

Friday Night Theology, June 20<sup>th</sup> 2008

Sexual Sin

How on earth did we get to the situation where evangelicals are defined by their attitude to sexuality? I find this particularly strange given that almost all of us are guilty of some sexual sin at some point in our lives. After all, Jesus was clear, "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart". (Matthew 5:28) There are not many people who can say this verse has never applied to them.

Of course, some would say that the difference between this and homosexuality is that even if they have been guilty of the lust that Jesus describes they at least acknowledge that it is wrong, they repent and move on – at least till next time. In contrast, it is argued, the reason homosexuality is such a pivotal issue is that those who are pro-gay refuse to admit that there is anything wrong with homosexual practice at all. That is the difference.

But at this point, another of Jesus' sayings seems particularly relevant. In the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28ff), Jesus' point is that the righteous son is not the one who merely *said* he was going to obey the command, but rather the one who actually *did* obey, even if at first he said he wouldn't. And so Jesus concludes "I tell you the truth, the tax-collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." The significance of all this is that in relation to any sin, perhaps especially sexual sin, what matters most is not what we *say*, but how we actually *behave*. Mere words are no demonstration of a heart submitted to God and those who say the right thing but continue to sin are no better than those who both say and do what is wrong.

Given this, and especially for those of us who have been guilty of sexual sin (according to Jesus' definition, not our own), I see no justification for a judgemental attitude whatsoever. Yes, homosexual practice is wrong, and is outside the parameters God has set for appropriate sexual conduct – but, according to Jesus, so is lust, or even looking at a woman inappropriately. Now, this does not mean that we water down God's message in this area. What he has said remains unchanging. But it does mean we communicate that truth in a spirit of love, gentleness, grace and compassion, fully aware of our own sin and failings in this area.

I don't want to pretend, though, that to do that is easy. Unfortunately, Christians tend to polarise into those who say nothing on the issue and those whose condemnation of homosexuality is nothing short of homophobic, springing from fear and prejudice rather than love. So, how can we communicate God's truth gracefully while conscious of our own shortcomings in this area?

Perhaps the place to begin is to show that all of us set boundaries to sexual practice, whether Christian, agnostic or atheist. A few weeks ago, we quoted Ken Livingstone who said, "I don't think anyone in this city will be shocked by what two consenting adults do, as long as you don't include children, animals or vegetables." But in reality, even in relation to 'consenting adults', almost all of us do continue to set boundaries. Pornography, 'open' marriages, polygamy and public sex all involve 'consenting adults'.

Yet, many people – Christian or not – consider some or all of these activities to be wrong. The point, then, is that there is nothing unusual about putting boundaries around adult consensual sexual behaviour and saying this form of sexual expression is inappropriate. The only question is where we put the boundaries and how we reach that decision. Christians, at least, have the advantage of saying that they put the boundaries where they do because that is what they understand God's message to be. They don't just create their own morality.

Yet, having said that, I suspect one of the reasons that we have a word for homophobia, but not for polygophobia, or pornophobia (at least as far as I'm aware) is that gay and lesbian people have been on the receiving end of some atrocious prejudice and harassment. For instance, it is still the case that some Christians wrongly compare homosexuality to paedophilia when they are categorically not the same. It is imperative, then, that Christians are just as active in standing out against such homophobia (irrational fear and hatred toward gay and lesbian people) as they are in gently, humbly and with a spirit of repentance standing for God's plan for sexual expression.

Which brings me back to my opening question – how on earth did we get to a situation where evangelicals are defined by their attitude to sexuality? For, unless we are all innocent of sexual sin (and this is clearly not the case), what should be our defining mark is the attitude of repentance we show toward our own sexual sin, rather than an attitude of judgement shown toward others. In Jesus' parable the defining mark of those who were truly his followers was not what they said, but whether there was evidence of repentance in their life. Can we honestly say there is in ours?

And as Jesus said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?" (Matthew 7:3) Or perhaps more bluntly, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." (Matthew 7:1) I once saw a billboard that proclaimed in relation to the ten commandments, "Which bit of 'Thou shall not' don't you get?" Perhaps the question for all of us over the coming weeks and months is this: "Which bit of 'Do not judge?' don't we get?"

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