

LGBT'S ask "WHY DO OTHER CHRISTIANS FIND IT HARD TO ACCEPT US?"

In conversation with a member of First Sunday, I discovered that sometimes when he met a member of the church for the first time, he sensed an uncomfortable atmosphere. He did not think it was his fault. I too thought it probably was not. Many Christians are initially ill at ease when talking to anyone who they know has a sexual orientation different from their own. What follows is an attempt to explore this dis-ease in the hope that together we will work out remedies.

First I want to stress that if I try to explain a particular attitude or behaviour, that does not mean that I think it is justified. Explanation should lead to understanding and understanding why people do things can make us more sympathetic. It puts us in a better position to negotiate with them without antagonising them further, and it can make it a bit easier to forgive them when they are insightful, tactless, and even cruel, as some Christians are toward LGBTs.

A good starting point is the whole of the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts.

The first split in the early church was over whether Gentiles could be Christians or not, and if they could, whether they were acceptable to God as they were or did they have to change, i.e. be circumcised and keep Jewish laws.

Today in parts of the church we are dealing with a very similar question: Some say only celibate or monogamous heterosexual people can be Christians and any other state is sinful. Others who are more open minded have discovered deep faith in individuals whose sexual orientation is different from their own. If they have (unconscious) negative assumptions about sexual difference, this discovery takes a bit of getting used to. It may even seem quite shattering. It was a shock to some in the early church to discover that Gentiles could be Christians too, AND without becoming circumcised or obeying Jewish dietary restrictions etc. It took spectacular dreams, courage and obedience and a dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit to convince Peter and those with him. Later there was much heart-searching about this in the developing church and it looked as if the issue was going to be divisive (What's new!!) before it was generally accepted that Jewish and Gentile Christians were equal in the sight of God.

Many of the group know they have received God's grace, either dramatically or quietly, and other Christians have not accepted its authenticity. That must be incredibly painful. I suggest we consider what made it hard for Jewish Christians to accept Gentiles and then look for similarities with the failure of some church people today to accept that variations in sexual life need not be a bar to a full Christian life.

BLOCKS TO ACCEPTANCE in the Jews toward Gentiles becoming Christians.

**Upbringing from infancy.** Good Jews did not talk to/mix with/ go into the house of a Gentile. To do so would be sinful because they were considered unclean. It is very hard and scary to go against such a taboo. To do so makes you unclean too. You would be alienated from other Jews if you did that. Yet Peter and those with him were liberated from all this. How? The dramatic circumstances helped a lot, of course. It was difficult to deny such an obvious manifestation. However, nothing is absolutely certain. I have known people who have had exciting experiences on Sunday and lived quite differently for the rest of the week! In the end it is the

consistent quality of a person's life that authenticates it (by their fruits you will know them). Fear blocks recognition of goodness, even when it is obvious. Is this the 'sin against the Holy Spirit'?

### **Fear**

FUNDAMENTALIST CHRISTIANS fear losing the certainty of their own faith. Many Christians brought up to believe the Bible literally are as strongly convinced of the evil of sexual variety as those early Christians were that Gentiles could not become Christians without becoming Jews. They insist that the Bible says so and can quote chapter and verse as many of the group know all too well. If the faith they cherish, which is the source of their joy and strength, insists that they take the Bible literally, to change their mind about what they believe it means is to lose their faith, which would be unthinkable. Anything that tempted them to do so would be regarded as the work of the devil. Hence their passionate intransigence. They are afraid, and with fear, love goes out of the window. Fear blinds them to the fact that they have become driven to behave in a way that is incompatible with the love Jesus calls them to live out.

MORE LIBERAL CHRISTIANS, particularly those who are older, may think they are broad-minded in their interpretation of scripture, but many of us are unaware of prejudices we picked up in the course of our lives. They permeate our society. For instance, I remember wondering when I was a child what they did in Sodom and thinking it must be something terrible. I suspect that that act is the first, and often the only thing that comes to many people's minds when they hear the word 'homosexual'. They have no idea that profound and tender love may be included. The unconscious prejudices we carry make us feel uncomfortable without quite knowing why. The group knows only too well how many Christians have made them feel. Part of the point of this discussion is to explore how LGBTs make some other Christians feel so we can begin to clear away this discomfort and pain.

### CHRISTIANITY AND THE PURPOSE OF SEX

We have inherited from Judaism the idea that God gave sex so that his people would be fruitful and multiply. Putting the precious seed anywhere other than in a woman's vagina, where there is at least the possibility of starting a new life, is a perversion; something that pagans did. If we have had a religious upbringing from childhood, these ideas are part of our heritage. They are likely to be in our unconscious somewhere and to influence our feelings and behaviour.

### FEAR IN THE GENERAL POPULATION

Ignorance and fear of difference: of people who are 'not like us'. For instance, Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland, when given the chance to mix in school and play, find out that they have much more in common than they were brought up to believe. We stereotype unfamiliar people instead of seeing them as individuals. We don't trust those whom we perceive as different. We feel we can't predict their behaviour, we don't know what their social rules are, what cues they give

The answer lies in more openness and education. We must, guided by the Spirit, be ready to explore the unfamiliar, honouring all that is good and rejecting only what seems contrary to the love of God. When we have learned to trust each other we must be seen doing things together, especially fighting prejudice in the church, the gutter press and in society as a whole.

PUTTING SEX INTO PERSPECTIVE Introducing another level of understanding.

Most ordinary people do not know that we all carry dormant within us more of the continuum of sexuality than we usually feel or express. Meeting a person of a different orientation may make us dimly aware of a hidden part of ourselves. We may become unexpectedly interested and puzzled, ashamed, or even aroused. For a person who has had a strict upbringing, this can be frightening. One way of dealing with such fear is to label the person who has triggered it wicked or perverted and reject them. That is so much easier than allowing yourself to explore and accept the complex person you might be.

Many people seem never to have thought about the fact that sex, like any other powerful force, has great potential for good or evil (like nuclear energy can provide electricity, radiotherapy, or a huge bomb.) Nor is it generally recognised that there can be a sexual element in most kinds of love. Parental love (the commonest model for God's love for us!) can be released from normal controls to be expressed in incest; love for children can become paedophilia, hetero- and homosexual loves both lead to prostitution, blackmail and rape. So it is not surprising that people are afraid of sex, enticing and rewarding though it is. Without knowing it, many of us project the frightening, tempting side of our own sexuality onto others who express it more fully, and then smugly and energetically condemn it. The Christian way is for each of us is to offer our sexuality to God, just as we offer the rest of ourselves. The more fully it remains in those loving hands the less likely it is that anyone will be hurt by our behaviour and the more its potential for joy and goodness will be fulfilled.

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