



## A Personal Journey

Anonymous<sup>1</sup>  
6 July 2006

Acts, chapter 10, tells the story of Peter and Cornelius. It's a story in which Peter's view of who God accepts and who he doesn't undergoes a seismic shift. The Holy Spirit falls upon those traditionally regarded as outsiders: worse, vile, repugnant and profane.

It's a huge change for the listeners too. Cornelius and his household were 'God fearers', pious gentiles who were attracted to the monotheism of the synagogue, but they went along as half insiders, half outsiders. They agreed that they were impure, second class citizens in a religious system where first class citizenship was only available through joining a particular race by circumcision. This distinction between pure and impure seemed fixed and non negotiable. But now God is drawing them in. He wants them on the inside just as they are. He is not confronting them to repent or asking them to become something they are not. God possesses them with delight and they are delighting to be possessed. They discover a truth that they had always been taught was impossible: they are liked by God - just as they are.

Personally, as a gay Christian and ex-Church of Scotland parish minister I have undergone both shifts in understanding. I came from a conservative evangelical background where to be gay was and is regarded as sinful and repugnant. To be honest about my sexuality was automatically to become a second-class citizen, an outsider where I was told (and would have told others in the past) that, although I was loved, my actions, my desires and my whole inner way of relating to others could never be. In this conservative understanding sexuality is, in an obsessive way, always reduced to sexual acts. The excluded voice of pain is never heard. I don't think it is too strong to say that gay Christians are regarded as incapable of speaking truth. They are spoken at rather than listened to.

Over the last few years I have come to see that, like Peter, my understanding of the gospel was wrong. God's embrace is wider, God's grace deeper than I had ever realised.

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<sup>1</sup> Because this story is not just the author's story, but also a story affecting other family members, the author would like to remain anonymous.

Like the Gentiles in the story of Cornelius I have come to know God possessing me with delight in my whole identity. Sadly, I had to leave the Church of Scotland in the process because, especially in my conservative part of the church, there were too few Peters around. Maybe now things are changing: at least there is an opportunity for change to happen. Let me tell you my story as a contribution to it.

Ever since I was a child I have known I was gay. Looking back, I don't think that I grew up in an exceptionally homophobic environment. Homophobia was simply endemic in Scotland in the sixties and seventies. Everything about that culture taught me that my feelings were wrong and had to be hidden, denied and suppressed. To do anything else would bring ridicule and shame.

All through my childhood and youth I attended Sunday School, church, bible class and youth fellowship. My growing faith offered me some comfort - at least God loved me if no one else did. He would help me deal with my desires. The grace of God could surely overcome anything. Who knows, even Paul might have been gay. Surely that was his 'thorn in the flesh'? It suited me to think so anyway.

At university I became involved in a very conservative church and in the leadership of the Christian Union. I sensed a call to the ministry. Everything I read simply reinforced these beliefs. I desperately wanted to be the same as everyone else. Could God help me find a woman, love her and marry her? Surely then everything would be all right?

I kept myself pure. I did not have sexual relations with either sex. I prayed and prayed for God to deliver me from my feelings, which were often very strong. There were guys at university I had powerful crushes on as there had been in my schooldays. But this was a temptation to be resisted at all costs - and I did. I had no gay friends and if I heard that anyone was gay (which was rare) I avoided them, whilst inwardly I was fascinated by them and desperate to break out of my loneliness to talk to them.

Eventually I met a girl I really liked. We started dating and, for the first time, marriage seemed a possibility. I liked her a lot. I loved being with her. I wondered if this was all sexual attraction was about. I knew it wasn't of course as my feelings for guys were quite different, but I couldn't quite put these two things together in my mind. I couldn't allow myself to else my whole world would collapse. It was too frightening to admit the truth.

I did pluck up enough courage to talk to my prospective fiancée - it seemed only fair. We went to see our minister who was more understanding than I had anticipated. We talked about sexual orientation as on a spectrum and I convinced him (and me) that I was nearer the straight end. I did not want to believe anything else. I wanted to be married, normal and a proper 'insider'.

We did marry, we had family and the marriage lasted more than twenty years. But within a year of marrying all the old feelings were back. Again I pushed them deep down, I tried to ignore them, certainly hid them and it would be several years before I had even the slightest physical contact with a man. All during the 1980's when demands for gay rights were increasing and when AIDS became an issue I preached fiercely anti-gay messages. Gay rights campaigners were messengers of Satan as far as I was concerned.

Not surprisingly, with this dissonance in my soul, I was increasingly unhappy. Unhappiness began to turn to crisis when, at a swimming pool, another man made advances to me. We didn't do much, but what we did do threw me into confusion. Physical contact with a man did things to me that I had never ever felt with my wife. It was as if it pressed all my

buttons. It was who I was. It was what I was made for. It was the way I was wired. Sooner or later I would have to face the truth.

Then came the Section 28 debates with all the petitions being signed against its repeal. By this time I was well known as an evangelical. Many of my friends were in the forefront of the campaign. I was involved in the Boards of the church making statements on the issue. People were asking me to sign petitions but I did not feel I could. I was sick of the hiding and the pretending. Yet all this made me feel more frightened of being exposed and even more isolated.

The tensions spilled over into my marriage and things at home deteriorated. My wife went through a period of believing there was something wrong with her and that I no longer found her attractive. I could not bring myself to tell her the truth even though she was my best friend. I was so confused that I had actually forgotten we had talked about the issue before we married. Eventually she asked me outright if I feared I was gay. I broke down and said I not only feared it but was certain I was gay. That night and for several months afterwards I felt very near to suicide.

It seemed to me as a bible-believing Christian that there were only three ways to resolve the situation. I could end my life: I knew that was wrong - but then so was being gay in my evangelical worldview so what was the difference? An alternative would be to abandon my faith but I couldn't do that either. I knew God was real. He'd led me through many times in my life and, oddly enough, in that darkest time he seemed very near.

The only other possibility was to question my interpretation of scripture. Had I maybe got it wrong? Jesus did say that we would know the truth and the truth would set us free. The truth I'd been seeking to live by was certainly not setting me free. It was imprisoning me, crushing the life out of me, killing me. John reminds us that perfect love drives out fear. Why then was I living in such fear?

I began to question and read extensively outside my blinkered evangelical perspective. Before long I came to the conclusion that there were other interpretations of scripture that were just as cogent and coherent as the one I had lived with for so long. I realised that far from abandoning the scriptures this quest was actually making me take the Bible more seriously than I had ever done.

I began to believe it was possible to be Christian and gay. It did not need to be an either/or. I began to believe God loved the gay me. Until now I'd always believed God loved me - but not that bit of me. It was like a cancer that needed to be cut out. Now I realised he actually loved ALL of me because my gayness was part of the man he had created me to be. It was not a disease.

This search and journey was helped by the advent of the internet which allowed me to research widely without speaking to anyone and to contact supportive Christian groups outside Scotland. I travelled to attend meetings and worship. The first time I shared a communion in a community of other gay men was the most meaningful celebration of my life. God came to me and I came to God in all my identity for the first time.

But now there were other problems to resolve. What did it mean for my marriage? What did it mean for my ministry? At first I hoped my marriage and therefore my ministry would continue. I gave it a good try and my wife tried even harder. But the secrecy continued to trouble me. I felt I was being a hypocrite yet there was no way of 'coming out' in my situation. I felt more and more that I was not loving my wife as a wife, or woman, should be loved. I longed to be able to be openly me. I wrestled with what I knew would seem to

others to be the selfishness of that. They could not know how long I had buried my true self and the pain that had caused.

Again the tensions mounted at home. I knew I was being irritable with my wife and family. Eventually, after much prayer I decided that I had to find a way out that would cause least distress to my congregation, least distress to my family and preserve some dignity, if possible, for me. God is gracious. It took several years, but a way did open. It has not been without tears for us all. It is still early days and I grieve for the pain I have caused others.

But for the first time in my life I feel I am true to myself and living with integrity. My faith has been shaken and reshaped, but remains. My ministry is no longer within the church but I still believe God will use my gifts.

I hope that by writing my story some will be caused to question the hard line they have always taken on issues of sexuality. In my case it led to the near ending of a life, the failure of a marriage and the ending of a ministry. A more open, accepting understanding of scripture would allow young people to talk freely about who they are and prevent years of fear, hurt and loneliness. I ask you, which way is more true to the Gospel?