When a trustworthy Christian man befriends or mentors a man who struggles with same-sex attraction and a trustworthy Christian woman befriends or mentors a woman who struggles with same-sex attraction, the need for same-sex bonding and connection is met via a healthy same-sex relationship (as it should have been met in childhood and adolescence) and quite frequently their sexual attraction for the same sex diminishes. Nicolosi writes about his work with hundreds of men over the course of twenty years:

As he continues to develop closer mutual relationship with significant men in his life, the client begins to see his sexual attractions from a different perspective. The more he gets to know his male acquaintances on a personal level, the more unlikely it is they will remain objects of his sexual fantasies. The erotic power of their traits moves to the background as the whole person comes into

focus.⁶²

The Church can be the perfect place for men to connect in healthy ways with other men and the same is true for women. However, for those who do decide to befriend or mentor someone with same-sex attraction, it is important that they not be the sole confidant or friend of the person they are mentoring. Men and women who have struggled in this area need a broad range of friends (some friends will be closer than others). If a man or woman is just beginning to find healing, he or she may not know what a healthy relationship looks like, so gentle guidance and boundaries may need to be established.

For example, a man or woman who struggles with same-sex attraction may have unrealistic expectations of how much time he or she should spend with his or her friend or mentor. She may expect her friend to be there for her at all times (or much of the time). If the friend forgets an appointment, reschedules a lunch, or doesn't call for a couple of weeks, the woman with same-sex attraction may receive this as rejection and may get angry or even sever the relationship with her friend. The best response is to keep reaching out while explaining that boundaries do not equal rejection. It is also important for the mentor or friend to point the woman to a professional counselor if needed, to group Bible studies and social activities in the church where she can meet new people.

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child; well, it takes a church with a lot of caring people to heal the sexually broken. Men and women who have found relational healing have also come to the realization that no man or woman can be their spiritual father or mother—only God can fill that role. Mario Bergner writes:

Finally, I ended my search for a spiritual father. If I were to be a healthy Christian man, then my primary need was to learn to relate to men as my friends and brothers in the Lord. One day in prayer, I gave to the Lord all the expectations I had of Christian men and determined to give more of myself.⁶³

Andrew Comisky agrees:

It is important that we forsake any idealistic notion of finding the lost father of our youth in our male gatherings.... God alone is worthy of such entitlement. We thus must die to our natural dreams of the perfect human mentor and instead must gather together as brothers to seek and find God.⁶⁴

The same can be said of women. Women are looking for that mother figure—the idealistic nurturing, benevolent care-taker. But a healthy friendship is not taking care of someone but caring for someone. For many women with same-sex attraction, they see friendship as an all or nothing proposition. They often put all their emotional eggs in one woman's basket and

are devastated when that relationship is not as intimate and all-consuming as they desire. When women begin to fight against this tendency to idolize women, they will often pull away from women altogether and thus experience great loneliness.⁶⁵ Anne Paulk writes:

Some women have chosen to avoid relationship with other women in order to prevent sexual feelings from emerging. Sadly, this not only isolates, but also creates a well of need that may eventually draw us back into lesbian intimacy.⁶⁶

Women can also remain isolated in order to keep themselves from being hurt by other women. They keep themselves safe by defensively detaching from women, but this only creates more of a need and hunger for female intimacy. What usually happens in this case is that when a healthy woman reaches out to a woman who struggles with emotional dependency issues, the woman with emotional dependency will smother and suffocate this potential friend with all her needs and expectations for intimacy and inevitably will drive away her potential friend. This scenario can also happen between two men.

For those of us who struggle with same-sex attraction (in fact for all of us) it is vital that we go to God first with all of our expectations and needs because only he can fulfill them. Second, we need to learn how to reach out to others and not just demand that others reach out to us. Third, we need to trust people, knowing that they will hurt us, but forgiving them when they do. And finally, we need to be “proactive and not reactive.” Paulk writes:

We cannot sit passively back and expect to be handed the golden relationships and skills we so long for. Instead, we need to actively pursue health and wholeness... individuals who are successful in overcoming homosexuality... “make every effort to obey Christ” [and] “these people are proactive and not reactive.”⁶⁷

Eventually, no matter our past circumstances, we have to take responsibility for our lives. Spiritual and emotional health requires us to be able to face pain without self-medicating via our vice of choice. We must be willing to face and endure this pain in order to be freed from it.⁶⁸ This requires courage and fortitude—and nothing short of the grace of God.

Healthy intimate relationships are built on trust and honesty and forthright communication. Manipulation, blame, denial, anger and avoidance lead only to brokenness. It is always fear that keeps us from being honest, from taking responsibility, and from leading courageous lives uncompromised by sin. Paul, a hero of our faith, exhorts us in Ephesians 4:

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love...put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all

members of one body.... Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Finally, the only way we can love others like this is to know the love of God for us. Paul prays for us in Ephesians 3:14-19:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

The Church as Healer

The greatest need of the human race is to belong to a family. We need a father and mother who will love us, will provide for us, and will fight for us. We need siblings who will be there for us when others are not—brothers and sisters who have had similar experiences and with whom we can identify, defend, and look up to. We need a family who, because we are stuck together, will forgive each other and not abandon one another when members of the family fail or when there are hard times. We need people who will be there for us for the long haul—from birth to death—people who are willing to give their lives for us.

It is not by coincidence that the gay community is called “the family.” The need for family is acute for gays and lesbians because many of them have experienced dysfunction in their own biological family to some degree. It is important to understand that same-sex attraction in and of itself is not a sin. At the root of the same-sex attraction is a longing to be loved by the same sex, and that is a God-given need that should be met.

The same can be said for those who struggle with sexual addiction, drug addiction, and those who have experienced the effects of verbal, physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse. I have heard many testimonies of people being healed of life debilitating addictions and wounds via the local church. However, the healing always occurs within the context of a caring relationship. Sermons, Bible studies, retreats, and conferences play their part to heal and restore, but true and lasting healing always comes through personal relationships. As members of a local church, we are to be sisters and brothers in Christ.

A Messy Business

Loving people, however, is a messy business. It is something that takes practice, trial and error. We often think that loving someone is taking care of them rather than caring for them. A woman whom I was befriending made this distinction for me. She let me know that I need only care for her; I did not have to take care of her. This was a big relief for me. Often times when we decide to obey God and love another person who has great need, we think that we must make everything right for them, and this leads only to frustration and burnout. The greatest thing we can do for someone who has suffered sexual brokenness is to lead him or her to dependence upon Christ, not upon us.

The majority of people who have suffered from sexual abuse, unwanted same-sex attraction, and sexual addiction have the tendency to put all their eggs in the basket of one person. They can expect the person who has come alongside them to always be there for them and to never let them down. When this happens—when the caregiver reveals that he or she is fallible and cannot always love as God loves—sometimes the person being cared for may become hurt and offended and may pull away from the person who is trying to love them.

In turn, those who are willing to respond to the call to love people in their congregations can also pull away from the very people they are trying to help—especially if a person has tremendous wounds and needs. The inner dialogue sounds something like this: “Oh, Lord, it’s too much. She expects too much and I have children to take care of—a full-time job. This person is so needy, and I fear they will suck the life out of me. I can’t be there for them.” The tendency is to avoid this person at all costs. I’ve struggled with this many times. God has taught me something very important. I don’t have to give everything, just what he is asking me to give at the time.

Because of my own wounding, I have felt the pressure to take care of people and the impending guilt when I do not. However, God is helping me with this. For example, he has taught me that I can say hi to someone without committing myself to lunch or going to an event with them, even if asked. I can go out to lunch without committing myself to a deep friendship. It is not unloving to set limits as to what you can or cannot give, and it frees us to reach out to people with needs instead of avoiding them.

What the Church Can Do

Only a few churches have addressed the question “How can we reach out and provide support to those who struggle with unwanted same-sex attraction, sexual addiction, and the effects of sexual abuse?” Over the years parachurch ministries have, in fact, asked this question and started effective small-group ministries

and counseling programs. The church needs to learn from groups such as Exodus International, Sexual Addicts Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery, AA, and other recovery groups.

Interestingly, though, it is these groups that are calling on the church to start ministries of their own. Recovery groups provide a safe environment for those with similar issues to meet and get help. However, after a time, group members need to assimilate into the mainstream of church life, interacting with those who have different life experiences.

Churches do not necessarily need to start formal support groups for those who struggle with their sexuality. More important than support groups and programs is the church’s ability to be a welcoming place where people know one another and care for one another. Most people who struggle with sexual brokenness will not walk into church and announce “I’m a sex addict. What programs do you have for me?” In most cases, they will first quietly look to see if the people in the church are kind and interested in getting to know them.

Once church members invest in other people’s lives, they in turn need to make sure that those they are helping are invested in serving the church as well. I heard of a church that reached out to men who were homeless and addicted to alcohol. They started a successful program that got these men off the streets, sober, and seeking God. Those who started the program were ecstatic and filled with purpose and hope. However, as time passed almost all of these men went back to their lives on the streets, to the church members’ dismay. When asked what the problem might have been, there didn’t seem to be an answer. However, when asked this question: “Were the men who were served ever required to serve others?” the answer was no.

When we ask others for their thoughts and ideas and expect them to contribute, we are giving them a great gift. People need to know that they matter and that they make a difference. We can condescend to those we serve by not giving them opportunity to give back. I have witnessed leaders in recovery programs and pastors in churches talk down to those who come to them with concerns, wounds, and needs as if they were children. The sense of superiority and condescension has no place in the church, for we are all wounded sinners saved by grace.

However, I have also witnessed pastors and leaders that treat men and women with tender love and respect. In most cases, these Christian leaders have experienced many trials of their own and, consequently, have great empathy for others who suffer. Usually, it takes someone who has suffered in a particular area to reach

out or start a ministry to those who have suffered or struggled with the same problem.

For example, in a church I attended there was a woman in a wheelchair who came Sunday after Sunday and to Wednesday night dinner, but few people in the church took the time or energy to get to know her until a married couple (who had a child with physical disabilities) began to sit with her and eat with her. They challenged the leadership of the church to post a sign-up sheet for its members to go over to her house and help her with things and just sit with her and read and talk. The only reason I went to visit this woman is because I knew the couple. I would never have volunteered otherwise.

I remember thoughts I had before I agreed to go: “God has gifted others to do this. I minister to people in other ways,” and then thoughts I had when I was with her: “How could God allow this to happen to her? She can’t even eat without help.” I even contemplated (to my shame) that perhaps it was sin in her life that put her in a wheelchair. It wasn’t until I dealt with my fear and selfishness and asked myself, “What if I were in her shoes?” and prayed, “Dear Lord, it is only by your grace that I am not sitting in a wheelchair” that I was able to open my heart to her and truly empathize with her condition.

We all have a tendency to blame the victim because we do not have an explanation for why God allows horrific things to happen to people. We rationalize that if he could allow things like this in other people’s lives, then he could allow it in our own lives, and this terrifies us. It also gives us a sense of control and fuels our pride to believe that we merit our good fortune and blessings, instead of falling on our knees in gratitude to God for them.

I will never forget something that this paraplegic woman told me as we were talking one Sunday afternoon. She said,

Sometimes I get mad at God for being in this wheelchair. I think, “how does he know what it is like to be in a wheelchair? He was never in one.” But then one day I was reading in the Bible about how Jesus lives in us. So I thought if Jesus lives in me, then he must know—he must know what it is like to be in a wheelchair.

Jesus walked in our shoes. That’s how much he loved us, and he continues to walk with us every day. When we as a church put ourselves in other people’s shoes, we suddenly begin to care about them as Christ cares for us.

Pastors and the Power of Personal Vulnerability

For those who struggle with or who have experienced sexual brokenness and sin in their lives, the church needs to be a safe place for them. Safety comes when people can share their pain and sin openly without fear of condemnation and rejection. Because the church is led by pastors and elders, they are to be the first to model vulnerability. This means that they, too, must be open and honest with themselves and their congregation about their own sin. Shepherds are to lead their sheep along the path of brokenness, repentance and healing, but many shepherds have not allowed themselves to be led down the path themselves.

When I was leading a Sunday school class on sexual wholeness, the minister’s wife stood up and shared a personal testimony from her own life. This made such an impact on the group that a young man decided that he would share his own story (which was painful and difficult to share). His testimony brought great healing and encouragement to those who heard it, but it may never have been shared, if leadership in the church had not been the first to be vulnerable.

Many pastors do not fully realize the impact of their vulnerability in the pulpit. For generations, pastors have been expected to have their act together in every area of their lives and to not let on to their congregations when they have weaknesses or failures. It is important that pastors be healthy role models, but for too long we have put them on pedestals that only God should be privileged to stand on. The result is that we as church members have become as stoic as the pastors we are trying to emulate instead of being vulnerable and honest with ourselves and with one another.

When I was at seminary, I took a preaching class and my sermon was on I Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” During my sermon, I shared about my past struggle with same-sex attraction and the healing God had brought into my life. I was surprised and disappointed by the reaction I received from two of the professors.

Their response was one of surprise and mild offense. I was told that the sermon is not the place to share such personal information. I asked one of the professors if he had ever preached on the topic of homosexuality, and he said no. He shared with me that members of congregations look up to their pastors, and it can be damaging to the congregation for pastors to discuss such controversial topics and personal struggles. I responded to his comment by saying this: “If pastors had been willing to be vulnerable in the pulpit and discuss controversial topics when I was growing up, I

may not have had to struggle in silence for so many years.” At this, the professor humbly agreed.

Pastors and Christian leaders must realize that what they work so hard to maintain: an untarnished reputation, respect and admiration, preaching ability, and even celebrity status can actually keep people from the kingdom of God. These qualities are to be admired, but they are usually acquired at the expense of humility, vulnerability, and an open and caring heart for those who sin and who suffer.

On the other hand, healthy pastors realize that it is not just their parishioners who need counsel but they need it, too. As I was going through my master of divinity program in seminary, we were required to put in six semester’s worth of supervised ministry, but we were not required to engage in one personal counseling session. The one pastoral counseling class we were required to take was designed to teach us how to respond to church members who had problems, but never did we acknowledge that our class was filled with people who had the very same struggles! A theological degree is not sufficient to heal the wounds of our hearts.

I saw a lot of wounded people at seminary (including myself), and the opportunity to address personal issues during this special time of study and reflection was often missed. It is no wonder we hear of so much burnout and sexual sin among clergy. They have been primarily prepared to exposit and exhort and write theological treatises (as worthy as this is), yet many are not prepared emotionally to face their own brokenness let alone the brokenness of their entire congregation.

The position of pastor, of shepherd, is a formidable privilege and calling. One of the greatest leaders in Old Testament was Moses, and it is not by coincidence that the greatest leader is attributed with the greatest humility (Num. 12:3). The moment he attempted to attribute power to himself (Num. 20:12), he was barred from entering the Promised Land. I would venture to guess that Moses’ humility was cultivated in the desert of Moab as he reflected on his own brokenness after having fled Egypt. God can only work (with power) through broken men and women, and only broken men and women can work (with power) for God.

A Dysfunctional vs. A Healthy Family

The Church is not called to be perfect but righteous. What is the distinction between perfection and righteousness? Genesis 15:6 states: “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Our righteousness has always been defined by our relationship to God. Being rightly-related to God (in that we acknowledge our dependence upon his goodness and not our own) is what, paradoxically, makes us pure and holy in his eyes.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

Anyone who is a member of a church knows that every church has its stains and wrinkles and blemishes because we Christians (clergy and laity alike) sin and miss the mark. Every church has its dysfunction as does every human family. Only God can make us holy. Holiness comes when we ask Christ to cover our sins and when we ask our brothers and sisters to forgive us when we sin against them.

The apostle Peter states that Christ’s blood and his love cover a multitude of sins (I Peter 4:8). It follows that if Christ forgives us then we are to forgive one another (Matt. 6:15). There is nothing more beautiful than forgiveness. We as Christians should be the first to forgive (particularly one another) because we know the One who forgave us.

Finally, a healthy family and church is one that is free—free from legalism (Gal. 5:1-6), “sexual immorality, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, and drunkenness” (Gal. 5:19-21). Instead, a healthy family and church is one that demonstrates “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal. 5:22). It is patient and kind, it does not envy or boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, nor is it not self-seeking. It is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight when evil befalls one of its own, but it rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. It never gives up (I Cor. 13: 4-8).

Some of the greatest abuse and betrayal has happened in our families and in our churches. In these last days, may our churches become healthy families so that those who need a home will come to us and find their heavenly Father and brothers and sisters who love them.

Kristin Johnson, M.Div., is the Executive Director of OneByOne. If you are interested in learning how to reach out to those who experience sexual brokenness (unwanted same-sex attraction, sexual addiction, the effects of sexual abuse) you can contact Kristin Johnson at 407-423-3441 (1489) or email her at kjohnson@fpc.org. For a list of OneByOne speakers, please go to www.oneby1.org. Also, OneByOne encourages churches to join their OBO Church Network. Please go to their website for more information.

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