

## Talking about how to talk about homosexuality

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My goal today is to talk about “how to talk about homosexuality”. I’m not going to offer teaching about the truth of this or that regarding sexuality. In fact, I am simply going to assume that the traditional Christian teaching on this topic is true and accurately reflects the Scriptures. Indeed, most scholars agree that the Bible condemns homosexual acts. We don’t need to argue about this. I’d be happy to address this question; but the real issue in our emerging global culture is how this traditional Christian conviction can be *heard* and why it is so difficult to get a hearing these days. I think, in fact, that if one can get a handle on this challenge, the direction of the arguments about sexuality can be more readily seen by Christian teachers.

That is, the Church has been losing the argument on sexuality over the past few years, and no amount of insisting that “the bible says this or that” is convincing people. Not that one shouldn’t lay out Christian scriptural teaching, and lay it out carefully. But we need to grasp why this has not worked well of late.

So, how shall we talk about sexuality today? Before saying anything, I want to be straightforward in insisting that, in talking about sexuality, one has to, first of all, be very clear about what one is doing and not doing in a given conversation. On this topic, more than any other, people hear what they want to hear not what is really being said. So, unless you get straight what you are about in a discussion enormous misunderstandings, often tinged with passion, emerge. So let me be clear about a few things today in this discussion.

First, as I said, I am not going to offer a biblical lesson. But second, I am not going to discuss exactly “what” homosexuality is or where it comes from. People will disagree with me, but I am of the view that we don’t really know for sure either the “what” or the “why”. This is a controversial claim. Less than a year ago, two distinguished scientists associated with Johns Hopkins University published an overview article in which they argued, on the basis of looking at a vast (if hardly exhaustive) range of studies, that there simply was no scientific clarity on this topic. There is no hard evidence that one is “born” gay, and that is partly because it isn’t clear what “being gay” means, apart from certain physiological-emotive arousals that, in themselves, vary among individuals. The article has been abusively attacked, mostly because its actual premises were misrepresented – it was not original research but an attempt to find coherence in research that may not be there – and because there is a political culture in the West and global cultural guilds that cannot accept questioning its own premises. In any case, I agree with Mayer and McHugh: we really don’t know enough to say much that is clear on a material or biological basis about homosexuality. So my approach has to do larger social themes, not biology or psychology.

Third: without knowing why, we can safely say that people with same-sex attractions don’t generally “choose” these attractions. This is important to grasp for *pastoral* reasons. On the previous point – in general same-sex attractions are not invented, but given to individuals somehow – can I tell you that I had as a roommate at boarding school when I was 13 and 14 a now famous British Singaporean, Melvyn Tan? Why do I mention Melvyn? Because I want us to be humble in talking about homosexuality. Whatever one thinks about the Church’s responsibilities in teaching about sexuality – and I think these responsibilities involve upholding

traditional Scriptural Christian claims -- I don't believe we can do this "innocently", that is without recognizing the challenges and moral dangers we confront in the effort to be faithful. Humility is a pretty big part of teaching on these things today. And they should have been earlier. Melvyn Tan is one of the great pianists of our day. But he is gay. And when I was 13 and we shared a room together, and before any of us had words and concepts in 1969 to talk about these things, I think realized that he was gay – his manner, his shyness about things, his approach. He neither asked for it; nor understood it; nor did I at the time. But in retrospect it was all obvious; it was the first time I can think I encountered the question; and it was inevitable. And surely it is not only because I come from a Jewish background that I am sensitive about this: but I would never wish for Melvyn or anybody what was done by Nazi's to homosexuals, arresting up to 100,000 of them, and sending thousands of these to concentration camps to die. History tells us that the Church cannot allow her teachings to be used by hateful people to injure others. She must be clear that she stands on the side of all people, whoever they are, and will not abandon them. We must be clear; but we must be humble.

Having said that, the teaching on the topic of homosexuality is now harder than we can imagine, and not for the kinds of reasons I have just mentioned. No: we are now in a globalizing culture that has simply overcome traditional teaching on these matters altogether.

Anybody who knows the Irish singer Hozier's song and music video "Take Me To Church"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYSVMgRr6pw>

will realize that the traditional Christian view of sexuality and homosexuality more particularly is pretty much irrelevant to the general youth culture of N. America and Europe. Platinum, award-winning, teen-enveloping – the song and video angrily depicts the Church as a violently oppressive opponent of true love, in this case same-sex love. True love vs. the Christian Church: take your pick – and its obvious what the choice is.

This vision has been widely disseminated, propagandized, and embraced. It's not going away. And its deeply rooted personal and social vision now is bound to things that can't be argued away either. It has to do with feelings and hopes and personal yearnings that are no longer about logic, but about what it means to be a human being at all – the whole thing, from head to toe, heart to finger tip, mind to flesh. And these matters have become enshrined in civil law – anti-discrimination law, harassment law, hate-crime law, and marriage law.

We can, and should, be asking "how did this change happen? And happen so quickly?" On the one hand, it's a complicated story that no one really understands, though we might have theories about it. It is similar to the kinds of questions that arise when we ask, "How did Europe, Canada, and now parts of the US move, in just a few years, to accept euthanizing people?" No one really knows. On the other hand, there are at least *contexts* in which to look at these kinds of changes, to try to understand them. And that is what I am going to try to provide. In the few minutes that follow, I want to suggest where the Christian entry point is into the vast area of sensibility, personal and social – not "how" to enter, or the equipment to bear. Just the entry point itself.

That entry point, I want to insist, is our personal mortality and its relation to other people. By “mortality” I don’t just mean our deaths, but the way our death-boundedness informs the shape of our life-limitedness, in terms of human generation. And that conjunction of mortality and generation is what defines our sexuality, utterly and immovably, in the sense that we are creatures of God. Because we are all born from a mother and father – whether we know them or not – and because we all die; and finally, because the way human life *persists* is through this ongoing process of mother and father giving birth, to those who grow up and in turn give birth and then die – because this is the “way of human existence”, everything we have to say about the use of our bodies is also defined by this birthing, conceiving, and dying movement. And Christians – along with others, we must stress – have always understood this. But, you see, this arc has been culturally redefined. How so?

Contemporary redefinitions of sexuality and their deforming of the embodied self’s purpose are tied to this redefinition of the shape of human life. New cultural notions of sexuality derive from a vast and profound reordering of social experience, away from the immediate exposure of the self to human mortality, and towards an experientially buffered self defined by present choices of action. The unprecedented expansion of the average human lifespan in the past 100 years from approx.. 40 years to 80 years (that’s Canada, but goes for much of the West, and now other parts of the world in the past 50 years), was centered around infant and maternal mortality mostly, although it also affected adult health in the face of disease and accident. This single shift, known as the great Health Transition, altered the way people understood their lives in relation to generation: having children, raising them, losing them, hoping for the future, living for the sake of past and future together, being cared for by the young, and finally ordering the moral shape of our brief lives with generational goods in mind, in their link to God’s gifts, promises, and final end. One could say so much here about the complex consequences from all this, but they cover almost everything: when life-spans increase around the world, we *always* see the following consequences: constricted fertility, later marriages, altered generational relations, changed gender roles, the character of work as an individual decision for personal fulfilment, and so on. All these changes – which nobody planned, for the most part – put the question “who does my body belong to?” in a new light: our bodies now have increasingly become detached from anything but the self – my body doesn’t belong to my ancestors, or to my descendants, or to my generational ties today. And these do not belong God.

My body is my own, and I must decide, on the basis of my own reasons and feelings, what I want to use it for. This is indeed one reason why the legalization of euthanasia is part of a larger social package that includes multiple sexualities that are not protected as a matter of *choice*.

Sociology can explain some of this shift. Yet for all the changes, neither sociology nor natural science has anything to say about the immovable shape of human life that remains in place *despite* these changes. Whether we live to 40 only or to 80, we remain profoundly limited beings, whose purpose has no intrinsic meaning when viewed solely within the limits of a set of disengaged embodied choices. Human mortality has been culturally obscured, but it has not been mitigated. Just the opposite: our deaths now strike us as nothing but wrecking balls, extinguishing our hopes out of the blue. Death is not part of our lives, our being’s texture, but comes as pure oblivion. This leaves only our bodies, and their sensations as the standard of meaning.

How should we talk about our lives? I concur with the great 17<sup>th</sup>-century mathematician and theologian Pascal, whose *Pensées* remain the only truly modern apologetic of any worth. Pascal's *Pensées*, left unfinished at his own early death at age 39, were in fact designed to be an apology for the Christian faith, aimed at doubters, dissipated and tired self-indulgers, and despairing intellectuals. His fundamental argumentative principle is straightforward: our very contingency as entities, in the context of the infinite and the overwhelming, of death, yet also in the face of the thisness and hereness of our small beings. For Pascal, we cannot explain everything let alone the most important things of our existences, because we are intrinsically *subject* to things outside ourselves – time, weather, war, food, culture, families, the universe. We can't control any of this. Yet we are subject, however fragile and small we are, as thinking, hoping, and loving beings. How is this possible? There is also something magnificent about human beings, supremely unexpected and marvelous. On the threshold of this realization, the truth opens up, and, from a purely human perspective, God's life looms up as the "all" that we can never be, but know must be.

We discover, that is, that we are creatures.

I stress this point. Only if we are creatures, in this breathtaking and fearful opening to our mortality, does sexuality make any sense beyond immediate individual gratifications. Only once the point is grasped somehow or at least entered into, does the Scriptural truth and wisdom of human life, sexually ordered, begin to make any sense. This is not the place to explain this truthful wisdom, only to define it. Sexuality, from the perspective of Scripture's truthful wisdom, is the temporal mode by which human beings order their mortality through relations of generative responsibility, aimed at God's final receipt of our limited beings. Sexuality is about our movement from Adam to Adam: that is, from Adam as our mortal origin, to Adam as the Son of God who has taken us to himself. Hence, sexuality is being born from two parents – a mother and a father; it is about growth, and about familial demands in obligation/struggle/and gift, it is about suffering, sacrifice, mortality.

I like to say that sexuality, understood in a Christian manner, is about three things: lifespan, genealogy, and probation. Is it about lifespan, in the sense that we live only a few years (hardly anything, friends!), and come into being from nothing and end in that same nothingness – but and through the grace of God; it is about genealogy, because that coming-to-be and passing away is given by God in the shape of our generational giftedness – parents, ancestors, siblings, children, descendants; The bible is filled with genealogies, that we usually skip over, though we shouldn't. The very gospels begin with this. it is about probation, precisely because *how* our lives are genealogically ordered in struggle, suffering, love, and final endings, constitutes the shape of our creaturely character, which is the human vehicle of our life with God. This is Jesus' own life, the life God himself took on.

When we ask "who am I as a sexual being?", the answer is given in how we "fit" into this generational passage. This, I think, is something that many Singaporeans still understand better than Westerners; though for how long? In any case, neither sociology or natural science can offer any compelling alternative to such an answer. Who are we, if we are not creatures who are part of a network of generations? What are we going to put in the place of this? And in fact, the

Scriptural vision here is proven a deeply compelling “fit” to human experience for millennia and across all cultures. Same-sex engagements, we know, have also been practiced to the same temporal and geographical extent – that is not new either. Scripturally, same-sex behavior found its “fit” into the genealogical and probative ordering of the creaturely lifespan in a very particular way – it was at most a set of *practices* that were to be evaluated in terms of their place within the generational life of human beings. In Scripture, homosexuality was not an identity, it was not defined in terms of intrinsic desires (and these desires, in any case, were not viewed as definitive of human personhood). Let us assume that there were men and some women in biblical Israel who and same-sex attractions; that is quite possible. But probably most homo-erotically charged individuals – whatever exactly that means – found their places, probably uneasy ones for many, within the genealogically ordered frame of male-female marriage and child-rearing. Some, perhaps, found their place in the celibate roles that help human creaturely probation accountable. And a few did neither. We are aware of this or that homosexual person, from the past, but not many. Most people with such desires found their “fit”. Yet, the fit was there, because all Christians, more or less, knew that their bodies were “but for a day”, and were given over for the service of generational existence, in all of its challenges. That is not to say that we have no documentation of those who were quite attuned to their homosexual preferences. But, by definition, we know mostly only of these probably more unusual cases where the “fit” was consciously problematic.

In 2017, furthermore, nothing has changed in the natural components of this scriptural outlook: we are exactly the same human creatures we always were, except that we live handful of years longer on the average. The exact same questions of who we are remain. What *has* changed are purely *pastoral* demands, in the face of the destruction of the probative instrumentality of relational and generational existence, through the cultural stripping of our creaturely and mortal forms. It is a socio-logical syllogism, for instance, that as genealogical sexual existence loses its value, nihilism about life extends, and social rights to suicide emerge. There is a connection, I believe, between the rise of suicide among young people, and growing up in a culture where sexual identities have been set adrift from what we can call the deep meaning of familial purpose.

The Hozier phenomenon, then, is not susceptible simply to arguments. But locating the issue – and that issue is our social obscuring of specifically *creaturely* truth – defines what is at stake. What is at stake is the faithful rendition of our lives, as individuals and societies, but more importantly as mortal creatures in generational passage, from birth to near approaching death. Locating the issue and the stakes then uncovers the Christian church’s role: which is to embody and enact the forms of creaturely life that define genealogical faithfulness. I can’t go into this here, but obviously engaging this challenge is the most important practical apologetic there is.

Here, then, are just a few areas. I am of course speaking as a North American; perhaps I am completely off based when it comes to other places. But my sense is that some of the same dynamics as in the West on these matters are taking hold here as well. In any case, for better or worse, here are some practical areas I think are important to engage. Note that, in the context of this discussion, I am suggesting that following forms of life are *directly* necessary for illuminating the errors around contemporary affirmation and embrace of normative homosexuality. Note as well that none of these elements is directly about homosexuality itself: as

I have been arguing, that's not the first line of concern given the cultural and social dynamics we are a part of. It goes deeper. The best way to talk about homosexuality in our era is to talk about what it means to be human *creature*, in the fullest biblical sense: one who is made for time, who is born to parents, grows, struggles, learns, matures, is married, raises children if possible, struggle with them, joys with them, cares for them, suffers, weakens, is cared for in turn, and sees this round of life move on informed by faith in the Creator and his miraculous love that, even in Christ, does not shun these basic creaturely forms.

- a. acknowledgement and focus upon issues of mortality: the shortness of our lives and what that means; teaching – as Christians used to do – on the “art of dying”; return to funerary discipline; encouragement of home hospice care; and so on; young people must learn about this as a central part of Christian truth and identity.
- b. encouragement of generational interweaving – multi-generational households as a good and virtue; insistence that church life, in worship, teaching, and events be aimed at and bring together younger and older – the banishment of generationally segregated worship; formation for the young that is led by older persons, not other young persons, and so on. This is a major issue in the West; perhaps less so here... or is it?
- c. formational work that is specifically aimed at teaching younger persons (and older in their own way) about their genealogical obligations. Both where they come from, to whom they are related and how; and what their own role as adults who contribute to the generational line of human flourishing might be.
- d. A key element: teaching what has been called “the craft of suffering”: creaturely life is one where suffering is a given; some of derived directly from sin; but some simply from the fact that we indeed mortal creatures. The church has been gobbled up by the culture of buffered sensibilities, where gratifications are immediate and sacrifices are oppressive burdens. Of course, there is no real buffer for suffering, just as there is none for death. What differs is whether a human creature is prepared for it, grows with it, knows how to let God work within it. Churches of the past engaged these aims forthrightly. Not so today. Yet without training in the craft of suffering, sexuality is an intrinsically meaningless category.

In the context of traditional forms of sexual life, “take me to church” would present *these* matters first of all as that tradition's forms. Theologically, I would even say that, outside of these lived and embodied forms of life that Christians must present to the world, the reality of redemption itself will make at best constricted sense:

O death, where [is] thy sting? O grave, where [is] thy victory? The sting of death [is] sin; and the strength of sin [is] the law. But thanks [be] to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. [1Co 15:55-57 KJV]