



When I was the pastor at Ilam Baptist, the whole gay marriage thing was going through and predictably many Christians were upset about it. It seemed to me that there was a lot of shouting from both sides of the debate but little listening. So I thought, how might we address that at our church.

So I invited Murray, a gay Anglican theology student that I knew, to come share his story at church one Sunday. I was concerned that he might cop it from someone as it was a public meeting, so we did it as an interview with me on stage with him to deal with any brickbats that might come his way.

I was nervous, particularly when our most theologically conservative person walked through the door. He told his story of a growing faith and a growing awareness that he was gay, and as you might imagine his story was riveting. I am proud to say that we gave him a good hearing and most of us went away with more understanding and empathy than we came with. Mission accomplished, I was not trying to change anyone's mind but to put a human face on the issue which I thought was lacking.

My conservative friend came up to me afterwards and I braced myself for a slap and instead I got a thank you. You see his mum is gay with a partner but will not talk about it, so to hear Murray's story was significant for him as it helped him to understand his mum. Murray told me later about a chat that he had had with one of my flock, who was married yet bisexual. He did not tell me who and I did not ask, but I really hope that they are ok. Does their bestie know? Do their parents know? Does their partner know? I really hope that they are ok and not utterly alone.

In churches, particularly Baptist and other evangelical churches, we do our best to hide our sexual issues and talk about them as little as possible. But in Corinth, there was a guy, let's call him Brian, who had formed an open incestuous relationship with his step mother. And no one said a negative word about it. Brian was out and proud and it seems like the church was good with it. Why?

We don't know for sure but there were probably two things in play.

The first is that Brian was likely a person of wealth and power, to whom many of the church owed social obligations of loyalty. He may have owned some of them as his slaves, others might have been relatives who were economically dependent on him, and he may have employed others or at least put business their way. All of these people were socially obliged to support him, even if he was doing something quite against the moral grain such as sleeping with his mother.

There was this other social system running through their community, not just the ties that bound them together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Not a problem for us nowadays as we don't have patronage systems do we?

I am not so sure about that. I have seen money given to churches and individuals inside churches where there was a quid pro quo, an expectation that something will be received in return. The gift came with strings attached. Often the donor expects influence or power, a large voice that needs to be especially listened to because of their generosity. I think that we Baptists are often be a bit too impressed by people with money.

I know of a church where they normally sat in rows facing the front but the evening service crew decided that they would sit in a circle, they thought that it would make for more intimate worship as they were smallish group. After the morning service they set the chairs up for the evening service and went home. At 6pm they returned to have a music practice to find one of the old stalwarts of the church putting the last of the chairs back into rows. When they asked him why he had done this he replied 'my grandfather built this church and we sit facing the front!' The church leadership should have come down on him from a very great height, but they didn't. As Paul said in Ephesians 6:12,

For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

When churches become beholden to the dollar or to someone's family, there is another authority in play, a principality or power.

I think for us too there are other social relationship networks running through churches. Are you prepared to call your sibling, old friend, cousin or parent on their bad behaviour? If you aren't then there is another non-Christian system of influence in play, which gives the lie to phrases like the church being family and all that. If you and your family are really well established here you need to give that one some thought, it might be good to talk about that as a family before an issue arises.

Paul told the Corinthians in chapter 5:5 that they had to expel Brian from their church, because what he was doing with his mum was just so beyond the pale. For Paul the big issue was how it would look to those outside looking in, that the church tolerated such an offence. One of the guiding theses in Paul's teaching and in particular his ethics, working out what is acceptable behaviour, is that we are not to be an obstacle to others coming to hear the gospel and responding to it. This man's behaviour was not only an offence to God but also to the pagan world. The gospel is so important that we cannot get in its way, and we should not allow anyone else here too either.

Interestingly, they were told to 'hand him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his Spirit may be saved on the Day of the Lord.' The agenda is that this man will ultimately be redeemed, and I guess that we are to infer that other means to persuade him to repent have been unsuccessful. This is drastic but it reflects the seriousness of what's at stake.

Not only the man's life as a follower of Jesus, not only the prejudice to the gospel being received by pagan observers, but also the corruption of the church. In verse 6 he says don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole loaf? I googled the recipe for bread, yeast is about 2% of the ingredients by weight but think of the impact that it makes. Without yeast a bread loaf is a dense pizza base, the addition of yeast changes everything.

Power people are hard to shift, especially those that are prepared to buck all the moral codes in sight like Brian was. One church power player told a pastor colleague of mine that you change what you like, but when you leave we will put it all back as it was. A guy I know finished an 18 year pastorate a while back, which had gone very well for pastor and church. Two years later a new pastor was appointed, and he faced all the same issues that his predecessor had faced twenty years earlier. In that two year layover the empire had struck back.

We know from 2 Corinthians 2 that Brian later repented, and Paul urges them to forgive him and console him so that he is not overcome with excessive sorrow. However, I do not imagine that that was always the outcome. It's no small thing to put someone out of your fellowship.

The other reason that the Corinthians did not do anything about Brian and his mum, is perhaps that they were quite happy about the relationship. Verse 2 refers to their arrogance and verse 5 to the church's boasting about this situation, which suggests that they were not merely tolerating this relationship but were proud of it. Why?

The most likely explanation for this is that they thought that they were all already living the resurrection life, sin had been defeated at the cross and hence they were unable to sin and were living in perfect freedom. So they could do what they liked, they were now free as demonstrated by Brian and his mum.

Theologians call this an over realised eschatology and there are two types of eschatological errors – over realised and under realised. Eschatology is the doctrine of the last things – second coming, resurrection, judgment, new heavens and earth, etc.

Let me explain slightly more simply. Jesus runs around Israel preaching what, preaching that the kingdom is here, it's almost here, it will be here. If you line up everything that he said about the kingdom it's a bit of a hotch potch. Sometimes it's a present reality, other times its imminent and then in the Lord's Prayer we are taught to pray for its coming. The kingdom is the new community of believers living under God's reign, in the power of his Spirit.

The church has understood this apparent contradiction in this way, now but not yet. There is a sense in which the kingdom is here now in the church, and in groups of people that subject themselves to the lordship of Jesus. And there is also a sense in which its fullness and completion are still off in the future, so it's not yet. The kingdom started breaking in when Jesus's ministry began and that process is still ongoing, to be completed only when he returns. That completion or fulfilment is the Christian hope.

An under realised eschatology is the belief that the kingdom is completely future, so God is inactive at the moment. Hence, there is not much point in praying if you are trying to influence God's action because like a jeweller he wound up the universe like a clock, and left it running. He will not interfere until he wraps the whole show up at the end of time, which is why evil exists in the meantime if we don't stop it. If the kingdom is going to come, then it is up to us to build it. You hear this kind of thinking in the more liberal churches which focus on advocating for social change, and moral self-improvement.

The Corinthians seemed to have the opposite problem, an over realised eschatology, as they thought that the kingdom was already here completely. Their arrogant boast was that we are now so free that we can do what we like, because for us there is no longer any such thing as sin. Sleep with mum if you want to, do whatever your heart's desire because by definition it must now be good. They had made another error in that they seemed to think that Jesus came to save them to sin, rather than from sin. Enough to make Paul tear his hair out.

The idea that we will all be healed if only we have the faith is a modern example of an over realised eschatology, and you will meet plenty of Christians who think this. I have confessed my sins and prayed for healing, so if I only have enough faith to believe God for the healing then I will be ok because in God's kingdom there is no suffering or disease. I have known several people die with this fallacy on their lips.

The now but not yet means that we should pray for healing, and should have hope that God may move, but he will not necessarily do so. The world is a battle ground between God and Satan, and humans are the prize that they war over. In that context sometime evil seems to triumph, and other times good does. However, we have the certain hope that at the end of all things God will wrap the whole shooting match up for good. There are no guarantees of healing, wealth or happiness in the interim.

Chapters 5 and 6 also raise the wider question of how we address sexual issues in church life. Two words spring to mind from our practice, the first is reluctantly and the second is badly. Yet most of us have or at least have had serious struggles in this area, yet it is a seldom discussed topic. Many of you are right now staring at your shoes and wishing that you were somewhere else, what's he going to say? We are profoundly uncomfortable with this stuff.

Sex and sexuality represent some of the most joyful parts of being human and the worst. And we the church, the people of God, are worse than most social groups in how we deal with it's complications. I have so many stories I could tell.

My favourite teacher at my church based prep school raped a ten-year-old mate of mine after school one day in the art room. When confronted he admitted it and his general predilection for young boys. To cover things up he was sent to teach at the college as the boys were older, so apparently not to his taste – my mate eventually went to that college. Most churches that have been around for a while will have their stories of sexual predators in their midst, and in many cases how they were mishandled. I went to the funeral of a good Christian man who unbeknownst to his friends, had molested his grandchildren and a girl at their church.

My school experience was in the 1970s, forty years ago. Well, in 1994 a book was published to record the papers given at a big Christian conference in Waikanae. There is a paper in it from the then head of the Elim denomination on the future of the NZ church, who was a serial adulterer. There is also a paper by someone who was removed from his church for sexual assaults on teenage boys, it was widely known but he was never charged. Both of these predatory men fooled people for years.

My friend Daphne Marsden from South West Baptist did her master's thesis on domestic abuse in church families. A common intervention by church leaders was to urge the victim to forgive their abuser, so they were disempowered by their abusers and their churches. We have not dealt with these issues well.

In the gay law reform debates of the last 30 years many Christian people have said the most horrendous things, and I shudder to think of what will be said about gays when the adoption reform proposals come before parliament. It's no wonder that many gays think that we are their enemy.

While demonising the gay community, we have tacitly tolerated youth promiscuity, pornography and romantic fantasising all of which are endemic in the church. If you are not blatant about it then we will usually not ask questions.

It can all seem too difficult, and I agree that there are no simple answers, but that is no reason to avoid the subject.

The sexual issues that we wrestle with are not much like the arrogant Corinthian sleeping with his mother, daring anyone to take issue with him. Our issues tend to be in the shadows of our lives, in the dark places where there is little light. Yet the best cure for darkness is light, there is no healing in the darkness, plants need light to grow and so do we.

For most of us, being saved does not fix all of our stuff overnight. That is a lifelong journey of sanctification, of the Spirit doing his thing in us to help us work through our issues. Some of which may not be healed this side of the grave, but will be ultimately addressed at our resurrection. As Paul says in Philippians 1:6 he who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it, that is the promise that one day we will all be truly whole. However, this life is subject to the now but not yet of the kingdom, we may be forgiven but true freedom may not be there for us yet. Most likely we have to live with the struggle in the meantime.

We have a life to live as the saints of God's inbreaking kingdom, being his junior partner in his building a people for himself. How are we going to do that?

I think that someone needs to know our stuff whatever it is, and have permission to ask us how it is going. It's very difficult to own up to having a sexual or marital problem, because being good Christians we know all of the shoulds and should nots. There is a lot of shame when we don't measure up and shame can be toxic, it poisons everything that is good by driving us into the dark.

We need to get over the embarrassment about the whole thing, and own the fact that sex, sexuality and relationships are tricky. It's got to become something talked about rather than ignored.

One of my heroes is the catholic priest and author Henry Nouwen, the best book on leadership that I know is his book 'In the name of Jesus' and the best book about pastoral care is his book 'The wounded healer'. As a priest he swore an oath of celibacy and also had the conviction that a homosexual relationship was not God's best for him. He spent the latter part of his life in a Christian community for disabled people who he shared his life with, he nurtured them and they in turn nurtured him. They knew his stuff and loved him regardless, hugely healing.

There is something that we can learn from his experience, we really need each other at a profoundly deep level. I suspect that the cry for relational intimacy that has come through our recent church conversations reflects this reality, being known and accepted for who we are is a deep human need. Our need.

Here is a way that I have learned to think about this stuff, there is a hierarchy of conversations:

Facts - what is and isn't, it's raining, we've had a lot of earthquakes

Ideas – what would it be like if we became a collection of house churches, and only all came together occasionally?

Opinions – the government should do something more about the housing crisis, no the church should

Feelings – the boss may have to make me part time and it's making me feel really insecure, I am worried that my family would not be able to live on a reduced income. I am starting to act out of that insecurity.

Needs – every relationship that I have been in has crashed and burned, I am scared that I will always be on my own. Is there something wrong with me?

Do you have relationships with other Christians that you can talk about your feelings and needs with? Most guys that I talk to don't have a real friend in the sense of someone that they talk about the deeper stuff with, not just football strategy or results.

- So if they get ensnared in porn who do they talk to?
- If they are attracted to someone at work who do they trust with that?
- If their wife develops a mental illness who then can support them emotionally through that experience?

We need each other more than we know. I was talking to an old friend of mine this week who has walked me through some very hard stuff in the past, and now he is facing some real challenges and he needs me to walk with him, which I am happy to do because it's what friends do for each other. But as I thought about meeting with him regularly again, I need him just as much as he needs me. Someone who knows me well, can listen without judging, yet is unafraid to question or challenge me when I need it.

If you look at your small group if you are in one, where do you spend most of your time? Sharing facts, ideas and opinions are all good and worthwhile, but is it also a safe place to say what you feel? Do people share what is going on for them, or is everybody always alright / ok / fine when asked?

If someone does share deeply is that met with empathy or with an embarrassed silence, or even worse advice on how to fix yourself?

Christian groups need to have the space for the 'I feel' statements to be made and heard. Does yours?