

October 11, 2015

Counterculture: *The Great Identity Crisis – Questions and Answers*

Ephesians 2:1 – 10

Last week we looked at what we called the great identity crisis in our culture as it relates to sexual and gender identity. It is safe to say there is massive confusion today in this area. We live in a time in which self-identity is increasingly defined according to sexual preference and gender choice. Someone is gay, or lesbian or bi-sexual, or trans-gender, or something else, based on their sexual attraction to either men or women, or their perception of their own gender. Their identity is all wrapped up in who they perceive themselves to be sexually. And we are talking about this because it is not only an issue in our culture in general, but in the church in particular.

Prominent Christian music artists like Ray Bolz, Jennifer Knapp and Vicky Beeching, have come out of the closet because they have self-identified as gay and lesbian. But they also claim that they are still Bible-believing, Christ-confessing Christians as well. Gay, lesbian and transgender bands like Micah's Rule are springing up on the Christian music scene. Christian congregations are welcoming openly homosexual, lesbian and transgender people into membership in their churches. Numerous books written by Christians have come out on the subject, promoting homosexuality and transgender lifestyles, like Matthew Vine's God and the Gay Christian and Ken Wilson's, A Letter to My Congregation.

But as we saw last week, this re-defining of who we are sexually and re-defining of gender, grows out of a refusal to acknowledge the God who made us and of buying into the lie of who He is and who we are. And it's progressed to the point that we've embraced the lie that our sexual desire is who we are. The problem is we are not defining ourselves the way our Creator intended. The Bible tells us that we have been created in the image of God, and it is only by looking at Him that we can fully understand who we are. We were never meant to find our identity in sex or behavior or lifestyle. We were meant to find our identity in the God who created us and sustains us and invites us into intimate, sweet, fulfilling, relationship with Him through His Son. We were meant to find our full satisfaction and joy in God Himself, not in sex.

What I'd like to do this morning is take you through some of the most common arguments you encounter from Christians and non-Christians alike on this issue, frame a biblical response to those arguments, and then talk about how a loving, counter-cultural gospel community can offer hope and healing to those caught in this lie. One of the most common arguments of those who want to maintain a Christian status but practice a homosexual lifestyle is to argue that when Paul wrote condemning homosexuality, he didn't have in mind the kind of homosexual relationships we encourage today. They say that Paul's world had no concept of sexual orientation, no understanding of loving, mutual, monogamous same-sex unions. He had in mind those kind of oppressive, exploitive, abusive same-sex relationships that took advantage of the weak in society. Paul was thinking of the kind of homosexuality that preyed on young boys and girls, or homosexual prostitution or the kind that expressed itself in dominating and controlling ways. In other words, the argument is that Paul was speaking against 'that kind of homosexuality' – the kind that was not mutual, or loving, or committed.

But that argument ignores the enormous weight of historical evidence that clearly shows the ancient world did know about loving, mutual, committed same-sex relationships that were not exploitive or domineering and abusive. Kevin deYoung's book I mentioned last week has a great section on just this argument and there are great sourcebooks dealing with the writings of ancient Greeks like Plato, Plutarch and Aristides who wrote extensively on this subject that make it plain that anyone offering this explanation really doesn't know what they're talking about. From a scholarly, historical perspective, this argument has been put to rest. But even more to the point, Paul himself certainly knew that what he was condemning in Romans 1 was not just non-mutual, abusive, exploitive homosexuality. He wrote that 'men burned in their passion for one another'. That's mutual, not exploitive. And furthermore, he categorically condemns all sexual relations between people of the same sex, both men and women. If he had wanted to condemn only a certain kind of homosexual relationship, he certainly knew the words to describe them and yet he doesn't.

Another argument we hear is that homosexuality is genetic. 'I can't help it. It's in my DNA'. Some will go so far as to say, 'God made me this way so it must be alright'. What they are saying in both cases is that homosexuality is some sort of inherited trait over which you have no control. It was passed on in your genes and to fight against it is to fight against your real nature. You have to know that there is absolutely no scientific evidence that that is true. But of course if that were true, then the burden is lifted. You can be who you really are and the Bible is simply wrong in this area. But that doesn't really solve the issue. Ann Curry, a well-known TV journalist, was interviewing Pastor Rick Warren on same-sex marriage, and at one point she asked him this: *'If science finds that this is biological, indisputably...that people are born to be gay, would you change your position?'* And Rick said 'No'. And Curry was incredulous – 'Why!?' she asked. And Rick said, *'Just because something is natural for you, doesn't necessarily mean that is best for you...I'm naturally inclined to have sex with every beautiful woman I see, but that doesn't mean its the right thing to do.'*¹

What this argument fails to take into consideration is the fact that we are living in a fallen, sinful world, with fallen sinful people, whose motives and feelings and nature are absolutely shot through with brokenness and sin. What was once true in the garden in the beginning, every thought, every motive pure, every impulse and inclination perfect, has not been true since Adam and Eve were removed from the garden. Our best thoughts, our best motives, our best impulses are distorted by sin and by selfishness. So to say 'I feel gay, or I feel attracted to the same sex so it must be okay' is to ignore the reality of sin in this world. In other words, you can't trust your feelings. But you can trust the word of God. And the word of God says that He is opposed to homosexuality. He's also opposed to idolatry and sorcery and outbursts of anger, and envy and jealousy and pride and greed. No one believes that just because you feel greedy it's a good thing to pursue it. We expect people to deny their greedy tendencies, not to indulge them. Nobody agrees with Gordon Gecko that greed is good.

We don't think people are better off indulging whatever feeling they have. We don't praise those who cannot control their anger, or their jealousy or their arrogance. Why would we think that just because we have certain feelings or appetites that it is okay to indulge them? The Bible is a book from God that gives us God's thoughts, God's heart on who we are and how we are to live. And God's word gives us guidelines to follow. He says that there are things we need to encourage and run after, and there are things we need to fight against and to run away from. And all of this is designed for our total joy and satisfaction. God is for us. He's on our side. He wants us to grow and mature and live life to the full. He is not some extra-terrestrial killjoy, looking to cause us pain and heartache and stomp out happiness. To paraphrase John Piper, God's opposition to homosexual behavior is not because He is a kill joy, but because He is opposed to what kills joy.² He gives us His commands so that we will have joy.

Jackie Hill-Perry is a 25 year-old young woman who wrote an open letter to women struggling with same-sex attraction to encourage them to trust God's word and not their emotions because she had battled the same issue herself. She writes, *'You see what God has to say about homosexuality, but your heart doesn't utter the same sentiments. God's word says it's sinful; your heart says it feels right. God's word says it's abominable; your heart says it's delightful. God's word says it's unnatural; your heart says it's totally normal. Do you see that there is a clear divide between what God's word says and how your heart feels? So which voice should you believe?...The struggle with homosexuality is a battle of faith. Is God my joy? Is he good enough? Or am I still looking to broken cisterns to quench a thirst only he can satisfy? That is the battle. It is for me, and it is for you.'*³

Another argument making the rounds today, and made popular by our president, is that you don't want to find yourself on the wrong side of history. The implication is that issues like normalization of homosexuality and gay marriage are signs that history and humanity are somehow engaged in this ever upward advance toward perfection and utopia, and to oppose these things is to join the side of the segregationists of the fifties and the slave owners of the 19th century, or the people that still believe the earth is flat. It selectively ignores those leading intellectuals of the 21st century who championed Darwin's theory of evolution by calling for racial determinism and eugenics.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2ZwhdgiBgc>

2 <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/let-marriage-be-held-in-honor-among-all>

3 <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/love-letter-to-a-lesbian>

Kevin DeYoung notes in his book that, '*...many of the elite intellectuals of the day accepted "scientific" theories about innate mental differences among the races, as leaders on the left argued for eliminating the 'inferior stock' of mankind through restricted immigration, institutionalization, and mass sterilization.*'⁴ Not too long ago, Attorney General Mark Herring of Virginia announced, in reference to his decision to oppose in court the state's same-sex marriage ban, "I'm proud to say today the Commonwealth of Virginia stood on the right side of the law and the right side of history." To which Mike Huckabee replied, in essence, "*History shmistory.*" He recently said, regarding his opposition to same-sex marriage, "*You've got to understand, this for me is not about the right side or the wrong side of history, this is the right side of the Bible, and unless God rewrites it, edits it, sends it down with his signature on it, it's not my book to change.*"⁵

Listen, the only side of history that is worth being on is God's. He wrote the book. In fact He's the one writing history. And He's given us a peek at the end and it all ends up being about Him and not about us. This is not an argument that should rock you. Think of all the Christians that have ended up on the wrong side of history. Jesus ended up on the wrong side of Jewish justice. The early Christians under Roman rule ended up on the wrong side of the lions. What about those Christians even now being hacked to death and beheaded by Isis? How about those recent martyrs in Roseburg, Oregon? Do you think that they will look back on this and say, 'Darn it all, we were on the wrong side of history there'? We should not be intimidated by some artificial argument from history. History is His story and being on His side is what really matters.

One more argument that is gaining traction is the argument of relationship. That is, getting to know someone who is homosexual or lesbian or transgender and hearing their side of the story so to speak, will change the way you think of homosexuality and move you to acceptance and consideration of equally valid lifestyles, or at least take it out of the category of sin. And purely from a relational point of view, the church absolutely needs to move from a position of what has been real bigotry and intolerance, and humiliation of people who struggle with same-sex attraction or transgender issues, and become a place where broken people of all stripes are welcome. But just because we can empathize with those who struggle with those issues cannot mean that we should redefine sin in a way the Bible prohibits. There are lots of stories of prominent people who initially opposed homosexuality and because a dear friend or son or daughter came out as gay or lesbian, they now embrace the lifestyle as valid and legitimate.

A Princeton Theological Seminary professor of Old Testament Language and Literature, an ordained elder in the Presbyterian Church (USA), relates how his relationships with homosexuals changed his stance on the issue: "*I used to believe that homosexual acts are always wrong. Listening to gay and lesbian students and friends, however, I have had to rethink my position and reread the scriptures. . . . I have no choice but to take the testimonies of gays and lesbians seriously. I do so with some comfort, however, for the scriptures themselves give me the warrant to trust that human beings can know truths apart from divine revelation.*"⁶ In other words, our experience is more important than the word of God. This is the old, old lie of the garden. We know better than God. Our subjective experience trumps God's objective word.

Luke Timothy Johnson, a well-respected New Testament scholar who champions the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the confessing church said, "*I think it important to state clearly that we do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us.*"⁷ But if you start redefining sin based on your experience, where do you stop? Ultimately you have no objective truth to point the way. Everybody ends up defining sin and self and God any way they please based on how they feel.

4 Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach About Homosexuality*, (Crossway, 2015), 104

5 http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2014/04/17/the_phrase_the_wrong_side_of_history_around_for_more_than_a_century_is_getting.html

6 <http://www.drpipim.org/homosexuality-contemporaryissues-47/70-popular-arguments-for-homosexuality.html>

7 <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/homosexuality-church-1>

And this is not just a same-sex attraction issue. I've had Christian men and women tell me to my face that now they are divorced they feel that a great weight has been lifted and they are so happy and satisfied and they feel God's blessing. And I tell them 'Sure you're happy. You've gotten your way. But it's not going to last. The same issues that caused this divorce are lurking right around the corner because they've never been dealt with by the Spirit of God. What you've got is only a temporary reprieve. The same selfishness, the same anger, the same jealousy and self-serving attitudes are still there waiting to wreck the next relationship'. You see we need the word of God to be our definition of what life should be. We cannot depend on how we feel. God created everything, He sustains everything, and He tells us in His word how things work and what things we need to embrace and what we need to run from so that we can live life with joy.

So how should we respond to those around us who do not profess Christ and want to promote an alternative lifestyle? How should we respond to those who are not Christians and are actively living as homosexuals or transgender people? We should respond just as Christ responded to our own hostility and rebellion and rejection of Him. Look at the first few verses we read this morning: *1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.* Like the rest of mankind. We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind and we all were by nature children of wrath. In other words, the sin we all embraced before we trusted Christ was equally damning. There is no room in the gospel for self-righteous attitudes toward anyone.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, *Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.* The word '**welcome**' there means to take to yourself, to receive into friendship, take to your heart. How did Christ receive us? He welcomed us, He took us to His heart. Ephesians 2 tells us that even though we were rebels and disobedient to God's law and hostile to Him, He reached out to us in our deadened spiritual state and welcomed us into His embrace: *But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved--*. You see, none of us came to Christ before we were cleaned up so to speak. We came to Christ because God had mercy on us and reached down and raised a dead man to life. He's never said to anyone, 'Clean up your act and we'll talk about it'. In other words, you can't address morality before you address the gospel. Trying to talk to someone about changing their views on homosexuality before you address the heart is futile, and wrong. It is transformed hearts that lead to transformed lives – it doesn't work the other way around.

So a gospel-centered, Christ-exalting community is first welcoming to those who've adopted a homosexual or transgender lifestyle. We understand that we all stand in desperate need of God's grace and without His initiative to change our hearts and our desires and transform our minds, we all are just as lost and headed for hell. Rosaria Butterfield, a former tenured professor of English at Syracuse University and lesbian, wrote a book about her journey to faith called *The Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert*. In that book, she credits the loving, patient friendship of a pastor named Ken, who didn't try to change her, but instead simply tried to be a friend and share the truth of the gospel with her, for her conversion. *'Ken and his wife, Floy, and I became friends. They entered my world. They met my friends. We did book exchanges. We talked openly about sexuality and politics. They did not act as if such conversations were polluting them. They did not treat me like a blank slate. When we ate together, Ken prayed in a way I had never heard before. His prayers were intimate. Vulnerable. He repented of his sin in front of me. He thanked God for all things. Ken's God was holy and firm, yet full of mercy.'*¹⁸ It was through this friendship that Rosaria began reading the Bible and God began opening up His love and mercy to her until 'one ordinary day', in her words, she came to Jesus.

We need to love them, and we need to also speak the truth. We need to change the reputation Christians have that we hate gays to a reputation for those who love them. And at the same time, never downplay biblical morality to make the gospel somehow more inviting. Loving others requires that we tell the truth. Homosexuality is a sin, and so is adultery, and pride and greed and malice and a host of other things. It isn't loving to mislead people into thinking that God is okay with your sin. The path of salvation starts with repentance from sin.

And we must not be insensitive to the very real struggles many have with same-sex attraction. Just because people have a same-sex attraction doesn't mean that attraction itself is necessarily sin. It becomes sin when they act on it. As James says, we all deal with various desires, lusts, but it is when those desires have **conceived**, they give birth to sin. And we cannot simply say that those same-sex desires are a choice. To many of the men and women who struggle with same-sex attraction, it isn't. They look at their lives and say, "I would have never chosen this. I can't choose not to feel this way. I've tried to feel straight, but nothing has changed." You can't just pray the gay away. Just like you can't simply pray away all the other sins with which you struggle. Overcoming sin takes the power of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. And that's a life-long struggle.

In the end, what it takes on our side is a strong, loving, encouraging gospel community that will welcome the sinner and exhibit the love of God and speak to them of the goodness of God and the good news of the gospel. A community of brothers and sisters who recognize that everyone of us struggles with sin and need help to overcome it. We need to be a community of faith that extends forgiveness and acceptance to all those who come in brokenhearted repentance. Those who are greedy as well as those who are proud. Those who are self-righteous as well as those who have a low opinion of themselves. The homosexual sinner and the heterosexual sinner. We need to see every person as God sees them – regardless of how hopeless or militant in their homosexuality they may seem to us.

Look at the end of the passage: **6 and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.** God saw you and me whose sin may not have been homosexuality as worthy of plucking up from the depths of our depravity to sit with Christ in the heavenly places. Is it too much to think that He would see those caught in gay, or lesbian or transgender lifestyles as no less worthy of rescue? You see no one's boasting here. No one's got a better kind of sin to be rescued from. None of us stand in judgment over this. We are **His workmanship** created in Christ Jesus for good works.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. 1
Corinthians 5:17

Our gracious God and Father,

We thank You for Your rich mercy and the love that reached down to us when we were dead to the things of God and running headlong in our pursuit of sin. We thank You for the grace that revealed Your incredible kindness to us in saving us and seating us with Your Son in the heavenly places. We thank You for the gospel that promises pardon for rebels, liberty for captives, health for the sick and salvation for the lost. Grant that we would be those who reflect Your love and grace and kindness in this world, and welcome with open arms those who do not yet know the joy of life in Jesus. Let the love with which You loved us spill out over those who are caught in the deceitfulness of sin's embrace and lead them to a new life in Christ we pray in the powerful, saving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.