



Confession is Good for the Soul

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Confession is good for the soul, they say. They also say that if it doesn't hurt, it isn't working! Perhaps that is why confessions can be painful - they strengthen you through humbling you. And who likes to be humbled? Yet we are told in Proverbs that 'Pride goes before a fall', so humility must also be a good thing.

It is humbling to admit that we were wrong and that our old attitudes hurt and discriminated against a significant minority of those around us. It is even more humbling to admit that some of those same attitudes are lingering, despite our best efforts. But perhaps naming our short-comings provides the accountability we need to continue to work to overcome them.

And perhaps, if one person is willing to admit to her struggle to overcome less than admirable attitudes and feelings, that admission will allow others to face up to similar attitudes in their own lives.

So here it is - homosexuality is an uncomfortable subject. It is a topic we are less than eager to explain to young children. Because we are not used to seeing gay couples together, that can be uncomfortable, too. And I wonder if gays and lesbians don't present some sort of challenge to our own sexuality, which is also deeply uncomfortable. I know that, as a woman, I am more uncomfortable with lesbians, while a good male friend of mine admitted that he has no problems with lesbians, but he is ill at ease with gay men.

Not very pretty, is it? It is much easier to sweep the subject under the carpet and not think about it. And yet... how would I want to be treated if I were gay? Jesus summed up the whole of the law in the two commandments, 'Love your God' and 'Love your neighbour as yourself' - even if this involves being uncomfortable and facing issues I'd prefer not to think about.

I grew up in a conservative evangelical family in the American South - so no prizes for guessing that I grew up believing that homosexuality was a sin. I can't actually remember homosexuality being discussed, and I'm not sure when I became aware of what homosexuality was, although I think I was probably into my teens. Looking back, homosexuality was one of those issues that was too uncomfortable to discuss. Besides, the 'clear teaching of Scripture' was that homosexuality was wrong and I didn't know anyone who was gay (at least not openly), so what was there to discuss? It was much more comfortable (and much easier) to let the topic remain under the carpet where it belonged.

It's interesting... homosexuality as a taboo topic makes life easier for me, as a straight person. I don't have to think about or discuss this issue. And given that thoughts of homosexuality almost inevitably involve talking about 'sex', that has got to be the easy option in Christian circles, right?

But what does seeing homosexuality as a taboo topic mean for a gay individual? And particularly for a gay Christian? Human sexuality is a powerful force - but for many gay individuals, particularly in Christian circles, their sexuality is taboo. I wonder how that feels? It can't be easy or good, and I imagine that it can lead to much heartache, self-doubt and even self-hatred.

That's a lot of pain to expect someone else to carry, simply so I can stay comfortable in my Christian world in which homosexuality isn't discussed. If I am to 'Love my neighbour as myself', as Jesus commanded, then that includes homosexuals. And even if the 'clear teaching of Scripture' is that homosexuality is sinful, that uncomfortable command to 'love my neighbour as myself' surely demands that straight Christians acknowledge that this issue makes them uncomfortable, but that their discomfort is nothing compared to the issues faced by gay Christians.

And if we are to treat others as we would like to be treated, then ignoring this subject simply isn't good enough.

As I have said, while I was growing up I never knew anyone who was openly gay. Homosexuality wasn't part of my world, so I didn't give it much thought. When it did come up as a topic of conversation, it was easily dismissed with reference to the few Scriptures which seem, at face value, to condemn it. And that was that. Easy and comfortable for me.

I would imagine that there are many others out there with a similar experience to mine.

Over the years, the subject of homosexuality has come up occasionally. I remember reading an essay my husband had written for one of his Divinity classes, in which he looked at the Scriptures that seem to address homosexuality and concluded that they do not condemn committed homosexual relationships. At the time, I told him I wasn't convinced.

Perhaps a year or two later, however, I was reading a book by John Stott called, 'Issues Facing Christians Today'. Stott looked at a variety of controversial issues for Christians, and homosexuality was one of the topics. Stott listed the Scriptural references to homosexuality, and showed that, if one looks at the texts within their historical contexts, they are not condemning nor even addressing the issue of a committed homosexual relationship. But Stott nonetheless concluded that homosexuality is, in fact, sinful, because 'God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve' (I'm paraphrasing perhaps a bit flippantly here, but that was the essence of the argument).

Well, of course, relationships between male and female are the norm within our society, and, evolutionarily speaking, that is not surprising: without heterosexual sex, the human species would quickly cease to exist. But does that fact alone make homosexual relationships sinful? It seemed a very weak argument to me, and one not supported by Scripture. It was at that point my mind was changed on homosexuality.

Although my mind might have been changed, however, and I perhaps added the odd pro-homosexual comment into the mix when talking with members of my family (who would all condemn homosexuality as sinful), my actions didn't change. I still ignored (for the most part) the issue of homosexuality because... well, because it didn't impact on my own life and because it remained uncomfortable.

But lately I'm beginning to ask myself more and more often - how does Jesus' command to 'Love my neighbour as myself' fit into my comfortable life in which homosexuality is never talked about? And what about my attitudes to homosexuals? Don't I have an obligation, as a follower of Christ, to actually love others, rather than just tolerate them (or pretend they don't exist)?

As with any ongoing personal development there are still many questions and not so many answers. But we must start somewhere, and I have found that questioning my own attitudes has been a good place to begin. May we all be willing to ask hard questions, and then listen humbly and prayerfully for a response.