

The Science around Same Sex attraction.

Over the last few months we have been exploring the issues of sexuality, marriage and divorce from a Biblical perspective. The reason for this is because these issues are hot topics in the media and in our society at the moment. There is huge pressure for change from what would be seen as the traditional norms.

For Christians this brings many challenges not least of which is having a clarity around what it is we actually believe on these issues. So often many of the things we do, we do because we have always done them. And it isn't until there is a challenge to the status quo that we actually stop and ask what is it I am actually doing. What do I really believe about this issue? For many Christians this is the case with marriage and sexuality. So exactly what is marriage? Is it a civil institution or a religious rite? What makes it different from de-facto relationships or civil unions? And what about sexuality? What does the Bible teach about same sex attraction and so on?

And so we have been studying these topics mainly from a Biblical perspective for the last month or so. Today is the final message on the topic and it will be from a different approach. I am very aware that while the Bible is very clear about its stance on each of these topics people still have a lot of related questions that can make it hard for them to reconcile what the Bible is teaching with what they think they know about these issues.

So today I will be talking about how our sexual attraction develops or as it is commonly put. Are people born Gay? I want also to look at the difference between having a same sex attraction and acting upon that attraction. It will also be important to address how we then respond as a church to a person or a couple with same sex attraction who come seeking to join us as a church. And lastly I want to look briefly at the question of whether or not sexual orientation can be changed.

So let's start with how sexual attraction develops. No-one is born either heterosexual or homosexual. At birth we are born with all the plumbing in place but as blank slates in terms of our gender and sexual attraction. In other words we are not attracted sexually to either the opposite or the same sex at birth. But as time goes on and we begin to mature we undergo a transformation. A transformation that is activated by the biological and hormonal compulsions of puberty but shaped by the nurturing environment in which we mature and the experiences that occur during that time. A transformation which will result in a sense of gender identity and the expression of some form of sexual attraction as we approach adolescence, be it heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality or what we would describe as more deviant forms of sexual expression like bestiality and pederasty.

Generally speaking for 92.3% of the population that process will result in their being attracted to the same sex, 6% of the population will declare themselves to be bisexual and 1.7% as exclusively same sex attracted.

For humans to develop into healthy individuals in every way from how we relate to others through to our expression of sexuality what we require is a nurturing environment where we are shown affection and care, are provided with food, warmth and safety. In such an environment we learn through observing the behaviour of those around us and develop accordingly. Where that nurturing environment is deficient it has an impact of how well a child develops into a well adjusted individual. There is a lot of evidence for example for

how children who grow up in institutions like orphanages, had higher rates of mental illness, struggled to parent their own children, had higher rates of failed marriages and so on.

So for the 92.3% of the population who declare themselves as heterosexual they will have grown up in families with a mum and a dad, grandparents, brothers and sisters. Factors which influence their gender identity development and their subsequent heterosexuality include the presence of Mum and Dad who will model the relational interplay between men and women. The presence of Mum and Dad also allows for the child to bond with them at key times during their developmental years. The obvious biological difference between the sexes causes parents and society as a whole to intuitively and culturally treat children in different ways according to their sex which contributes to the forming of the male and female gender identity, a gender identity which sets the stage for how we are attracted to that which is different from us. There is also a wide range of what I would call normative and healthy cultural and environmental factors which conditions and shapes our gender identity and sexual attraction. Factors like our first sexual experiences, how well we connect or form friendships with both sexes, the messages we are receiving from the specific society in which we live and so on.

All this will result in an ideal society where all of those are positive and supportive in children developing a sexual attraction which matches their sex. In other words heterosexuality, an attraction to those of the opposite sex. Sadly however we live in a fallen world where many of the factors I have mentioned are distorted and for some this results in them developing a sexual attraction which is either bisexual or same sex attracted.

Let me note for you what some of those distortions are but first it is really important to remember that none of these distortions predetermines that a child will become homosexual. It is not fated that because a certain factor has been identified in helping shape the same sex attraction of some that it will necessarily do so for all. In fact what research has discovered is that it is a whole range of distortions that together can lead some to develop a same sex attraction but certainly not all.

For example a NZ study has shown that those who experience their parents divorcing at an early age are twice as likely to develop a same sex attraction. Although obviously not every child who goes through a divorce is going to become same sex attracted. Another factor is child abuse. A child who experiences child abuse is seven times more likely to develop a same sex attraction than one who wasn't abused. Again not every abused child becomes same sex attracted but the abuse will obviously make it harder for the child to emotionally bond when it needs to with those of the sex which perpetrated the abuse, especially if the perpetrator is their father. It is also recognised that rape has a similar effect. For others adolescent sexual experimentation is key. Your first experience of sexual arousal is incredibly powerful in shaping your future and if just happened to be in a tent with other boys of a scout camp then can also predispose you towards same sex attraction. There are many other factors identified from gender non-comformity, confusion caused by messages from the media through to sex education programmes in schools which normalise same sex attraction today as a valid, and all of these many factors taken together can predispose some to head down a track that results in their forming a homosexual orientation.

But to also quickly give you some evidence of why it is not genetic or that you are not born that way. Here are three interesting tidbits.

Firstly twin studies do not demonstrate it. In monozygotic twins (identical twins) you would expect if it truly was genetic a 100% concordance rate. In other words if one twin was gay, the other would have to be. The results are in fact far from that. In an Australian study of 5000 twins they discovered that where at least one of a pair of identical twins was gay the other twin was gay only 11% of the time. Not 100%. If it truly was genetic then it would have to be 100%. 11% is way too low.

Here's another interesting fact. A study of the incidence of homosexuality in cities versus rural environments in America demonstrated that homosexuality in rural environments among men was around 1.3% of the pop while in the 12 largest American cities the figures was 9.2%. In other words there were seven times as many gay men by proportion of the population in large cities as opposed to rural areas. This is clearly environmental causation not genetic. Similarly if you finish your education at high school as a woman you stand a 0.4% chance of being a lesbian or bisexual where as if you gain a university degree you stand a 3.6% chance of being gay or bisexual. 9 times higher. Again this is environmental causation not genetics. And I know of a young woman for whom this happened at Victoria university because of the lesbian environment she ended up in, in her department.

And of course lastly if we were born that way then natural selection/evolution would have bred out homosexuality as a genetic trait long ago as it is not a trait conducive to reproduction of the species. Population genetics would say from studies those of homosexual orientation do not reproduce enough to maintain a homosexual set of genes in the population.

So it's pretty clear that we are not born gay nor heterosexual for that matter. It is part of God's plan that our sexual attraction was nurtured into being because we are relational creatures. It is in families that we learn to love and be compassionate and to relate to people with intimacy. It is something that has to be learned it cannot be bred into us. But in our fallen world with all it's distortions that process goes astray for some. So we should never condemn people for being same sex attracted but neither should we accept the outworking of the same sex attraction which brings us to the interesting question of whether our orientation can be changed. And the answer is yes it can. A fact that is reinforced when we realise it is a learned behaviour, and learned behaviours can be unlearned. Alongside that is the recognition that sexual attraction is very fluid. Think of those who are attracted to both sexes for a start. Is that something we are born with? And if born with that then why not some of the other forms of sexual attraction that would be described as more deviant. There are also many who start off with one form of sexual attraction, shift to another and then go back again. I know someone like this personally.

It's because our sexual drive is so strong that most tend to experience their sexual orientation basically as a given whether homosexual or heterosexual. But there is in fact clear evidence that given the right counselling, support of a loving community and so on that orientations can be changed. It is easier of course for those who are bisexual or non-exclusive, but it can occur. Although I would stress that it is not always an easy process. Think of the struggle many have with pornography for example. Our sexual drive is strong and once formed it takes a lot to change it, but it is not impossible.

So finally what about the church. How might we respond if a person or a couple with same sex attraction came to church?

How we would respond depends on a number of factors but our first response to anyone walking in the door would always be one of welcome because I think it is very important to remember a very clear thing here. The Bible condemns homosexual acts of any kind as outside the will and purpose of God but it does not condemn same sex attraction. While some may choose to deliberately engage in same sex acts many today find themselves unwittingly attracted to those of the same sex through no fault of their own and many are wrestling with that fact. So we would welcome them as much as we would welcome any first visitor to church.

Where we went from there would depend on a number of factors not least of which would be their willingness to talk about their situation with us or more particularly with me as the pastor. Not everyone does and I suspect most of us here have secrets or areas of our lives that we wouldn't be comfortable sharing more widely.

So let's assume for the moment that an individual arrives in church and then privately shares with me that they are same sex attracted and that they are keen to explore what the Christian faith is all about. What would I do?

To begin with I would probably suggest that they attend for a couple of months and get to know us a little and experience a little of what church is about and then if they still want to explore what the Christian faith is all about we would sit down and have a more in depth conversation.

In that conversation which might span several meetings and include Bible study and times of prayer I would explain what God's view on human sexuality is. That God made us male and female, and that sexual relationships and intimacy are the sole preserve of men and women who have committed themselves to each other in marriage. A lifelong, covenantal union that encompasses every aspect of their lives. That until we are married we are required to be celibate and after marriage faithful until death do us part. Every other form of sexual expression is therefore Biblically out of bounds which covers not just homosexuality but also polygamy, polyandry, prostitution, adultery, fornication and so on.

From that point how I treat with them would depend on a number of factors.

If they accepted God's view on sexuality then I would work them for change. I would probably encourage them firstly to participate in a some kind of discipleship, new Christians programme with the aim of bringing them to a place where they would make a public commitment to Christ through baptism or through a confirmation service. During that journey there would come a point at which if they were sexually active I would be asking that they become celibate. If they were in a relationship with someone of the same sex then I would also be asking that they move to end that relationship. If they were amenable to all of this then I would be supportive of them as I would any other parishioner as they sought to live the life of a disciple. Furthermore if they wanted help with seeking to change their orientation then I would also support them in that area in any way that I could. Following baptism or confirmation or possibly earlier I would also be supportive if they wanted to become more involved in the life of the church or take on leadership roles. Prudence would suggest what roles were most appropriate.

However if after that initial conversation they did not accept God's view on sexuality and saw it as completely appropriate for them to be sexually active with someone of the same sex and that it was okay to be in relationship with someone of the same sex then I would say to them very gently that to be a disciple of Jesus requires that we keep his commands and that if you are unwilling to do so then it is not possible for you to be a disciple or to belong to the church as the body of Christ. Whether or not I would tell them not to come on Sunday morning's would really depend on how they responded to that.

So in summary our sexual attraction is something that is nurtured into being and not genetic. That there are people with same sex attraction is because we live in a fallen world where the process and factors that would typically shape us into heterosexuals is distorted. However with help people's orientation can be changed although it is not easy. And for us as a church. We are to be welcoming as we would of any person but in the end if a person is to become a disciple of Christ then they have to accept and live by God's plan for human sexuality as given to us in the Bible. Most clearly in Genesis.

Any questions? Let us pray