

George was my drug dealer and you know what happens next. George begins reading the Bible and the Holy Spirit falls on him. He is born again right there in the local lockup! His brother John picked him up from jail and gave his life to Christ before they even arrived home. They compiled a list of all the people they sold drugs to and called it their evangelistic “hit list.”

When Jesus came into my life everything changed. All those old clichés you hear— being lost and then found, being blind and then seeing— applied to me. I encountered God in such a dramatic way that I knew my life would never be the same. Within a very short time both Sharon (me partner) and Mark also gave their lives to Jesus. The three of us were living with a bunch of others in a big community house and identifying as gay. We were a ragtag bunch of ex-prostitutes, drug dealers, gays, punks and goths. The nearest church was fundamentalist filled with conservative-looking old folk. Yet despite the obvious differences between us and them, we managed to stay. Those older folk had no clue what to do with us, but they did know how to love and how to pray.

I met my husband Alan in those early years. He became the leader of a small group we ran in a community house, and we instantly became friends. He, Mark and I all ended up going to the same seminary. Among those drawn to our South Melbourne Restoration Community, called South, were a number of LGBT folk, averaging at least a quarter of our community. Given this, we regularly sought help to make sense of what discipleship looked like for them. When you invite the messiness of broken humanity, you also invite amazing grace. Al and I had the privilege of leading this unique community for over 16 years,

Orgasms offer us fleeting experiences of transcendence, a way of losing ourselves, a mechanism to find and experience the “other.” Isn’t such freedom and transcendence as that embedded in the orgasm an intrinsic part of any addiction? Are not all our vices virtues gone wrong? Is there not, in all our addictive behavior, something deeper being sought? We all often look for the right things (connection, ecstasy, touch, yearning to be known, etc.) in the wrong places.

Spirituality can be described as a vast longing that drives us beyond ourselves in an attempt to connect with, to probe and to understand our world. *Sexuality* can be described as the deep desire and longing that drives us beyond ourselves in an attempt to connect with, to understand, that which is other than ourselves. Both express a deep longing to know and be known— by God and by others. **Our deepest longings as human beings are to be in relationship with God and our neighbor.**

I was left with the distinct feeling that God had abandoned all things sexual to the playground of the devil. James Nelson describes sexuality as the central clue to what God is up to in the world. If we are created in the image of God, then our sexuality reflects something of who God is. It is the brokenness and temporary nature of our sexuality that creates the

hunger for the complete and the perfect. Acknowledging our own broken sexuality enables us to identify with a sexually broken humanity.

Augustine said that the pleasure one felt in the act of sex was the sinful element and therefore to be suppressed and avoided. It is this distinctive understanding of concupiscence (fleshly appetites) that was conferred onto the later church. This Hellenistic thinking was innately dualistic, particularly as it related to the body. Anything physical (in this case the body) was of a lower nature, contrary to the spirit and therefore not to be indulged. In direct contrast, Hebraic thought affirmed both mind and matter as good and part of the created order. Dualistic views of body and sexuality have remained predominant throughout Western church history.

This form of prohibitive repression of sexual expression actually runs the risk of cultivating what can be called the forbidden fruit syndrome—the temptation to possess what we know we can’t have (Romans 7). This “romantic myth” elevates marriage or genital connection as superior to all other forms of relationship. Hardly helpful for those who will not marry or who are currently single, which happens to be 50% of the American population over the age of 18. *Uptight Christians forget the fundamental fact that God created sex* (Philip Yancey). Artificial boundaries don’t exist in the real world, so how can we be authentic disciples, living examples of healthy humanity, while not being able to relate meaningfully to at least half of any given population? The cramped sexuality of puritanism might come from the right motivation of “staying pure,” but adults need to be able to make meaningful decisions for themselves, not just acquiesce to rules imposed from the outside.

If the church is going to present an alternative eschatological community of brothers and sisters bonded together as one in Christ, formation and friendship must suggest that Christian sexuality has multiple paths for men and women. Where are the redemptive stories in evangelical culture— stories of healthy nonromantic cross-sex friendships? Dan Brennan proposes the brother-sister metaphor found in Scripture (Mark 3: 35) as a third way for men and women to connect in nonsexual intimacy. My sense is that fear, rather than freedom, has become our prime motivator when it comes to sexuality. We fear what we don’t understand, and we judge what we fear. **When we are fearful as disciples or as a church, we begin thinking primarily about what we want to prevent and avoid rather than what we want to encourage and develop.**

We have created a hierarchy of sin, with sexual sins at the top. I’m not sure how we arrived at such inconsistent views on how we rate sin. Perhaps it’s because Paul talks about sexual sins as having different consequences. While sins might have different consequences, all are equal before God. **Money and wealth— not sex— are for Jesus what is most likely to compete with God for our loyalty.** The body seems to be where we carry our sense of shame and inferiority. **Christianity will regain its moral authority when it starts emphasizing**

social sin in equal measure with individual (read “body-based”) sin and weave them both into a seamless garment of love and truth. Seeing the Bible as a “rule” book, especially related to sexuality, reflects not only on the God it points to but restricts our capacity to see his good intent in and through creation.

We know that we can live a morally upright life and still manage to keep God out of the equation—the Pharisees of the New Testament are a clear case in point. Moral puritanism creates what Greg Boyd calls an idolatrous false religion. All of our sexual/relational needs can be summed up in two essential desires or longings, what theologian Marva Dawn calls our *social sexuality* and our *genital sexuality*. In the midst of a needy throng of humanity Jesus himself sought out specific people, not only to impart his message, but his life and heart too.

At Simon the Pharisee’s house (Luke 7: 36-50) we encounter a woman—a known prostitute, a woman who lived off her sexuality and body—wetting the feet of Jesus with her perfume and tears, then wiping them with her hair. What a picture! The fact that her hair was loosened (something only done in the intimacy of a bedroom) shows clear erotic overtones—at least on her behalf—and it certainly was not lost on the crowd! Yet Jesus lets her continue. This is a man who risked great misunderstanding by even allowing this woman physical closeness to himself. Jesus didn’t avoid relationships with women, even with those women who had a history of sexual sin and proclivity. He also didn’t avoid being alone with women. Jesus kept his social sexuality distinct from his genital sexuality by relating in powerfully wholesome, up-building, nongenital ways with persons of both sexes. And frequently his support for ‘naughty women’ set them free to ‘go and sin no more’ genitally. Jesus seems able to create a space between himself and others where real love is able to flourish and where feeling passionate toward another doesn’t have to lead to having sex.

We are now in a context where there are likely to be significantly more single people than marrieds in the church. At the same time, social sexual mores are loosening such that the church increasingly stands alone in expecting people to limit genital sex to marital relationships. **In Jesus we find the redemption of celibacy, and therefore of singleness.** And as many of my dear friends (both gay and straight) are walking the celibate path, this gives them a deeper insight and appreciation of what Jesus experienced. **There can be no such thing as a single person in God’s expansive family.** A life of resisting temptation and purity also involves the very gain promised by Jesus in the Beatitudes. And it is this extraordinary reward that can sometimes make spiritual giants out of celibate Christians. Many of my spiritual heroes have navigated the peculiar path of celibacy. Mother Teresa, Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen, Jim Cotter and Richard Rohr all took vows of celibacy. Others remained celibate till their later years: C. S. Lewis only married at age 59. Still others remained celibate their whole lives without taking formal religious orders that required it. John

Stott, for example, saw his singleness as a gift and said that God was faithful in supporting those he calls to it. These few and many others who we learn deep and rich truths from are all celibate, formally or informally, for a time or for life. **In Jesus we find the perfect marrying of sexuality and spirituality.**

What would our marriages, our friendships, our churches, and our communities look like if men and women were not afraid of connecting with each other in deep ways? What if men and women could really know each other without sex getting in the way? **What if we did not have to be so afraid of our own and others’ bodies that we cannot trust ourselves with them?**

Being sexual is connected to the way we image our Creator. Few other things can awaken the dark elements residing in every human heart as well as lust. Because it involves the splitting up of a person, prostitution is a foretaste of hell, not of heaven. For in heaven all things will be united in Christ, including all our parts: body, mind, spirits, emotions, wills. The body, in fact, and it alone is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God.

Men (generally) are more genitally motivated; women (generally) are more socially motivated. The highest selling men’s magazines fall into the category of “soft porn”—magazines like Playboy (genital sexual interest). For women it’s Women’s Day, Who Weekly and the like (social sexual interest). It seems men have a penchant for looking at people’s private parts, women for looking into people’s private lives. Broadening our understanding of sexuality necessitates that we also broaden our definition of sexual sin. I put women’s magazines into the category of “social porn.” Sexual sin is fundamentally alienation from our divinely intended sexuality. To put it overly simply but I hope accurately: **sexual sin lies not in being too sexual, but in being not sexual enough—in the way God has intended us to be.**

When one is in love, one always begins by deceiving one’s self, and one always ends by deceiving others. That is what the world calls romance (Oscar Wilde). Most of us have at some point experienced powerful nonromantic obsessions. Covenantal love is our ultimate goal, whether it be in our relationships or broader missional discipleship. I’m always saying to people that a romantic type of love might get them to the mission field, but only covenantal/sacrificial love will keep them there. Just like with marriage. Romantic love might get you down the aisle, but only the higher, more sacrificial love will carry you on till “death do us part.”

If anything needs a chaperone, it’s our sexuality. In his book The Cost of Discipleship Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks at length about Jesus being the mediator between all of our relationships, not just the God-oriented one. *We learn that in the most intimate relationships of life, in our kinship with father and mother, brothers and sisters, in married love, and in our duty to the community, direct relationships are impossible.*

Between father and son, husband and wife, the individual and the nation, stands Christ the Mediator, whether they are able to recognize him or not. We cannot establish direct contact outside ourselves except through him, through his word, and through our following of him. To think otherwise is to deceive ourselves. There is no way from one person to another. Christ stands between us, and we can only get into touch with our neighbors through him. Simply stated this means that no person has direct access to another person. All access is in and through Jesus, our chaperone, so to speak.

We have spent eons since the creation re-creating ourselves in our own image. “Gender” (expressions of masculinity and femininity) changes from culture to culture, and is affected by caste, class, religion, ethnicity, age and other variables. Promoting the difference between people only promotes the underlying fear of those differences. The fruits of the Spirit were largely classified as feminine, particularly the characteristics like “patient” and “gentle.” Yet the fruits of the Spirit are surely gender neutral! I always thought it a bit strange that the disciples would stop the children from coming to Jesus until I realized that children were not only seen as unimportant, they remained in the domain of the women.

Nobody definitively knows how or why homosexuality forms in the life of an individual. No one is simply born gay. Gay people, like all people, just want to be recognized and accepted for who they experience themselves to be. Acceptance and belonging. Do these sound familiar? They should to all people seeking to find God in the midst of life. To what degree do we have to struggle with ongoing brokenness in a still-broken world? Every human being on the planet is sexually broken. Everybody’s orientation is disoriented. Just like other saints throughout history, everyone has to navigate their particular brokenness, their particular pain. Apparently **the gospel doesn’t involve God simply obliterating our history. God is a redeemer not an eraser.**

All of us have the potential to live lives we never thought were possible. This doesn’t mean we move forward ignorant of our past. Our history is part of our story. But we can live beyond that history, beyond how we might feel in the present, on into a new tomorrow. That is the promise of God. I could tell you story after story of people who are now living lives they never thought they could. Men and women who are married (to the opposite sex) who have or are raising children and loving their lives. These individuals are not in denial about their sexuality; they are simply choosing not to live according to one aspect of it. They are making new paths or new “normalities” for themselves with God’s help.

We all have to be very careful with this “change is possible” type stuff. This is, after all, why our particular ministry left Exodus all those years ago, and why Exodus International recently closed. I continue to find instrumental use of people as ideological agenda an appalling violation of people’s rights. And this goes both ways on the political divide. Not all gay people who follow Jesus either want or feel able to explore the possibilities of heterosexuality. **Many of my same-**

sex attracted friends have no inclination to be married to the opposite sex. Instead, they are choosing the path of celibacy as the way of faithfulness. It should be acknowledged that in a profoundly sex-oriented culture this can be a difficult path to tread. Biblical teachings on salvation, and specifically on justification by faith, ground salvation fundamentally in God’s grace, not our behavior. Ministries set up to make gay people straight are becoming increasingly rare and marginal and have shifted their focus from orientation change to broader discipleship and holiness models, recognizing that **the opposite of homosexuality is not heterosexuality.** The point is not to call for a watered-down discipleship. The point is we all need generous spaciousness in our walk with Christ.

For those of us trying to work out what we think God thinks, and what we think about what we think God thinks (and there is a difference!), it’s hard enough, let alone being able to communicate this to someone who is gay! In 2009 the Barna Research Group published the book unChristian. The title itself represents the findings of the research. Unchurched people ages 16 to 35 were asked what they thought of Christians. **The overwhelming majority said they found Christians to be “un-Christian”! And when it came to the reasons why they thought this, the one on the very top of the list was our antigay sentiment.** Think about this for a minute. The most common thing any nonchurched person in this age group thinks about Christians is that we are antigay! While we’ve been arguing theology, a new fashioning of our public identity has been taking place.

My best guess as to how and why this happened is tied in with Jesus’ warnings to us in both Luke and Matthew about judgment. Both texts find Jesus warning us not to judge. But in Luke’s passage we also see the consequences of what happens when we do judge, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. . . . **For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you**” (Luke 6: 37-38).

Unless we fundamentally change the way we relate to the gay community, we run the risk of alienating not only the gay community but the larger cultural audience, all on our inability to love. **The way we have gone about this can rightly be called a false witness to the gospel.** Theology and witness are surely tied together. The growing generational gap is being felt both outside and inside the church, again related to how Christians treat gay people. Our younger people are being forced to choose between what appears to be a bad-tempered church (which their parents represent) and their LGBT friends. One of the reasons why I’m finding more and more younger Christians embracing a gay-affirming theology: It’s not necessarily because they are convinced about the biblical arguments and exegesis (although for some it is), but because it *feels* like a more loving response. For many in the younger generation it’s not necessarily as much about correct *doctrine* as it is about correct *loving*. Should the church be focused on the moral aspects of the supposed misbehavior of homosexual people— or should the church be focused on the sin of the

alleged misbehavior *toward* homosexual people? Many have abandoned the traditionalist approach for exactly these reasons. They want to be people of love and grace, and see no viable, living alternative than to adopt the progressive view. Yet surely we can hold an orthodox position and still be kind and embracing people.

There are 4 dimensions that together inform one's discernment: Scripture, tradition, experience and reason. Incorporating Scripture (as one's primary source), reason (recognizing God has created us as rational beings able to comprehend and discover God's truth), tradition (drawing on wisdom of the people of God, both past and present) along with experience (how we feel) helps us minimize the potential for being led astray or seeing emotions alone as the final authority. This balanced approach validates our human experience—how we feel—but also protects it within the boundaries of Scripture, tradition and reason. When these are governed by love for God, pursuit of truth and a precommitment to obedience, no matter what the outcome, we have a powerful combination to guide us in determining God's truth and will for us. William Webb compares the issues of slavery and the status and treatment of women with that of homosexuality. Exploring the teachings of the Old Testament and then discerning the developments in thinking in the New Testament, he suggests that there is a clear forward “redemptive movement” with both women and slaves. In other words, the logic of the gospel is clearly against racism, slavery and oppression of women. Creating a redemptive focus to our lives also means that we love homosexual people as ourselves. It means that we treat them with the same kind of grace, respect, care and compassion with which we want to be treated.

Remember the old slogan “Love the sinner, hate the sin”? The problem is that very few in the church ever got around to loving the sinner—it became a cheap slogan. **We must lead with our embrace, not our theology.** When we lead with our theology, we tend to get all caught up in the “wrongness” of some people's behavior, and the humanness of the person is easily lost. I have shared this “lead with embrace, not theology” principle countless times, and I inevitably get someone in my audience who can't quite get their mind around it, thinking that embracing someone equates to condoning their lifestyle choices. Jesus didn't wait for us to get our behaviors cleaned up *before* he embraced us; he embraced us first, with open arms. **Embrace is theology.** Many people have formulated their theological position devoid of any real contact (or understanding) of the very people it has been formulated about. Radical engagement and loving of the other earns us the right to speak. Yet many continue to enter the debate without even knowing a gay person. **We need to feel this issue, not just think it.** In the words of Walter Brueggemann, “theology that is ‘pre-pain’ must be treated with suspicion.” It really isn't enough to have a “correct” theology anymore (as if it ever was); it's about getting the sincere, relational love stuff together. Engaging with people wherever they find themselves or we find them, and then

slowly and intentionally pointing them toward the ideals of the kingdom and therefore God, is wonderfully liberating.

Homosexuality is the scare issue in the churches. It has become a funnel into which is poured a whole range of social fears, many of which have little, if any, relation to issues of sexual orientation. **I desire mercy, not sacrifice** (Matthew 9:13). Sacrifice—the purity impulse—marks off a zone of holiness, admitting the ‘clean’ and expelling the ‘unclean.’ Mercy, by contrast, crosses those purity boundaries. Mercy blurs the distinction, bringing clean and unclean into contact. Thus the tension. Think of this in the context of the church. Boundaries are drawn, in effect separating ourselves because we are afraid if we get too close we risk being polluted by them, just like the Pharisees in Matthew. We follow a Jesus who broke down barriers between the clean and unclean, and gave access to people that offended the purity sensibilities of the religious. He bridged the gap between the us and them. **Jesus modeled a different type of purity—a holiness of engagement, not exclusion.** A question we must ask is: What was it about the holiness of Jesus that drew people to him like a magnet? Sinners of all sorts were drawn into his orbit: the bungled, the broken and the bent, tax collectors, harlots—all sorts of social outcasts—all wanting closeness. His holiness was certainly alluring and enticing. Following this, a more disturbing question needs to be asked: What is it about more churchy forms of holiness that seems to evoke the opposite response? Jesus shows us that one cannot achieve holiness by separation from the unclean. **Not only did the social outcasts and sinners want to be around Jesus, but Jesus wanted to be around them!**

All of us have little fears and anxieties that lurk beneath the surface—fears of people who are different from us, those we deem the other. And these fears, if not dealt with, begin to foster negative thoughts and prejudices. For many of us gay people represent the stranger, the other. We see them as not quite normal. And unless we take steps to make the unknown known, we risk letting fear, not love, dictate the terms of the relationship. *It is harder to crack a prejudice than an atom* (Albert Einstein).

The church needs to get behind this normalization process—despite what one thinks theologically. This “normalizing” of homosexuality needs to be accepted and responded to in Christlike ways. When the perceived humanity of a person is lost, their life fails to have any intrinsic worth. If shielding our children from those who are different is based on irrational thinking and fear, then it can no longer be considered as being protective but rather as transmitting prejudice. Stereotyping is the social narrative we use to maintain prejudice, and **there is no question that homosexuality has been profoundly stereotyped.**

There is nothing fundamentally different between a gay and a straight person, certainly nothing that requires a different genre of love. **There ought to be no essential difference in how we treat anyone (in the faith or without).** It's only in the context of relationship that we can love. And let's face

it, authentic loving is never comfortable or easy. **We should first and foremost see all people as image bearers of God and only then see them as fallen and in need of salvation**, that this was the right theological order and priority. *When I respect the image of God in others, I protect the image of God in me. When Jesus speaks of loving our neighbor, it isn't just for our neighbor's sake* (Ron Bell).

Image of God (primary truth) and Sinner (secondary truth). This means all people have an innate Godlike beauty and dignity because they all in their own unique way reflect something of their Creator. We move away from our pre-formed cultural assumptions, and from fixating on behaviors, **to focusing on their innate potential to imitate their Creator. Our role becomes to look for God in them, to call forth the image**, to fan it into flame, to help them to both see and become like the One they reflect. Jesus saw humanity as worthy before any of us changed our behaviors (Romans 5: 8). This must become a practiced response. God is at work in all of humanity, not because all know God but because all in some way reflect God. Bonhoeffer cautions us: *I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. Unless people really suspend their judgments they'll never truly engage the other.*

God is on everyone's case! No matter who you are, where you are or what you are doing, God is in pursuit of you. He is the unrelenting evangelist. John Wesley called this reality "prevenient grace" (literally "grace that prepares" or grace that goes ahead of us, preparing the way), and he built his entire evangelistic ministry on it. Our role is simply to look, listen and discern God's prevenient work— what he is already doing in people's lives— and join with him! God is the great evangelist; our job is to help our friends and neighbors connect the dots from these theophanies back to the very One to whom these experiences point: God himself. **There is nothing that makes us love a person so much as praying for them.**

I discovered in a conversation with a church lady at a conference that she was more concerned about a colleague being gay than the fact that he didn't know and love Jesus. And that **his homosexuality was in some way blocking his access to God**. And she confessed to thinking that God might not really accept him till he had changed. It is this cracked and damaging theology that lies beneath some of the ministries set up to make gay people straight. We should by now be clear about one thing: heterosexuality doesn't give a person a direct ticket to heaven, a relationship with Jesus Christ does. Romans states that nothing, absolutely nothing in the whole world, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8: 38-39). And God never waits for us to get our lives "right" (whatever that might mean for any of us) before he extends his love toward us (Romans 5: 8). Pray first and foremost that our gay neighbors would come to see the love and beauty of God in Jesus. That's our first priority. Whether they are in a gay relationship or not is not necessarily our business. Our business is to love, pray and serve, and let God sort out the rest.

Christians are generally known to be "tellers" and not "listeners." But we can't lead, relate or love effectively without truly listening first. **The LGBT community is full of people who loved God but were rejected by a bigoted church.** The church is being yelled at. There is an enormous reservoir of pain and rejection among members of the LGBT community toward both God and the church. Some of this lies at the root of their collective shouting. God's people should be the very ones marked by humility, repentance and, in turn, forgiveness. Even if we don't believe we have personally sinned against LGBT members, we sure belong to a historic church community that has. Does the LGBT community need to hear the gospel? You bet they do. Just like every other person who is yet to know Jesus. But perhaps they need to see it demonstrated in our very lives and actions first.

Having spent time around "sinners" and also around purported saints, I have a hunch why Jesus spent so much time with the former group: I think he preferred their company. In the end it was the saints, not the sinners, who arrested Jesus. (Philip Yancey). Most people come to church because they are spiritually and relationally hungry. They come looking to connect with God and others. **The broken body of Christ is reflected not just on the Communion table but also around the table.** Church environments are expressions of culture and communicate what we really believe. If we fail to be welcoming around our own tables, we're bound to fail at the broader church community level.

The Bible's concept of family is actually much larger than that of the diminishing nuclear family and is ultimately defined by our understanding of the ecclesia, the church. Jesus' pointed question, "Who is my mother, my brother, my sister?" must have sounded shocking to Middle Eastern Jewish ears, to whom family was everything. Families and family life are central to the Bible's understanding of blessing, covenant and lineage. He is not ditching family, but he is definitely enlarging it in rather surprising ways.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to be made part of a new community in which the family is reconstituted. We are all children, but now a community has been established in which we are all called to be parents, brothers, and sisters to and for one another. In such a community it is impossible for an "unwanted child" to be born, for the biological family has been transformed in service for the church. What is at stake is not the family, but rather those who do the will of the Father. As a faithful son of Israel, Jesus was expected to marry and have a child. Yet Jesus remains single. His singleness, moreover, is a sign that God's kingdom will not grow by biological ascription. Rather, the kingdom of God grows by witness and conversion. Through such growth Christians will discover sisters and brothers we did not know we had. Such is the wonder and the threat of the kingdom brought in Christ.

Much of the church's failure to engage society at large, particularly the poor and marginalized, is a direct result of our narrow vision of family: Where the concerns of the nuclear family become the focus of a church, the conservation

of middle-class ideals can blind both leaders and people to the prominent concern for social justice found in the Bible. If we so easily erect walls around our family and family life, it makes sense that we do the same thing in our churches.

Most of our churches are structured around what social set theorists call “bounded sets.” One’s inclusion, belonging, is based on how aligned one’s beliefs and behaviors are with those on the inside. The mission of those on the inside is seen as going to those on the outside (defined as those who don’t believe or behave like us), telling them about Jesus, and hopefully bringing them in and getting them believing and behaving correctly—like us. The primary concern is with conformity to beliefs and practices.

The “centered set,” on the other hand, has a “hard,” well-articulated and vibrant theological center, but tends to be “soft” at the edges. It assumes that every person is somewhere in relation to the center—in this case, Jesus. One’s relation to the center has to do with orientation, not necessarily closeness. In other words, no matter how far away people might be from Jesus, they only need turn toward him (orientation) and he is right there. God is not far from any of us (Acts 17: 27-28). People are seen as moving along a continuum toward the center, and conversion is seen as a process (embedded in discipleship) rather than simply a singular event. The primary concern of those operating within this type of thinking is to orient others toward the Center. In other words, focusing them toward an authentic encounter and understanding of God in Jesus Christ. When Jesus is placed at the center he, not our cultural expressions or beliefs, becomes the primary focus.

A wonderful modern-day parable that depicts the difference between the bounded- and centered-set approaches is captured for us in an encounter between a farmer and a Japanese tourist in our Australian outback. The tourist is taken aback with the sheer vastness of the outback and comments to the farmer that as far as he can see, he can’t see any fences. The tourist asks the farmer how he can possibly keep his sheep in without fences. The farmer replies that they don’t need to build fences, they just dig wells and the sheep don’t wander very far. If people really drink from the well of living water, I believe they won’t wander very far. This centered-set approach more accurately describes the approach that Jesus adopted in his own life and ministry.

The chief role of the church is to create the right environment for all people to be able to encounter Jesus; everything else that we do is relative to this great cause. But that God welcomes all (Matthew 11: 28) does not necessarily mean that God affirms all that we human beings are up to. In fact, the whole purpose of the gospel is to address the problem of human sin and brokenness. This is why the center (Jesus is Lord) must be solid, and the leadership visibly committed to his highest standards of discipleship in the community. In my experience the messier the community, the more the members seem to rely on the strength and conviction of the leadership. Are we to be welcoming of all people? Absolutely! Are we to affirm all belief systems and behaviors of all who break bread

with us? Absolutely not. Being welcoming and mutually transforming moves the issue from just being about LGBT people to being about all people. If we have a policy on homosexuality, why wouldn’t we also develop policies about every other ethical issue? For instance, what is our policy about greed? Jesus seems pretty concerned about this, yet I don’t know a single church who has a formal policy on it.

Digging wells instead of building fences invites us to cultivate a much more dynamic awareness and relationship with Jesus. In living this way it’s necessary to see ourselves fundamentally as priests. At core, a priest is someone who mediates the knowledge of God. They represent God to the people and the people to God. This role lies at the core of every believer’s identity and function in the world. None of us are meant to do what only God can do. We simply have to guide people to Jesus, and he will do all that is necessary to restore them to the image of God. Redemption and sanctification is his job, not ours.

While we all might be heading in the same direction, our paths are different and we journey at a different pace. Discipleship in a bounded-set context can tend to look like some sort of cookie-cutter spiritual production line where everyone gets processed in the same way and at the same time. Our stories are so different, our personalities so particular, and our lives so complex that only God will know how to heal us (and deal with us) without destroying who we are uniquely. Romans 2: 4 reminds us that God’s kindness leads us to repentance—not God’s harshness or the wagging of the finger, but kindness. In John 8:1-11 Jesus’s acceptance of the woman caught in adultery preceded her repentance.

If one of the defining characteristics of the bounded set is conformity, then it stands to reason that the centered set will be characterized by diversity. “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love,” ascribed to Augustine, is in fact precisely what a centered set aims at achieving. Essentials take us to our deepest theological truths (i.e., the Trinity, the person and work of Jesus, the resurrection, the authority of Scripture, etc.). Churches wanting to engage society with a gospel witness will need to recover a sense of what is essential and what is not. Our own appreciation of the power of the gospel, and how it relates to our world is inextricably bound up with how we deal with the marginalized and rejected people in our culture. It was the same for the religious in the time of Jesus. Jesus must show us the way yet again.

[This is the most helpful view of the controversial LGBT issue I have found.]