

"MY SON IS A HOMOSEXUAL." A PASTORAL APPROACH TO GUIDING BELIEVERS
DEALING WITH HOMOSEXUAL FAMILY MEMBERS IN A WORLD OF CONTRASTING
VIEWS

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

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MARCH 2016

Abstract

A homosexual's "coming out" event is viewed by the secular world as one of the most significant moments in their life. Among believers there should be common ground, yet opinions are mixed. Some Christians have given in to the pressures of the world with their celebration of such "individuality." Other believers will look down their nose at the homosexual, or even someone wrestling with the desires, as if he or she has committed an unforgiveable sin. What is our response when such a sin hits close to home? How do we respond when a family member comes "out of the closet?" Should we immediately rain fire and brimstone of the Law on our loved one? Should we simply keep quiet and remain content with prayer? Should we accept such a lifestyle out of love for the individual? How does a pastor offer Christian guidance to the family conflicted by such a situation? How does he instruct the rest of the congregation? These are some of the questions this paper will explore.

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Introduction

During the 2008 presidential race, candidate Barak Obama launched his campaign slogan, "Change We Can Believe In," outlining Obama's vision for the future in America. It laid out the candidate's plans to fix the economy, make health care affordable, achieve energy independence, and instill equality and acceptance among Americans. Change was innovative. Change was forward thinking. Change was catchy.

Over the past seven years, a change has certainly taken place, though maybe not in the way one might have expected. While one can correctly point to legitimate economic and health care changes, an even larger transformation has occurred in the social sector of America, particularly in the way the public views the homosexual lifestyle.

While tolerance of homosexuality was becoming more common in the early 21st century, the acceptance and encouragement for this way of life was not anywhere near what it is today. In 2013, President Barak Obama continued his promise of change by becoming the first president to endorse gay rights during an inauguration speech. In July, 2015, the supreme court declared gay marriage legal in every state. As significant as these changes may be, one can't limit the changing attitude toward homosexuality to the political sector. According to an article on pewforum.org from November 2012, "In 2001 Americans opposed same-sex marriage by a 57% to 35% margin. Today there is slightly more support for same-sex marriage than opposition to it, with 48% in favor and 43% opposed."¹ A November poll from ABC News-Washington found that 51% of Americans support gay marriage. This is up from 32% as recently as mid-2004.² George Will, a columnist for ABC News said, "It's clear where public opinion is headed... Quite literally, the opposition to gay marriage is dying. It's old people."³ Although polls can be distorted, they do give us some idea of how the opinion of the populous has changed. The homosexual lifestyle, a way of life which just fifty years ago was taboo even in the secular world, has now become accepted by the majority. One could go as far as to say it is encouraged

¹ Pew Research Center, "Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Nov 2012), <http://features.pewforum.org/same-sex-marriage-attitudes/> (accessed Feb, 20, 2012).

² Greg Hoyk, "Majority Supports Path to Citizenship; Greater Division on Other Social Issues," ABC News, Nov 14, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/11/majority-supports-path-to-citizenship-greater-division-on-other-social-issues/> (accessed Feb 20,2012).

³ George Stephanopoulos, "George Will: 'Quite Literally, The Opposition to Gay Marriage Is Dying,'" ABC News, Dec 9, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/12/george-will-quite-literally-the-opposition-to-gaymarriage-is-dying/> (accessed Feb 20,2012).

and welcomed. In fact Richard Starr, a WELS pastor and co-author of the book *Forgive Us Our Sins* writes, "Today LGBTs who come out about their lifestyle are honored in public in much the same way as a teen who makes the honor roll at school or honorable mention on the athletic field."⁴ Even in the world of sports, one can't help but notice the attention received by athletes like former NFL player Michael Sam and former NBA player Jason Collins, both of whom came out as practicing homosexuals. Their public announcements were called "courageous acts" by President Obama himself.

With nationwide acceptance on the rise, Christians who understand the Bible as the true and unchanging Word of God undoubtedly have a difficulty seeing such times. But for the majority of Christians, that's all it is. They see a gay pride parade on television and they can turn the channel. They hear the news of the legalization of gay marriage and they can go on with their lives because it really doesn't have any direct affect on their daily life. But what about the Christian struggling with those desires? The Christian young man who, from as early as he can remember, has been a little bit different from everyone else in his class. The Christian teenager who learned from a young age that marriage is for one man and one woman, so she buried away those desires she had for her female classmates, fighting them in secrecy. Every Christian wrestles with sin. But what happens when a Christian is told by everyone around them that they don't need to struggle anymore? What is a Christian to do when the majority of people celebrate the lifestyle they are trying to wrestle against?

The sin of homosexuality is such a difficult sin because it is different from so many others. On the one hand, society encourages the homosexual lifestyle in such a way that it becomes an extremely difficult sin from which to repent. Conversely, many conservative circles view the thought of such a lifestyle as taboo. They attach a stigma to it, viewing homosexuality as a sin carrying more weight than others, almost as if it were an unforgiveable sin.

One can't help but see the difficult situation in which this puts a Christian family whose loved one has come out as a practicing homosexual. How does a family respond? How can a parent show love for a child who has made such a lifestyle choice? What is the best way to approach a sibling who refuses to give up practicing a sin which will ultimately end in the loss of

⁴ Richard Starr and Scott Barefoot, *Forgive Us Our Sins: Homosexuality in the Light of God's Truth* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2013), 15.

their eternal inheritance? How can the family keep the door open to the Word, without building a wall?

It is the purpose of this thesis to answer those questions and to open the eyes of understanding to the sin of homosexuality. It is the goal of this thesis to aid families enduring this crisis, while providing useful information to pastors who counsel families through such a difficult dilemma. The final component to the research behind this thesis looks at the education of the congregation, specifically, how a pastor can properly prepare his people for a potential encounter with this sin.

1. Understanding the Sin

An understanding of homosexuality is beneficial for all those involved. The more knowledge one can gain as to why he is tempted, the more likely he is to turn to the Word, and by the strength of God, overcome the temptation. In the same sense, an education on the sin of homosexuality is highly beneficial for all involved in the life of the one struggling. Understanding the sin is the first step toward helping both the offender and the offended. The following chapter will take an in-depth look at the sin of homosexuality, its science, its consequences, and finally, the argued validity of the homosexual lifestyle according to Scripture.

1.1 The Facts About Homosexuality

Is the Homosexual Lifestyle Desirable?

American culture now plays off the homosexual lifestyle as desirable. As previously mentioned, those who come out as homosexuals are celebrated and honored. Television shows such as ABC's *Modern Family* feature a married gay couple with a relationship that could be characterized as more stable and loving than the heterosexual families around them. The gay culture itself emphasizes freedom, the ability to be yourself, and happiness in who you are without having to change. With messages like this surrounding the Christian, it's easy to see why this sin is so difficult to wrestle with. Yet there are always two sides to the picture.

For most people, both Christians and non-Christians, a happy relationship is found in stability and a love that displays itself in trust, commitment, and self-sacrifice. This is surely a goal shared by the individual with same-sex attraction. After all, why else would same-sex

couples put up such a fight over the legalization of gay marriage? But can such a relationship be found among practicing homosexuals?

For the sake of reason, one surely would want to know the facts behind a lifestyle before plunging headlong into it. In 1981, the University of Indiana conducted a study which revealed that only 2% of homosexual males were involved in monogamous or semi-monogamous⁵ relationships.⁶ Another study conducted by A.P. Bell and M.S. Weinberg found that 43% of male homosexuals estimated having sex with five hundred or more different partners and 28% with one thousand or more. 79% said that more than half of these were strangers and 70% said that more than half were men with whom they had had relations only once.⁷ R. A. Kaslow of the *American Journal of Epidemiology* pointed to a study conducted by the Multicenter AIDS Cohort which took a poll of 5000 homosexual men. Approximately 70-80% of these men reported having fifty or more lifetime sexual partners.⁸ Jeffrey Satinover, a well known psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and physicist, as well as the author of several books on this controversial topic, gave the following list of problems which consistently plague those living the homosexual lifestyle:

- A significantly decreased likelihood of establishing or preserving a successful marriage.
- A 25-30 year decrease in life expectancy.
- Chronic, potentially fatal, liver disease-infectious hepatitis, which increases the risk of liver cancer.
- Inevitably fatal immune disease including associated cancers.
- Frequently fatal rectal cancer.
- Multiple bowel and other infectious diseases.
- A much higher than usual incidence of suicide.
- A very low likelihood that its adverse effects can be eliminated unless the condition itself is.
- An at least 50% likelihood of being eliminated through lengthy, often costly, and very time consuming treatment in an otherwise unselected group of sufferers.⁹

Is homosexuality being accurately portrayed? Is acting out on homosexual desires really the solution to finding stability, happiness, and completeness for the Christian who struggles

⁵ Semi-monogamous-Defined as having ten or fewer lifetime partners.

⁶ A. P. Bell, *Sexual Preference* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1981).

⁷ A. P. Bell and M.S. Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity among Men and Women* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 308-9.

⁸ Kaslow, R. A., "The Multicenter AIDS Cohort Study: Rationale, Organization, and Selected Characteristics of the Participants," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 126, no. 2 (August 1987), pp. 310-18.

⁹ Satinover, Jeffrey, M.D., *Homosexuality and the Politics of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 51.

with such desires? Is homosexuality a desirable lifestyle? It is certainly not the lifestyle one would choose for the physical and mental well being of their loved one.

The subject of choice is a proper transition into the next topic. If an individual is born with a biological inclination and attraction to the same gender, is the homosexual lifestyle really a choice?

What Does Science Say?

There is a common belief that gays and lesbians are born that way and therefore they have no choice as to what lifestyle they are to follow. Simon LeVay, a neuroscientist at Salk institute in La Jolla, CA, and also a practicing homosexual, sought to prove this theory with his study of a particular region of the brain called the INAH3. What he found was that this INAH3 was larger in heterosexual men than in homosexual men, and this INAH3 was also larger in heterosexual men than in women. However, he admitted his research was inconclusive, even stating, "I did not prove that homosexuality is genetic, or find a genetic cause for being gay. I did not show that gay men are born that way, the most common mistake people make in interpreting my work."¹⁰ Another homosexual researcher, Dean Hamer, who attempted to locate a "gay gene" concluded, "Homosexuality is not purely genetic...environmental factors play a role. There is not a single gene that makes people gay."¹¹ The bottom line of this research? There's no compelling evidence that an individual was born gay. While genetic makeup may have left them more susceptible to other factors that led them down this road, but the condition, or orientation, is not, in and of itself, a genetic and immutable trait.¹² Even if someday a "gay gene" were to be discovered, it would not mean that that individual carrying the gene has no choice but to engage in same-sex relationships.

Whether inborn or acquired, homosexuality is still immoral. And immoral behavior "cannot be legitimized by a quick baptism in the gene pool. It does not have to be indulged."¹³

¹⁰ "In Their Own Words: Gay Activists Speak About Science, Morality, Philosophy" by A. Dean Byrd, Ph. D., Shirley E. Cox, Ph. D., Jeffrey W. Robinson Ph.D. cited on NARTH website at : <http://www.narth.com/docs/innate.html>.

¹¹ Satinover, 51.

¹² Daniel Puls, *A Christian Perspective on Homosexuality* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1996), 58.

¹³ Puls, 57.

Scripture testifies to the fact that all human beings are born with an inclination toward sin, as the Psalmist says, "Surely I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5). However, this is not an excuse to act out on those desires.

While scientific proof gives opposing evidence to the excuse that homosexuality is an inborn way of life, one would be wrong to assume this is the only influence on the homosexual. This thesis will include more potential influences for homosexual inclinations in a later chapter.

1.2 The World has Changed, But Has the Word?

Changing the Word to Fit a Lifestyle

"Change We Can Believe In," was applied to the betterment of a country. But today, that same phrase is being applied to the spiritual climate of America. What Christians have always been taught is immutable, the Word, is being changed to meet the lifestyles of the 21st century Christian. How could a true believer fall into this temptation? Pastor Starr gives an example of how Christians justify the acceptance of such a lifestyle.

"So often, people who want to give their lives over to sin, including the sin of practicing homosexuality, seek loopholes in God's Word. People want to worship God to be on the safe side and yet want to live their sinful lives the way they want to. They do not want to be accountable to God, so they are always looking for disclaimers to his law. They think they find those loopholes in the "gay spin" of what are very clear Bible passages. But God's law is rock solid; it is perfect, having been given by the perfect God, and there are no loopholes."¹⁴

The Word of God has always been clear of its stance on homosexuality. One can point to several sections of Scripture including both the work of the prophets and apostles to demonstrate how the homosexual lifestyle is contrary to God's law. Unfortunately, many choose to disregard these sections or input their own interpretations.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will not take a definitive stand on the subject. They do not feel that Scripture is clear on homosexuality. As a result, they conclude in their written statement, "We further believe that this church, on the basis of 'the bound conscience,' will include these different understandings and practices within its life as it seeks to

¹⁴ Starr and Barefoot, 31.

live out its mission and ministry in the world." ¹⁵Understanding that this could cause disagreement among its members, the ELCA maintains the following:

"This church calls for mutual respect in relationships and for guidance that seeks the good of each individual and of the community. Regarding our life together as we live with disagreement, the people in this church will continue to accompany one another in study, prayer, discernment, pastoral care, and mutual respect."¹⁶

As a result of this stance, the ELCA accepts actively homosexual members into their churches. They believe a homosexual relationship is acceptable as long as it is viewed as publically accountable, lifelong, and monogamous. To take it one step further, they have also opened ordination to practicing homosexuals. One can understand why a "Christian homosexual" can remain entrenched in the homosexual lifestyle when their own church accepts and condones the sin.

The ELCA seems to have imported the common opinion of others from the pro-gay community based on Jesus' words in Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." Not only is this a gross misinterpretation of the words of Christ, it is also a disregard for the rest of Scripture. Jesus is telling us not to judge by our own standard but by declaring from God's Word what he has already judged as right and wrong. God's law alone is the only way to interpret good from evil. If Christians attempt to determine these things on their own, they can easily fall into the path of which the writer speaks in Proverbs, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death"(Pr 16:25). Instead of following the path laid out by God, many in the homosexual community have adopted the "Love conquers all, love is all that matters" methodology. They say, "Love each other and God, and everything else will fall into place," or "God is love and therefore he wants his people to be happy and live in the way that makes them happy." They follow the basic premise that the emotion of love is of the paramount importance, "God is a God of love and he is never going to condemn us for reaching out and loving someone else."¹⁷ However, they forget that a part of loving God is following his commands. The one they love is not God, but an idol. As St. John writes, "Whoever says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person" (1 Jn

¹⁵ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. A Social Statement on Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 19.

¹⁶ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 21.

¹⁷ Quote taken from an interview with Rev. Pieter Reid and his wife Marlys, parents of a practicing homosexual.

2:4). What the gay "Christian" has done, is created a god in himself whom he serves and loves above the true God.

Scott Barefoot, a WELS Christian who formerly lived an actively gay lifestyle, explained how this reasoning used to work on him as well. Scott said of his former lifestyle,

"It really boils down to the idea that itching ears hear what they want to hear... I used to buy into the way pro-gay theologians twisted scripture. Selfishly I wanted to embrace that so that I could act out on those feelings and desires... It's human nature to act out on what feels good, to desire to do that, desire to justify that from a Christian standpoint. Some churches provide an avenue for that."

The reasoning and justification behind the homosexual lifestyle completely undermines the plan God has laid out for us in Scripture. Instead of looking to the Word for instructions on Christian living, the practicing homosexual relies on reason and an erroneous conscience.

William Monday, a WELS pastor and author of *Rainbow Savior* elucidates this point when he writes, "If all humans are indeed sinful, as the Bible proclaims, then it goes without saying that we are incapable by our sinful nature to distinguish between good and evil, at least absolutely."¹⁸

Many ways seem right to the flawed human reasoning, but God's law alone is the deciding factor.

Biblical Interpretation Flaws and Responses

While some from the pro-homosexual community believe the Bible to be unclear regarding the homosexual lifestyle, others take their stance using their own interpretation of Scripture to support the gay lifestyle. There is a desire among many in the LGBT community to be a part of the church. That is probably why you will see many of them quoting verses of Scripture to justify the lifestyle. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:9-11 are two references where Paul clearly states that homosexuals are lawbreakers who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. With his wording, Paul leaves no doubt as to whether or not this is a sinful lifestyle. However, pro-homosexual writers insist that the subject is not homosexuality which is being condemned in these verses, but only homosexual activity. They suggest that the word in question, ἀρσενοκοίταις, refers only to the sexual acts of homosexuality, "In other words, they

¹⁸ William Monday, *Rainbow Savior* (Bloomington, IN: West Bow Press, 2014), 18.

are trying to make a distinction between the state of being a homosexual and homosexual behavior."¹⁹

Paul's words in Romans 1:26,27 also speak explicitly against both lesbianism and homosexuality when he refers to those who "exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones." Some pro-homosexual writers claim that Paul is only condemning those who give up what is "natural" to them. In other words, "The persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual persons. The whole point of Romans 1, in fact, is to stigmatize persons who have rejected their calling, gotten off the true path they were once on."²⁰ The big hole in their argument is the fact that Paul did not know anything about sexual orientation at his time. There was only one "natural" way of life for Paul. There weren't the sciences there are today. There wasn't the pro-gay agenda encouraging the homosexual lifestyle as equal to the heterosexual way of life. Paul knew "natural" to be God's institution of marriage in Genesis, between one man and one woman.

Still other pro-homosexual writers claim that Paul's focus is on the sin of idolatry in Romans 1. In other words, these homosexual practices are only listed because they were believed to be a result of the idolatry committed by the people. They see it as an offense only when it is included as a symptom of a greater sin.²¹ The irony behind this argument is that it is correct in a sense, but not in the way the writers intend it.

"When people no longer love God nor try to live according to his divine will, all sorts of wickedness arise. God turns people over to the sin of practicing homosexuality and all the other sins listed in the chapter. The cause and root of all sin lies in rejecting God as the only true and living God, and in failing to make him our number one priority as the first commandment demands."²²

The very fact that the homosexual lifestyle is included along with all these other acts of wickedness and the verity that it comes as a result of the sin of idolatry, proves the reality that this lifestyle is in fact sinful.

The Old Testament Levitical Laws are also a point of contention for pro-gay "Christians." Leviticus chapters 18 and 20 both call the acts of homosexuality "detestable" (Lev 18:22,24 and

¹⁹ Richard Starr, *Speaking the Unspeakable: A Biblical and Modern Perspective* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1987), 29.

²⁰ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 109.

²¹ Troy Perry and Thomas Swicegood *Don't Be Afraid Anymore: The Story of Reverend Troy Perry and the Metropolitan Community Churches* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 341.

²² Starr and Barefoot, 47.

20:13). It should also be noted that these chapters in Leviticus outline other sexual sins, such as adultery and incest, which are forbidden by God in both Old and New Testaments, not only in the Levitical codes. These parallels alone nullify the argument made by some that the entire Old Testament was made obsolete after Christ's coming. Another theory supports the conclusion listed previously, that homosexuality is referred to as detestable in these two chapters because it is listed in connection with the worship of idols.²³ Again, the very inclusion of the acts of homosexuality alongside the acts of bestiality, incest, and the murder and sacrifice of children should show something.

For the sake of length, this thesis will not go into more extensive detail on the misinterpretations of the Scriptures committed by the pro-gay community. From these few examples one can better understand what a Christian who struggles with these temptations is up against. One should never be surprised at the lies Satan tells and how believable he makes them. He twists God's Word. He repeats to present day Christians the same words he first spoke to Eve in the garden, "Did God really say that?" Sadly, countless Christians have listened and fallen into his trap.

The Unchanging Law

The church bodies who accept and encourage the homosexual lifestyle clearly have flaws in their interpretation of Scripture. A disregard for the law of God has to top the list. Scott Barefoot used to attend one of these churches. He had this to say regarding their preaching of the Word: "Even in the gay church I attended from time to time, there was never any shortage of preaching or proclaiming the gospel. In hindsight, the problem was with what was rarely preached or discussed- anything related to God's laws."²⁴ These pro-gay churches who take this approach to ministry are basically turning God's grace into a blank check, "write whatever you want on it because my grace will never run out." These churches claim to hold to the saving faith. They are seen to carry out a higher degree of love and acceptance than those who do not condone the homosexual lifestyle. Yet by condoning the sin of homosexuality, these churches

²³ Boswell, 109.

²⁴ Starr and Barefoot, 35.

are leading souls into a false sense of security. They are telling homosexuals that there is nothing wrong with their willful disobedience of God's laws. Without a reason to repent, these souls are likely being led down to hell by wolves in sheep's clothing.

One may have noticed the quotation marks around the word "Christian" each time it is associated with the active homosexual. There is a purpose for this. Can an individual truly call himself a Christian if he is living an actively homosexual lifestyle? St. John addresses this very question in his first epistle.

But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us (1 Jn 1:7-10).

Let's be very clear. We are not doing our fellow brother or sister any favors by allowing them to believe that they can maintain a homosexual lifestyle and still enter the kingdom of heaven.

Willful, unrepentant sin locks the door to eternity. "We can't cling by faith to the one who saves us from sin, if we're refusing to let go of our sin...No one may enter in the perfect kingdom of God while embracing his sin."²⁵

If the accusation of hypocrisy should arise when stating the above facts, it benefits the Christian to admit his sinfulness. There is no doubt, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Ro 3:23). However, there is a difference between willful sin and sins of weakness. It is of high importance for a Christian to recognize this. The homosexual lifestyle is a willful sin. God's Word explicitly defines it as such and in doing so, condemns anyone who persists in this lifestyle. Sins of weakness on the other hand are entirely different, though they demand the same punishment. All Christians are guilty of sins of weakness. These are the sins daily committed by thought, word, or deed. The difference lies in the attitude. True Christians repent of their of weakness, asking God to help them overcome such sins. Christians believe God has forgiven them through Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Then comes the biggest difference of all, Christians daily drown the Old Adam within, trying with all their might to fight and overcome those temptations when they arise again. Trusting in Jesus doesn't mean abusing his grace, rather, "part of trusting in Jesus and being saved, means calling out to him to save us from who we are

²⁵ Monday, 29.

and what we are doing before we perish. It means turning our back on all that makes us worthless."²⁶

Consider John 3:16, the Gospel in a nutshell and coincidentally one of the passages the pro-gay churches like to reference when speaking of God's love. Why would the Spirit include the words "shall not perish" unless it is true that without God's love in Christ, we would in fact all perish because we are not okay the way we are by nature? The fact of the matter is, God loves human beings, but not for who they are or what they do in their sinful, fallen state. He loves man *in spite* of those things.²⁷ God does not love the homosexual's lifestyle. That truth is plain in Scripture. God has not hidden his law in some secretive maze so that only the wisest and most learned of human beings would be able to find it. He has given his instructions to us in the simplest of forms so that even a young child can understand. Recognition of God's law and admission of one's sins is the first step toward change.

The Unchanging Gospel

A common flaw of WELS conservative Lutherans in dealing with the sin of homosexuality is to minimize the power of the Gospel and amplify the severity of the sin. Some in these circles view the sin of homosexuality as a trespass which far outweighs others in severity. In their minds, the sin of homosexuality has retained the unspeakable nature that it once had in American culture, while also taking on an almost unforgiveable character. This is not only a weakness of the members of a congregation, but it can also be a weakness of its pastor. How is a Christian struggling with homosexual urges expected to ask his pastor for help when he only hears one sided condemnation for homosexuals from the pulpit, but nothing of forgiveness? Is a visitor who is openly homosexual really going to return to hear the Word if all they receive is condemning looks of silence when they leave church on Sunday? How can the Holy Spirit work repentance if we don't keep the door open to the Word? In an interview, Scott Barefoot spoke briefly of this particular challenge going on in many WELS congregations, "I would give WELS an A+ on doctrine and theology standards, but a D when it comes to practical issues. Growing up

²⁶ Monday, 8.

²⁷ Monday, 8.

in the church, this was a taboo subject that no one talked about." How can a church body which prides itself in Christ-centered preaching, deny certain sinners the Gospel?

Allow me to explain two points of emphasis here: First of all, to look down on any individual because of a particular sin is pharisaical at best. All people need to hear the Word, that is the only way the Holy Spirit can work repentance. Second, Christ died for all, homosexuals are not excluded. While we do not want to give off the impression that we condone the sin of homosexuality, we do want to give the Word an opportunity to Work in the hearts of all people.

To approach this predicament, consider the example of Jesus' gentle yet truthful interaction with the woman at the well in Samaria (Jn 4:1-42). He did not reject her, he did not turn her away, he did not condemn her on the spot and tell her to leave. Instead, Jesus recognized she was living in sin with a man she wasn't married to and Jesus didn't whitewash it. Jesus approached her, listened to her, and spoke the truth gently without rejecting her because of her sin. "He saw her first and foremost as a person, not a sexual sinner and even when addressing her sin, He showed gentleness and respect."²⁸ This account "powerfully illustrates how Jesus' love and grace were poured into her as her sin was exposed and she was enabled to believe in Jesus as her Savior."²⁹ It is important to note how the Holy Spirit worked through Jesus' words. The woman acknowledged her sin, "it was in that acknowledgment that the living water began to flow within her. She was not to hide and keep her sin hidden. Jesus sought her out, found her shame, and did not condemn."³⁰ So it should be in our interaction with an individual struggling with any kind of sin; an approach of loving admonition, particular emphasis on *loving*. Joe Dallas, a formerly active homosexual, laid out several things to keep in mind in interactions with those wrestling homosexual urges or choosing actively homosexual lifestyles:

1. We are all created beings, created with a specific intent (Ge 1:26-2:23).
2. The created intent for the expression of human sexuality is fulfilled within the covenant of a monogamous and heterosexual union (Mt 19:4-6).
3. We are a fallen race, as a result every part of our lives, including sexual experience, is marred (Ro 5:12-19).
4. Homosexual behavior is a manifestation of fallen nature and a violation of created intent (Ro 1:26-27).
5. Homosexuals are redeemable like the rest of us (1 Co 6:11).

²⁸ Joe Dallas, *When Homosexuality Hits Home* (Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2004), 153.

²⁹ Puls, 64.

³⁰ Puls, 68.

Finally, God loves homosexuals, just as he loves heterosexuals, in spite of their sin. Paul's words in Romans are a reminder of this fact, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro 5:8). May we keep these things at the forefront of our minds when we interact with struggling brothers and sisters.

2. "My Son is a Homosexual."

Whether we like to admit it or not, we naturally have our own images of what our children's lives should look like, where they should find their happiness, how they should act. We may try not to put too much external pressure on them, "but if the child is too different, we discover that something emotional in us resists the child's desire, and we find very logical reasons to try to get across to the child why he or she should not do this."³¹ Among these idealistic images is expectation that our child will be heterosexual, will marry a member of the opposite sex and give us grandchildren. So what happens when our plans fall to pieces? How does a Christian respond when the sin of homosexuality hits home? How do we respond when a family member, or worse, a child "comes out?" Should we immediately rain fire and brimstone of the law on our loved one? Would it be better to simply keep quiet and remain content with prayer? The following chapter will address these questions and others which arise when a family member "comes out."

2.1 Coming Out

The Event and Reaction

"Mom and Dad, there is something I need to tell you." No parent necessarily wants to hear those words. Usually they are followed with something like, "I failed my science exam because I didn't study. I backed the car into the neighbor's mailbox. I got into trouble at school today because I gave in to peer pressure." Obviously none of these things are pleasant for a

³¹ David and Shirley Switzer, *Parents of the Homosexual* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 19.

parent to hear. However, they are somewhat expected. Parents remember a time when they were also teenagers, making poor decisions and learning the hard way. Usually, a child will confess their mistake, a parent will respond, and life will go on. There may be some temporary consequences, but for the most part, a parent still views their child in the same light as they did prior to the confession. This is where the "coming out" event is different. "Mom and Dad, there is something I need to tell you. I am gay and I have been for some time." Although many parents report having some inkling that their child was always different, no parent is ready for such a revelation.

Such was the case with WELS pastor Pieter Reid and his wife Marlys upon hearing this confession from their oldest daughter. In an interview, they detailed their reaction.

We were just floored, we had no idea, and all of a sudden there it was. I couldn't have been more shocked. When we lived overseas, I had colleagues who were gay. I thought I had a pretty good handle on being able to scope out who was gay and who wasn't.

The topic had come up at the table on one occasion during our family devotions when our kids were young, but we just said that God was very clear on this subject, that it was wrong. [Our daughter] wasn't oblivious to the lifestyle of homosexuality. It also wasn't a subject we had ignored. It never in my wildest dreams occurred to me that one of my children would enter into this lifestyle.

When a Christian child comes out as a homosexual, the family involved usually experiences some, if not all, of the stages of grief. The initial stage of shock is unanimous among family members in nearly every one of these cases. It is also to be expected, after all, every relationship we have is based on assumptions. "We assume the person we're in a relationship with is someone we know pretty well, so we trust there are no major secrets between us. We assume this individual tells us the truth and shares our values...to hear otherwise then signals the death of those assumptions."³²

As stated earlier, with most confessions between children and parents, family member to family member, the relationship remains the same though there may be some consequences. However, when a child comes out as a homosexual, some parents report an inability to recognize their child, almost a denial that this is actually their child and not some stranger.

During the first hours and days following such a discovery, some parents report a sense of unreality about it all, just as a person in grief will. A parent will catch himself or herself looking out of the corner of the eye at the son or daughter, and there is a shudder,

³² Dallas, 23-24.

and then the unreal feeling that it is all a terrible dream. It cannot be so. The parents expect any minute to hear the words, "it's all been a mistake." But for the majority, the words do not come..."Suddenly the person sitting across from me wasn't my son anymore. I felt as if I were talking with a stranger."³³

Much of this loss of identification comes from one's own expectations and assumptions. Oftentimes when a child comes out about their homosexual lifestyle to a parent, all of those characteristics by which they used to identify with their child are now gone. One parent describes this feeling, "We have actually seen parts of ourselves in our children as they have grown up, it now feels as if these are being rejected by them, as if we are no longer their parents and they no longer our children."³⁴

In the majority of these reported confrontations, one or more of the family members experiences some type of anger. In the interview with Scott Barefoot, he revealed how anger plays a large part in many of these confrontations.

The biggest thing is in Christian homes, when a son or daughter comes out to the family, there's usually a blow up of sorts. The same thing happened when I told my parents. Talking with folks nowadays that's something I caution people against. The husband will say, "I blew my top, my wife got emotional, child said unkind things, it was a meltdown situation." They'll say after they've cooled off, "I wish we could take back some of those things." You're not really prepared to calmly react to that news. I recommend a cooling off period. "I really want to talk about his but I need to think it over for a bit. A night or so. Let's talk tomorrow." Emotional response to news of this sort is usually not the best.³⁵

Anger plays a detrimental part in every confrontation, but especially when it involves a family member. Christians are called upon to love one another. Included in that love is the manner in which one admonishes their brother or sister who has fallen into sin. Yet, when an occasion like this presents itself, shock gives way to questions, questions turn to anger, anger drives family members apart and builds a wall between a Christian family and their loved one.

This can be the most destructive of all the grief stages, so for the sake of everyone involved, be careful how you react. When you're angry, you may want the relief of an emotional explosion, and that may cause you to use the harshest, deadliest words you can think of. I've known parents who, out of their own rage, told their sons or daughters they'd rather see them dead than gay. I've heard brothers call a homosexual sibling a 'freak who oughta be strung up and burned,' and I've see whole families reject and humiliate a gay relative through name-calling and cruel, senseless remarks. And in each

³³ Switzer, 18,24.

³⁴ Switzer, 27.

³⁵ Interview with Scott Barefoot.

case, these family members lived to regret-bitterly- every vicious word they spit out at their loved ones but can't, as much as they'd like to, retract or erase.³⁶

In these circumstances, anger is understandable, though not justifiable. This certainly isn't supposed to happen to Christians is it? Especially when the child has been raised in the Scriptures, attended church and Sunday school each week, had parents who made it a point to surround their children with the Word of God through daily devotions. Yet it still happens, the devil still works his way into the life of a believer, potentially tearing apart a family. But who is to blame? The parent? The child? The secular world and its ideas?

The blame game is commonly played among the parents of homosexuals. Who is to blame for the lifestyle in which their child chose to partake? Parents bargain that if they are able to find the cause, they are more likely to be able to fix this, find a solution. Marlys Reid speaks of these feelings, "You start blaming yourself. What could I have done, what did I do wrong, what could I have changed? That is a common reaction of parents with children who have gone into that lifestyle. The fact of the matter is, when they've entered that as an adult, there is really nothing you could have done." It is natural for human beings to try to find the cause of their child's homosexuality. We want to find the source and punish it for causing this trouble in our lives and in the life of our child. It is common for parents in this situation to move between blame and guilt, to think to themselves, "If I would have done things differently, if I wouldn't have allowed her to play with those trucks when she was little, if I wouldn't have allowed him to play with dolls, things would have been different." Sadly, parents in this predicament often feel isolated. Eventually they can begin to blame each other along with themselves. This can drive a wedge between husband and wife. Although there are no figures to point to, there is evidence that marriages have ended as a result of a child's decision to embrace the homosexual lifestyle.

Finally, a parent will certainly feel sadness and depression upon hearing that their child has gone down a road which leads to spiritual death. When Joe Dallas revealed his actively homosexual lifestyle to his parents, it never occurred to him what exactly he was forcing his parents to deal with. In the following statement, he details what many parents may experience when their child comes out.

It didn't occur to my teenage mind, however good my intentions were, that in telling them...I was forcing them to deal with my having been involved in these behaviors in the first place. It meant forcing them to envision their son being sexually abused, then

³⁶ Dallas, 29.

realizing they'd been kept in the dark about the abuse, and its effects, for years. It meant they'd have to hear that I had committed the sort of sexual acts they considered to be the most abominable, forcing them to wonder if they'd done anything to create such monstrous tendencies in their own son. It meant dragging them through the mud of my perversions, and yet, even as they were being dragged, I expected them to react calmly. Of course I was disappointed. Mother collapsed in tears; my father screamed, swore, attacked. The night I told my parents that I'd been involved in homosexuality, my disclosure had the effect of a death sentence. Our family would never be the same.³⁷

This experience is not uncommon. Numerous parents agreed that the knowledge of their child's homosexual lifestyle was like losing the child itself. Some have even said it felt worse because of the many complicated feelings and because of the spiritual implications.³⁸ Another example of this is seen in the following interview with a sibling of a practicing homosexual: "I kept quiet. My mom was quietly devastated. She was very conservative. She worried about what everyone else would think. But she is very un-confrontational."³⁹

It is a common misconception among many in the secular world, that a homosexual's coming out event is all about that individual. This could not be more inaccurate. The evidence explains itself. The family goes through just as much, if not more than the individual pursuing this new way of life. Not only do they experience the emotionally debilitating stages of grief in losing the child they once knew, they also have to go on with life in the public world around them. While interviewing the Reids, Marlys recalled the difficult days and months which followed their daughter's coming out: "When this first happened to us, I wanted to keep it to myself. But I am not a good liar, I wear my emotions on my sleeve. It didn't take long for people to know that something wasn't right. I told Pieter, we need to come out of the closet. Maybe if we come out, then other parents will."

Homosexuality is comparable to alcoholism or mental illness in that all can be a source of embarrassment to the family. It is common for parents to agree with each other not to speak of their child's lifestyle choice. A combination of shame and worry over the opinions of others drives family members into secrecy. The result: "At a time when they desperately need the love, if not totally understanding support of other family members, of friends and neighbors and fellow workers, of the church, they keep it a secret. The end result is an intensification of the

³⁷ Dallas, 13.

³⁸ Switzer, 18.

³⁹ Interviewee to remain unnamed.

feelings of isolation that they already have."⁴⁰ Families in such a predicament reported a decrease in their church attendance, an avoidance of social situations, and a constant feeling of guilt.

The pro-gay community claims that those who come out don't have to keep secrets anymore. They can live freely and not be afraid. They can be happy with who they are. They can be accepted by those who share the same views. While the homosexual is called courageous for coming out of the closet, what they don't see is the selfishness of the action. They don't see the long and difficult steps of grief which the Christian family has to endure because their child or sibling doesn't want to fight temptation. They don't see the stress it puts on the marriage of their parents who daily have to fight blame and guilt. They don't hear the hateful and threatening calls which their parents receive when they don't attend their child's same-sex wedding. They don't see the tears their parents shed each night as they pray for the Lord to work repentance in the heart of their child.

Families who endure such a hardship can only find peace from the God of comfort. He lightens burdens with the assurance of his love for all sinners. He continues to give Christians the courage to fight against Satan and his attacks. He daily renews our trust in Him and in his plan for us.

2.2 The Aftermath

A Traumatic Event

Traumatic events leave lasting effects. The three core losses in an event of trauma are safety, control, and hope. A serious car accident can leave a person questioning their safety the next time they ride in an automobile. A stroke can take away a person's control in life, just as it took their ability to speak. A child who has experienced abuse can suffer from mental illness and often a loss of hope in adulthood. In a similar way, the initial reaction of a parent or sibling to their family member's revelation of homosexuality can have traumatic affects on the future of the relationship.

Dr. Brandon Hayes, a clinical psychologist at Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services, frequently deals with families who experience these types of situations. According to

⁴⁰ Switzer, 72

Hayes, the coming out process is usually influenced significantly by the homosexual's experience with the topic prior to that occasion. What the parents say offhand regarding the sin of homosexuality will determine how and when a person comes out with the sin. These factors can also have an effect on the initial trauma of the event. Regarding the affects of the initial reaction, Dr. Hayes had this to say:

I think there are enormous implications from how a family first reacts. I think it's to be expected that quite a few families are going to be shocked. Some are relieved to know. They are troubled but at least they know. They can begin the process as to what they're actually going to do. How can we fight it? Yes there have been instances where the parents have said and done things which have just instantaneously caused a rift which will never be repaired. It's sad but it is a part of our sinful nature, the result of a lack of understanding. But, yes, it has in some cases left a schism there which can be healed but will never be the same.

How a family first reacts to this news is significant. In such a shocking circumstance, emotions are understandably high on both sides. As difficult as it may be, it is of high importance that both sides control their words and actions. Scott Barefoot advises, "Don't fall into the trap of letting your emotions and shock over the revelation take over. Don't react. Don't look at the individual who shares this as if he or she has just grown a second head." Barefoot suggests that both sides take a step back in this circumstance. Let the situation settle. There is a good chance that initial emotions will not persist with the same strength. It is important for a family and their homosexual family member to realize that this conflict is not going to be resolved with one heated discussion. Instead they both must accept that this is the beginning of a long process.

Moving on after a traumatic event is never going to be easy. This is particularly the case when a family member discloses their homosexual lifestyle to Christian loved ones. An emotional closeness that was once there has now been broken. Especially when this occurs between Christians, there is now no longer certainty in the fact that the two parties agree on the basics, or even on the most important part of life, their faith.

You've lost confidence in the openness of the relationship, since you now know there's something this person kept from you, maybe for years, when you thought you knew him or her so well. You've lost unity, perhaps, as this issue now divides you. Even though you love this person so much that you want to maintain all you've had, you realize he or she is going in a different direction, one you can neither condone nor relate to. And seeing that directional change may be one of the toughest losses you're facing.⁴¹

⁴¹ Switzer, 119.

How does a relationship move forward after an event like this? Obviously, offense has been caused and bonds have been broken. But is there any way to move on, protecting the relationship, while not compromising one's scriptural stance?

It is imperative for a Christian parent or sibling to be aware at the outset of why their loved one has revealed this sin. This same sex attraction didn't just suddenly appear out of nowhere. Rather, these same-sex desires have likely been something with which the loved one has been struggling for years, possibly for as long as they can remember. So why did they choose this time and place to come out with this? Simply put: they no longer want to wrestle with their homosexual desires. This is especially the case with a loved one who has been raised in a Christian home where they have always been taught that homosexuality is contrary to God's plan. Coming out then, is this individual's way of ridding themselves of guilt, "and they don't want to do it the right way because they want to continue in their sin and they want to convince themselves very much that it's not a sin. With society and churches saying that lifestyle is acceptable, that becomes much easier for them to do."⁴²

The Christian who has now decided to embark into the homosexual lifestyle is knowingly entering into a lifestyle of sin, though they are trying to convince themselves and their loved ones otherwise. In view of this, the Christian family has no choice but to remind their loved of God's stance on this matter. The fact remains, even if someone is predisposed to a certain behavior more than another, it doesn't mean that he or she must act out on it. A person remains responsible to God for choices they make in acting out on the temptations in their life. But how a family member shares these concerns with their loved one can make or break the relationship as it moves forward. Dr. Joshua Mears, a clinical psychologist at Wisconsin Lutheran Child and Family Services, talks about this struggle between the family and the loved one in these circumstances.

It's significant- how they grieve, how they process, how they interact and communicate with their beliefs. How can they show grace and love with them within the confessional Lutheran view of biblical inerrancy? How can they manage their own emotions within that loss (and yes, I would characterize this as a loss)? Same goes for the person struggling. How can they coalesce their values with what their body is telling them to do?⁴³

⁴² Interview with Rev. Richard Starr, author of *Speaking the Unspeakable* and co-author of *Forgive Us Our Sins*.

⁴³ Interview with Dr. Joshua Mears, Clinical Psychologist.

The challenging questions are obvious: How does a family show love to their own flesh and blood without condoning the sin? How do they express concern over the lifestyle their loved one has chosen without building a wall that can never be torn down? How can they keep the door open so the Word can continue to move through, without actually condoning the homosexual lifestyle?

Do's and Don'ts

St. Paul's words to the Romans ring out loudly in our ears in the midst of a conflict between believers and unbelievers. He writes, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Ro 12:18). Understand what Paul is and is not saying here. He's not saying "agree with all men, or force all men to agree with you." Nor is he saying, "No matter what live peaceably with all men, even if they make outrageous demands on you which are in opposition to the Word." Paul is being reasonable with his words to the Romans. As much as possible, with believers and unbelievers alike, try to maintain peaceful relations. This means sitting down with the person struggling and discussing the terms under which you are going to continue to relate to each other.⁴⁴

The families who struggle to continue to communicate with their child after such a revelation are usually the families who fail to empathize. While it is a shock to find out your child has been struggling with homosexual desires all these years without your knowledge, one must realize that this is not something they chose to wrestle with. This is an important concept. The choice is not in the temptation, but in whether or not the individual will embrace the homosexual lifestyle or continue to fight it. The idea is common that homosexuals can change themselves into heterosexuals if they try hard enough. But is that possible? What if we switch the scene to a heterosexual individual trying to become attracted to someone of the same sex? Perspective is everything. People forget that sexuality is not a light switch that you can toggle up and down. This individual cannot change the temptations with which they struggle nor can one person say something to make them change. It is important to recognize this for it is a part of the growth process. Only the Holy Spirit can change the heart, "the only change over which you have control is within yourself. How will you react to the information that this person is a

⁴⁴ Dallas, 35.

homosexual? How will this knowledge affect your relationship?"⁴⁵ It is important for parents, family members, and counselors to acknowledge that this is not a road their loved one sought to go down. These are not feelings they can change by themselves. However, this is a temptation that they will need help to fight and overcome. Understanding the emotions of the individual struggling with homosexuality is key to strengthening the relationship moving forward. The point to note here is this: "To understand a person does not mean you agree, rather, it helps you to better communicate and relate with that person."⁴⁶ Although a family member may not be able to relate to the sin, their objections will carry far more weight if they've at least tried to understand what led to that behavior.

Consider Paul's words on brotherly admonition: "The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Ti 2:24-25). Paul stresses a preparation of attitude, not only arguments. Notice the descriptions Paul uses here: "not quarrelsome but kind... not resentful... gentle." Finally, consider his last sentence and the role a Christian plays. It is important for a family to understand that they are not attempting to win a court case here with the most convincing arguments. Rather, they are merely trying to give a clear presentation of truth. After all, the case is won or lost in the heart, and that is a matter between God and the individual. In any case of brotherly admonition, the role one plays must be understood.

Many families make a common mistake when making preparations to speak to the loved one concerning their sin. They approach the situation purely from a law perspective, without reiterating the fact that they will love their child unconditionally. Dr. Hayes can attest to the frequency of this mistake among Christian families, "I think it happens all too often. I don't agree with this, but I do hear some families say, 'Call me when you're not gay.' If anything, it's like you're just kicking the child out to sea with no lifeline. You don't have any connection or ability to pull them back." Joe Dallas also spoke of a pastor who advised parents to cut off all communication with their adult gay son because he said, "You are loving him straight to hell."⁴⁷ According to Dr. Mears, this is a type of rejectionary philosophy which contains numerous contradictions. Basically the idea is that "you change or I cannot have a relationship with you."

⁴⁵ Puls, 61.

⁴⁶ Dallas, 16.

⁴⁷ Dallas, 14.

Even if a person is living a lifestyle of active homosexuality, completely discontinuing one's relationship with them is not a way of displaying love. Quite the opposite, if a family cuts off all ties to their loved one, the main highway by which the Word can travel into that persons heart has been demolished and cut off. Keep the door open for the Holy Spirit to work repentance.

Brotherly admonition does not mean cruel mistreatment of the sinner until they have no choice but to repent. The goal in all of this is to keep the door to the Word open, so that the individual indulging in the sin may be lead to repentance by the Holy Spirit. Yet how can that possibly happen when the family members, the very people who are supposed to love their child or sibling unconditionally, are continually hitting them over the head with the law because they feel this is the best way to show love. While intentions may be well rooted, the desired results are not likely to ever be reached if God's law is not accompanied by an acknowledgment of love for the child.

Pieter and Marlys Reid experienced this very dilemma with their daughter. They recounted their struggles in an interview.

We hadn't ever walked down this path before. There was nothing out there to tell us what to do. No one was talking about it if they had had these situations in their life. We're a law, gospel church. The next time we saw her in person I really blasted her with the law and had looked up every passage relating to homosexuality in the Bible, I had them all typed out and when I read them to her she just kind of glassed over . It was almost cultic, because as soon as we would start talking about God's Word it was like she just zoned out. She was in some sort of a glassed over state. It was really eerie. It was almost cultic.⁴⁸

The Reids found that each time they met with their daughter, they were hitting her with the law, attempting to get a recognition of sin and repentance. As it turned out, it was getting to the point where their daughter didn't want to meet with them anymore because she was sick of hearing the exact same thing from her parents. Do not misunderstand the point here. If there are no signs of repentance, the personal assurance of the Gospel cannot and should not be applied. But to constantly condemn a person to hell, without clearly conveying one's love and desire for the individual to be saved, is not giving the Holy Spirit much of a doorway through which to work.

While a continuous hammering of the law is usually ineffective, a far less loving reaction is to take no action at all. Parents who accept the homosexual lifestyle their child is living, those who withhold their words for fear of ruining the relationship *are* in essence, "loving their child to

⁴⁸ Interview with Rev. Pieter and Marlys Reid.

hell." Unfortunately, this has become the easiest response to the conundrum. Society today puts pressure on parents and family members to accept the homosexual and their lifestyle. Joe Dallas brought up the example of a mother who was warned by a school guidance counselor that her refusal to allow her teenage son to join an on-campus gay support group would increase the likelihood of his committing suicide. The counselor threatened, "Hold onto your beliefs and kill your son, or become a better mother by discarding your beliefs."⁴⁹ This isn't uncommon for Christians to receive such threats. Peter and Marlys had the same type of experience when they refused to attend their daughter's same-sex wedding ceremony. They received threats and hateful phone calls from members of the pro-gay church to which their daughter held membership.

While it is difficult to tell a loved one that their way of life is contrary to the Word, it is also one of the greatest displays of love. The key then, is in how a family communicates this to their loved one.

To illustrate this concept of loving admonition and how it looks among members of a family, picture a hotel room with adjoining rooms. There are two doors between the two rooms which open and lock. While the homosexual may lock their side out of anger and rejection when they hear the loving proclamation of the law from their loved ones, the family on the other side must always make sure that their door is open by intentionalizing love through their interactions and communication with the individual.

Intentionalizing love begins with one's own attitude toward the sin. Put the sin of homosexuality into perspective. Homosexuality is no less serious than murder and adultery, nor is it any more damnable than the sins of deceit and gossip. This is certainly difficult to do, especially when a family had no idea their loved one was struggling with this sin which carries with it such a connotation of gross immorality. Yet working past the sin itself is the first step toward effective communication.

Pastor Reid and his wife struggled to move past the severity of the sin. In their eyes, their daughter's situation was unfathomable. How could such a taboo hit so close to home? One moment changed their perspective on the sin of homosexuality.

Marlys and I were working with Muslims who were worshipping a false god. Here you are working with a group of people living in sin and we're trying to show love to them to keep the door open. Then it dawned on us: How come we can do that with these Muslims and not with our own daughter? That was a real eye opener for us when we realized what

⁴⁹ Dallas, 14.

we were doing. And that's when we realized we really had to approach this totally differently. When we talked to her next time we said, "This is not going to be a clobberfest. You know what the Bible says." We realized if we wanted to keep the door open and have any chance of her coming back to the Word, we can't clobber her with the law and have the chance of losing her altogether. We kept saying "We love you and we won't keep pushing the law," and that helped immensely to build that relationship again. We want her to know that we love her and we want to show her that she will always have a family to come back to when she leaves this lifestyle. We tell her that all the time. We say, "You know we will always be here for you."⁵⁰

The key in the example of the Reids lies in their goal of keeping the door open through intentionalization of love. Follow the example of Christ, love the sinner, love the child unconditionally while hating the sin. Make that clear distinction, without driving them away. The Reids noticed significant improvement in their daughter's willingness to interact with them when she felt the love of her parents. To the opposite effect, if a family severs the relationship until their child repents, that family has closed the door on their prodigal child and there is little hope of regaining any semblance of a relationship. Even if the child finally realizes this sin is no longer for them, the door was closed long ago, and in their eyes, they have no family to which to return. As a result, they will likely move on to another lifestyle contrary to that of a Christian's.

Maintaining contact with the child does not mean that a parent condones their son or daughter's behavior. In most situations, the child usually knows exactly where their parents stand. While it is important to reiterate where God stands on the issue, one could argue it is just as important for a parent to reaffirm their ongoing love for the child, though they do not support the actions.

As challenging as it may be for all family members to maintain a relationship through a conflict of this magnitude, the sibling of a homosexual may have an advantage over the parent. This was the case in the Reid family as one of their younger daughters was able to retain a good relationship with her lesbian sibling, keeping the door open to the Word. Another interviewee has also been able to carry on a close relationship with his lesbian sister. In this case, the two grew up together. They were always very close. When the sister came out as a practicing homosexual, their relationship remained strong due to that pre-established bond. When asked how they were able to keep a close relationship in light of their conflicting views on homosexuality, the interviewee advised,

⁵⁰ Interview with Rev. Pieter and Marlys Reid.

For those who don't have a relative who has come out of the closet, I would suggest that we make one of the most important messages to those we're close to that we will always unconditionally love them. And that way, maybe they can better see later when they do have to be confronted with something that they're doing that out of love. My sister knows that I love her more than anyone else in the world. If I hadn't established, I wouldn't be in the great relationship with her that I am today with the opportunities I have to share the Word with her.

The family remains one of the biggest tools in the hand of the Holy Spirit in bringing the soul of the homosexual back to their Lord. When family ties and communication are retained, the door stays open to the Word. This is the only way a family can hope that their loved one will turn from their sin and repent. Only through the work of the Holy Spirit can hearts be changed. Paul's advice to "live at peace with everyone" can only be followed if we first show the love of Christ with our words and actions, not looking down on a certain individual for a specific sin, but viewing them in light of the Gospel. Christ removed our sins, giving us peace and freedom from guilt. He certainly died for the sins of the homosexual as well. We want our loved ones to share that same peace and fulfillment which is only found in their Savior. We want them to share benefits of forgiveness in eternal life. Intentionalizing love is the first step toward those goals.

Finding Peace

When homosexuality hits home, it tends to replace the peace that once filled the hearts and minds of parents. A mother or father can very easily remain stuck in the depression or bargaining stages of grief. This can absolutely crush a parent. Marlys Reid experienced these emotions after finding out her daughter was a practicing homosexual, "It's one of those things that weighs you down; a horrible secret, I felt like I was being held hostage by Satan. There is such a stigma here, that people are terrified to come out and say 'Yes, we have a child who has strayed.'" Embarrassment and a fear of rejection often force families to hide secrets like this. The truth is, such a secret cannot be hidden for long. Not only is it unhealthy, but others will begin to see the toll it is taking on the family. Marlys and Pieter suffered as they wrestled with their secret. They found it difficult to even face their fellow believers in church. When members asked about their daughter, Marlys found it very difficult to continue to cover up her child's lifestyle choice. She decided something had to change. She had to "come out."

I wrote an article for *Forward in Christ*. This took a lot of prayer and trepidation. I didn't do this lightly, we went to them and asked if they would be willing to have a parent do an article. They said, "You know this could have some repercussions." But we decided that if this could help even one other family, it would be worth it.

After that came out in print, our phone was ringing for weeks. One family drove to Wisconsin from three states away to meet with us. They were called workers with a gay son. They didn't know how to tell their congregation. Writing that article was such a relief because now Satan can't hold me hostage anymore. I can tell people about [my child] and I can ask for their prayers and I can share with them, and that was very important.

It shocked me because in the congregation to which we belong, there were people there that were struggling with this. A brother or an uncle who was gay, and they never would have come forward if we had not been so open about it. And that's something I'd really like to change, that there could be a support group or something so that these parents and siblings have other people they can be in contact with. Pieter and I have kept in contact with those other people who are going through this. I think that was one of the hardest things to do as a mom, but I would do it again because I saw how the Lord used that to touch other families. I'm not alone, this can happen to anybody. There are other people out there who are hurting.⁵¹⁵²

The Reids found peace when they came out with their secret. They found support from others, but they also found those who shared their circumstance. The Lord worked through their cross to help countless families. It is situations like this which remind us of why the Lord has given us the blessing of our fellow believers. Christians build each other up. Christians bear one another's burdens. The Reids are an example of how the Great Counselor can use a very difficult situation to help countless others. The key is being aware of, accepting, and talking openly with others about the situation, whether that's with a pastor, a spouse, a sibling, or a fellow Christian. Even if it becomes repetitive, this mutual openness helps the entire family diminish the intensity of its feelings and move on to the final stage of the grieving process, acceptance.

Reaching that stage of acceptance can be one of the most difficult transitions to make. Between the questions, secrets, and guilt, the child's sin can become an obsession for the parent. In this predicament a parent must come to terms with the fact that he or she did not create or

⁵¹ Interview with Maryls Reid.

⁵² Reid's Article: "The Unspeakable Sin," *Forward in Christ*, February, 2012.

commit their child's sin. In every case of homosexuality, there are a number of different factors which contributed to the child's lifestyle choice.

Consider Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal's father undoubtedly asked himself over and over again why his son left home. "Was it because of me? Was it the way I raised him? Was I too easy or hard on him? Did I drive him into the path of unrighteous living?" The same thing goes through the minds of the parents with a homosexual child. "Did she get enough love? Was I a good enough father or mother figure? Did I teach her the Word, pray with her enough?" The answer to all these questions is "No." No parent is perfect, nor can they expect to be. But did imperfect parenting drive one's child to homosexuality? Pastor Monday responds to this question:

The answer is no, because homosexuality is not caused by one influence alone. As I tried to show earlier, there's a constellation of influences involved. Based on all available research, when we try to pinpoint what creates homosexuality, we find at least five factors: [Genes, relationship with parents, relationship with siblings/peers, violations or traumas, other factors we're unaware of.]⁵³

While all of the factors contribute to each other, a parent cannot put their finger on one thing and say, "This is to blame for my child's lifestyle choice!"

Part of acceptance is letting go. The prodigal's father had to let his son go. When children reach a certain age, they are allowed to make their own decisions. We don't know to what extent the prodigal urged his son to stay, but he couldn't have been too pleased to give his son his inheritance as he watched him go out into the world to waste it. Yet the prodigal's father didn't withhold financial support from his child. He didn't kick him out and tell him, "don't come back until you change your lifestyle." His son was at an age in which he could make his own decisions. The father did the only thing he could do and let his beloved son go, showing him love by giving him the means by which to survive and make a living for himself.

A parent can only do so much for their child. When the child is young, a parent has the authority over what the child can and cannot do. But when a child comes of age, a parent's influence becomes limited. When I was young and still learning to ride a bike, my father would always run along with me holding onto the seat to make sure I wouldn't fall over. My mother would hold my hand as we crossed the street to keep me safe from potential harm. When I got older and went off to high school and college, my father and mother couldn't follow me

⁵³ Monday, 73-74.

everywhere, holding onto my hand wherever I went and preventing me from making mistakes. I had to learn from those on my own, as difficult as that may have been. Although my parents didn't agree with some of the decisions I made, I knew they continued to love me.

The prodigal's father loved, provided for, and exercised authority over his son while he was young. But when the son came of age, his father respected the free will God had given his son and he let his son go.⁵⁴ The father accepted his son's choice and trusted in the Lord to keep the son's soul in his care.

Now consider the affect this had on the son. He knew his father's love for him, even after he had gone and wasted his entire inheritance. Even when he knew he had sinned, he wanted to come home because his father had left the door open to him with his intentionalized love.

Isn't this what we have also come to expect from our Father in heaven? He accepts us and meets us, not where he wants us to be, but where we are. He loves us unconditionally, in spite of our sinful state. He doesn't accept or approve of our daily sins, but he loves us all the same. He made that love for us known with the sacrifice of his Son. How then could we not show that same unconditional love to our child, to our sibling, to our loved one who has fallen away from the path of righteousness. Acceptance is *not* condoning the sin of homosexuality. Acceptance *is* recognizing that a loved one is a homosexual, but they are still the same person whom you loved. Though you may be constantly battling through disappointment and hurt, a relationship with them is still possible, though it will unlikely be the same.

When disappointment with the current situation threatens to take hold of one's emotions, consider the apostle Paul's outlook. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul described himself as a man who was rightfully disappointed in life and in the people surrounding him. Yet Paul came to a place of acceptance nonetheless. People had certainly let Paul down and Paul didn't pretend he was above feeling pain over their disappointing behavior. But at a deeper level, he could still accept his situation, without approving of the wrong that had brought it about. Paul kept his mind focused on broader issues. He remained focused on his eternal reward and God's ability to sustain him even while he was imprisoned. He focused on all the blessings he had experienced in his life. He rejoiced for the gifts God had given to him, the privilege he'd had as an evangelist and teacher.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Monday, 78.

⁵⁵ Dallas, 44.

In view of Paul's example, a part of acceptance then is committing a loved one to God and saying with confidence: "I know who I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed-the person I love and who God loves even more-unto Him."⁵⁶

Finally, acceptance demonstrates Christian love in the fact that in spite of your differences, you continue to demonstrate Christ-like love unto the individual. That in itself is a strong witnessing tool which the prodigal child continues to hear long after their ears may have been closed to one's words. One final word of encouragement comes from Joe Dallas who personally experienced a situation likened to those previously mentioned in this paper. On the topic of love, Dallas says,

I know this to be true, from both personal and professional experience: When Christian family members continue to love and, as much as possible, relate to their gay loved ones, the impact on those loved one's hearts cannot be measured. It's often unseen, but it broods quietly, maybe for years, until at some point, the heart softened by a family's ongoing, unconditional love becomes prepared for repentance and eternity.⁵⁷

3. The Pastor and His Congregation

Where is a Christian family most likely to turn when homosexuality hits home? The answer is obvious: Their pastor. He knows the Word. He has all the answers. He will give the family the tools to change the heart of their loved one. But is it that simple? Is a pastor really able to point to a Scripture reference which is guaranteed to jumpstart the working of the Holy Spirit in the homosexual? Will a pastor always say all the right things to guide a family out of the mess which homosexuality can cause? The answer is no. But with the help of Holy Spirit working through the Word, a pastor can certainly remind the family of the comfort which remains theirs, guide them in the right direction, and allow the great and mighty Counselor to do the rest.

3.1 A Shepherd's Approach to Homosexuality

Why is it that we react differently to certain sins in comparison to others? When we learn that our co-worker is living with her boyfriend, does it make us cringe? When we see

⁵⁶ Dallas, 46.

⁵⁷ Dallas, 136.

presidential candidates openly slandering the good name of their opponents, do we quickly turn the channel of our televisions in disgust? When we hear a friend use God's name in vain out of anger, do we suddenly burst out saying, "If you don't change your language, you'll be eternally punished?" It is sad to think that we've grown so accustomed to seeing certain sins, that our consciences are numb to their seriousness. Why then does the sin of homosexuality have the opposite affect?

A typical WELS pastor is trained for eight years in the studies of Biblical languages, the history of the church, and the various theologies. A pastor is trained to lead his flock and council his sheep in nearly every circumstance. But when it comes to the sin of homosexuality, the trend among some is to treat this sin differently than others. How could a pastor fall into this? In an interview, Rev. Richard Starr gave his opinion as to why some pastors struggle with this issue. "We don't understand it, we haven't felt that temptation perhaps. We don't give that same understanding to people struggling with that sin that we give to others struggling with different sins, and that's on us."⁵⁸ It is difficult to relate when one has never experienced this sort of temptation. When asked what challenges pastors most in dealing with the sin of homosexuality, Dr Joshua Mears stated,

Lack of empathy, lack of understanding. For so many people this whole idea is so foreign, how could someone be attracted to someone of the same sex? To show that compassion to someone who is experiencing something so oppositional to their own experience is difficult. To be able to put themselves into the perspective of the homosexual and minister to them is challenging for pastors.

Maybe it is a feeling of inadequacy, maybe it is a lack of empathy, maybe a combination of both, but some faithful pastors find themselves lacking and unprepared when they approach the subject of homosexuality. With the growing acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle in society, the question for pastors is not "if," but "when" someone comes into your office with a matter of homosexuality, how will you respond?

When a member reveals their struggle with homosexuality to a pastor, a response of shock would be a mistake. Remaining calm in such a situation elicits trust on the part of the confessor. In Scott Barefoot's experience, this is something WELS pastors need to work on, "Go out of your way to act normal, not treating this sin differently."⁵⁹ This includes the weeks and

⁵⁸ Interview with Rev. Richard Starr.

⁵⁹ Interview with Scott Barefoot.

months after the revelation. A pastor cannot treat a member wrestling with homosexual desires differently than a member who has a habit of gossiping. A part of overcoming that initial shock, is getting past the general stigma sometimes attached to homosexuality. Pastor Reid advises that pastors especially need to get over the "yuck" factor. He says,

You can't have a negative reaction. That's a hard thing to do, that's one thing I still struggle with when I see a gay couple who are more intimate in public. I think that's a very important thing for pastors to be able to be professional enough to not have that because that'll immediately put up a wall, whether that's between you and parents or you and those who are struggling with the sin. It can put up an unseen barrier. Right away it comes across as, my pastor isn't ready for this and can't give me any advice.⁶⁰

Though it may be repulsive at first to consider what the sin of homosexuality involves, a pastor needs to get past that, showing love for his members with proper application of law and gospel.

In order for a Christian to feel comfortable seeking help from their pastor, he must be approachable on the subject. To be approachable, one must be comfortable on the subject. Like all other parts of ministry, prayerful reliance on the Lord is of first importance. Second, in order to be faithful, a pastor must make use of the resources through which he can educate himself on the topic. Homosexuality is a growing issue. A pastor can't be ignorant of things like policy changes and influences within professional organizations. A pastor should be aware of society's trends toward affirmative therapy in dealing with homosexuality. He does well to understand the variables which determine sexual orientation. An education on the subject itself is only going to help the pastor in his dealings with the sin. Once he is educated, a pastor can reveal to his members that he is comfortable speaking on the subject of homosexuality through his preaching and teaching. Approachability is everything, not only for the ministry of the pastor, but also for the spiritual well-being of his flock.

3.2 Guiding the Sheep

Advising the Family

"Pastor, my son is a homosexual. What should I do?" How does a pastor guide parents, siblings, and family members when they come through his office doors with a question like this?

⁶⁰ Interview with Rev. Pieter and Marlys Reid.

To put it simply: No one theory fits all cases. While this is the simple truth, there are certain factors which remain valid in every case. When a family comes in for guidance in such difficult matters, it is important for the pastor to establish these truths with them before moving forward:

1. You and your loved one still have a relationship, no matter how imperfect it may be.
2. Your loved one is still the same person he or she was before you found out they were a homosexual.
3. God is relentlessly at work in the person you love. He has thousands of means at his disposal for continuing to woo your loved one to himself, and he is still employing them.⁶¹ These things one can know for certain, and in them one can find rest.

In most cases, a Christian family is coming to their pastor for guidance as to how to respond to their loved one. In these circumstances, a pastor has to take each case individually. The following are some common arguments which active homosexuals make to justify their new lifestyle. It is important for a pastor to be able to instruct Christian families how to respond when they encounter the types of challenging statements such as the following:

1. "I was born this way." This is probably the most common argument a homosexual will present to their parents and loved ones upon coming out. They will say things like, "I can never remember a time when I was attracted to the opposite sex."⁶² If the homosexual family member presents this argument as scientific evidence that they cannot change their lifestyle, then a parent must educate themselves on the scientific facts. There is no conclusive evidence that homosexuality is genetic, as explained earlier in this thesis. Rather, it is something created by a variety of influences, both genetic and environmental. Even if one's homosexual orientation is unalterable (which also cannot be proven), what is right and wrong doesn't depend upon what can and cannot be changed. Proof of this is found in other "genetically attributed" addicting behaviors. For example, "alcoholism, violence and depression may all be at least partially created by inborn factors, and there's solid evidence that genes play a role in their development. Yet we'd never redefine 'normal' or 'healthy' to include these behaviors or conditions."⁶³ The fact that a tendency or orientation is difficult to change, doesn't by any means legitimize it.

⁶¹ Dallas, 68.

⁶² Interview with Dr. Brandon Hayes, Clinical Psychologist.

⁶³ Dallas, 156.

A pastor must also point the family to the fact that all human beings were born with the same stigma, sin. As Paul writes "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath" (Eph 2:3). Sinful at birth means that we were all born with the capacity to become vulnerable to any kind of sin. Paul again reminds us of this when he writes, "But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead" (Ro 7:8). Keep in mind, while being "born this way" can be considered natural, it is not the way God created or intended our lives to be. He created man in his perfect image, to be in perfect harmony with his will (Ge 1:26). When man ruined that image of God at the fall, God sent Jesus into the world to restore his image to us. Therefore, as Christians, we want to have the image of Christ reflecting in our identity. The problem with the homosexual is that he or she chooses their sexuality as their identity. In essence, they are embracing that old self with all its desires. To counter such an attitude a pastor can point the struggling family or loved one to Jesus' words to his disciples in Matthew's Gospel. He says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). Pastor Monday brings forth an important point worth noting from this verse.

Jesus is not saying 'If anyone would come after me, let him pick up his picnic basket. He'll be living on Easy Street. I'll heal him of all his problems. I'll shower him with riches. And I will welcome him as he embraces his former life of sin.' On the contrary, putting to death the old self will at times feel like being crucified. To you, denying your same-sex attractions and way of life may actually feel like you are literally dying and unable to breathe. Thanks be to God, though, that he gives us the victory, no matter how much we struggle.⁶⁴

A Christian who embraces the gay lifestyle is arguing that this will complete their life, bringing them happiness. But according to Psalm 1, it is just the opposite. The lifestyle which makes us happy is the life lived according to God's plan. This is the only kind of life which makes us complete and fulfilled.

⁶⁴ Monday, 43.

2. "Gay marriage is considered valid and legal by the state, therefore I can't see how you would say it is wrong." Now that gay marriage has been legalized, this seems to be a trending argument, though not very strong. A pastor does well to point the family toward both scriptural and social proofs of the illegitimacy of this union. Although society may recognize gay marriage as valid, it is still a relationship which God does not sanction, so neither can we. To a Christian, marriage is spelled out in both Testaments as a type of relationship God has with man. To redefine something that so clearly represents the unchangeable nature of God's relationship with his people is unthinkable to a Christian.⁶⁵ Not only is same-sex marriage something to which we currently object because of our faith, it is also something that has never, until recent times, been recognized in any culture as legitimate. Although laws accepting homosexual marriages as valid are relatively new, one can point to the facts laid out in pages three and four of this thesis as proof of its fragility. More evidence of this can be seen in the countries whose legalization of same-sex marriage preceded the United States. In Denmark, after only two years of sanctioning same-sex, the government reported that marriage relationships among young Dutch homosexual men last from one to one and one half years at most. Additionally, 'extra union' contracts which allow for additional sexual partners besides one's married spouse are common.⁶⁶ God's clear and explicit laws against same-sex marriage alone should be enough to deter one from going down this path. But when one additionally considers the fragile nature of this union, it should be obvious that homosexual marriage is not a desirable life choice.

3. "Who would want to keep someone from loving another human being?" The homosexual may attempt to lay the role of "bad guy" on his or her family members. In an attempt to free themselves from guilt, they lay the blame on the family instead. The truth is, no Christian should want to keep someone from loving. But when such a question is asked, a Christian has to respond with the follow-up question: "To which kind of love are you referring?" Consider three of the ways that Scripture describes love: *agape*-

⁶⁵ Dallas, 164.

⁶⁶ Maria Xiridou. Survey taken of the Amsterdam Municipal Health Service. *The Australian*, 2003.

unconditional, self-sacrificing love; *philia*-brotherly or friendly love; *eros*-physical attraction whose end goal is sexual fulfillment. With the statistics and facts in mind, can the fragile and sexually promiscuous nature of a homosexual relationship really be characterized by *agape* or *philia*? It is quite the opposite. In every case, gay love centers around a commonality of sexual orientation. Pastor Monday explains this concept:

The trouble is that we're not talking about true love or even brotherly love when we're talking about gay love. That's the bottom line. This is the whole issue. With all due respect, people who argue in support of homosexuality by saying it's about true love are misguided. Gay love is not about true love. It's not even about companionship. Gay love is about *eros*. True love shared will never make you gay or straight. Companionship, at the deepest level of brotherly love, won't make you gay or straight either. And these forms are allowed by God for you and your partner. But love for the same gender in regard to *eros* is what makes one gay, and this kind of love is unlawful according to the Scriptures.⁶⁷

True love, according to Scripture, has nothing to do with *eros*. Consider Jesus' definition of true love in John's Gospel. He says, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (Jn 15:13). This is true *agape*, self-sacrificing, love. The greatest form of all time as displayed in our Savior's willing death on the cross. The Bible also speaks of *philia* in a positive light in the examples of David and Jonathan (1 Sa 20-21). Their friendship had nothing to do with romanticism. They were essentially brothers. Gay love, however, is best characterized as *eros*. It is driven with one's own sexual fulfillment in mind. Gay love is love which is misplaced, just like every other sin. It is crucial for a family to understand these facts when this statement is made, not only to remove their own guilt, but also to reveal to their loved one the type of frail "love" he or she is choosing.

Educating parents and family members is the first step toward reuniting the family. A family who knows how to respond in such a situation is at an obvious advantage over the family who remains in the dark on the subject. A balanced approach is key. Admonishing a prodigal child with a well-planned argument will have little-to-no effect on the loved one if it is not accompanied by an attitude of love. If a family member has already offended their loved one and driven them away out of anger, then an apology is in order. Ask forgiveness for the outburst of

⁶⁷ Monday, 62.

anger, but not for the truths spoken from the Word. Let your loved one know you're still not sure how the two of you are going to work out your relationship, but that you want to preserve it.⁶⁸

A pastor should instruct the family to make a few points clear to their loved one when they approach the subject matter. First, they need to acknowledge that their loved one did not ask for these feelings of homosexuality nor was it their choice to experience these temptations. Second, a family must be firm on their position. Their opinions are unchangeable on this matter simply because the Word of God is unchangeable. Next, the family should clarify with their loved one that they want to protect this relationship through a mutual respect, and as much as possible, a mutual understanding. Finally, the family must establish the fact they are committed to not letting this disagreement ruin this relationship, though there may never be agreement on the issue.⁶⁹

A parent in this situation is naturally going to have fears for their child, not only spiritually, but also physically. Parents of homosexuals tend to make this fear an obsession. They read or hear of the possible side effects of the homosexual lifestyle.⁷⁰ These thoughts can torment parents. One way of overcoming these fears is by actually approaching the matter with the child. Joe Dallas recommends clarifying one's fears, "doing so can only enhance communication and trust between you and your child."⁷¹ Even if such communication is not possible, a pastor can remind this troubled family of the comfort that is theirs with Jeremiah's words in chapter 31. Jeremiah writes,

This is what the LORD says: "Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for your work will be rewarded," declares the LORD. "They will return from the land of the enemy. So there is hope for your descendants," declares the LORD. "Your children will return to their own land" (Jer 31:16-17).

Look at the 3-fold message of comfort this section gives to grieving parents. 1. God sees your loved one and your own tears. 2. God perseveres. He continues his efforts long after your own have exhausted themselves. 3. God holds out hope for you and your child.

The family with a straying loved one is more than likely going to experience guilt. They may feel partially or fully to blame for their loved one's fallen lifestyle. Parents are going to point to mistakes they've made along the way. Siblings are going to remember harsh words said

⁶⁸ Dallas, 32.

⁶⁹ Dallas, 82.

⁷⁰ Side effects listed on pages 3-4.

⁷¹ Dallas, 85.

to their brother or sister. Reiterate the fact that homosexuality cannot be attributed to one specific cause, but several different factors. Finally, meetings with a troubled family should begin and end with Jesus. Point to the forgiveness that is theirs, forgiveness also won for their loved one. The gospel is no different for a homosexual than a heterosexual.

Depending upon the situation and the emotional state of the family, it may be beneficial for the pastor to encourage a "coming out" process for the family. If they have been keeping this a secret for some time, it may be taking its toll on their mental state. Encourage openness with one another. A family can build each other up merely by being open about their concerns, fears, and emotions on the subject. Marlys Reid emphasized this point,

As we met with other couples, we realize there was something we had missed. We were grieving as parents and we didn't realize that the siblings are grieving as well. So there really needs to be an extended support for the extended family. I realized our boys were really struggling with this. They were really conflicted, "What kind of relationship do I have with my sister now?"

Finally, focus on the family's devotional, relational, and recreational parts of life. More than anyone else, a pastor is best suited to guide his members in their devotional life. Encourage constant involvement in the Word. Gather around God's Word together so as to build each other up. Next, focus on their relational part of life. They are at a stage where they need human contact, maybe more than ever before. The body of believers is easily the best opportunity for this. Regular church, Bible study, and even fellowship attendance is imperative for retaining a healthy state of mind. One of the greatest blessings our church offers us is its ability to build us up simply by gathering with our fellow believers and receiving the means of grace together. If the situation is right, encourage the family to share their story with other believers. Parents in this situation often insist that this is the most beneficial thing they did when experiencing the stages of grief. It is not uncommon for the Lord to use one family's hardships to bring encouragement and counsel to another group of believers. Finally, encourage the family to stay active. Intentionally make time for play, exercise, and breaks from the ordinary. It is important for someone who is enduring a hardship to find something which brings them genuine pleasure, something which they can look forward to each day.⁷²

A family will often wonder where they are to draw the line in dealing with their loved one. How does a pastor respond to such questions as: "Should we allow our child to bring their

⁷² Dallas, 38.

lover home to visit? Should we attend their wedding ceremony? Should we treat their marriage as valid?" How does a family draw the line without digging an un-crossable trench? This can be a slippery slope. Again, encourage the family to maintain contact with the loved one, without condoning the behavior. For example, don't invite the gay son to sleepover with his boyfriend, but leave the door open for him to visit by himself. Don't go out to dinner with the daughter and her lesbian lover, but make meeting with the daughter a priority. Also, understand that attendance at a wedding ceremony means you approve of the event and celebrate its meaning. A Christian simply cannot in good conscience attend such an event. A family has to draw some boundaries where they don't encourage the sinful behaviors under their own roof or in their presence. It is the job of the pastor to point these out to the family, while continuing to encourage an attitude of love. It is the pastors difficult responsibility to show the family balance between these seemingly contradicting paradigms.

When a family has established a communicative relationship with their prodigal child, the next step is to gradually feed their loved one the Word. If the homosexual is continually connected with God's Word, then the Holy Spirit is able to connect with their heart and, Lord willing, work repentance. Over time, the Reids were able to stay connected to their daughter. In their interview, they spoke of how they encourage their daughter spiritually.

One of the things we're trying to do is to be in the word, that's something she used to do on her own. She was reading four or five different devotion books a day. And she continued that when she was in Thailand. But as I look at the whole gay movement, 10 years ago they were trying to convince everyone that they were trying to follow the scriptures. But now they say, "If you really want to follow the Bible, the Bible actually speaks against the gay movement. So don't go quote the bible anymore, it's a bunch of trash." I'm really concerned that if she's rubbing more shoulders with people like that that might start to rub off. So one thing we keep asking is "Are you continuing to have devotions? And we just keep asking please take time to be in God's word." Because if she can reconnect with God's word, then God the HS can be connecting with her in her heart.

There is a difference between "preaching" and showing genuine love and concern for an individual's soul. A family can display the latter simply by asking if their loved one is remaining in the Word, by sending them devotional materials, and by simply speaking openly with them about their Savior.

Factors of Importance

In dealings with the family of a homosexual, there are a number of factors that a pastor must keep in mind. While a child could have a perfectly normal Christian upbringing and still become a homosexual, there are certainly cases where a childhood violation directly influences their sexual orientation. Joe Dallas presents the following key points for a pastor to bear in mind in his discussions with the family.

A violated girl will often conclude men are unsafe and destructive, closing off future potential bonding with a male partner. A violated boy may, ironically, find the experience binds him to other males as sexual partners rather than as friends or comrades. If in your family discussions, you learn your gay loved one was violated, refer him or her to a licensed Christian mental-health provider immediately. No matter where your loved one stands on homosexuality-whether embracing or rejecting it-he or she needs to deal with the emotional after-effects of the abuse. Do all within your power to encourage this.⁷³

One can see how sexual abuse will affect the lifestyle choice of an individual. Females who suffer from a history of trauma and abuse are more likely to choose a homosexual lifestyle than is a male who was abused. They don't want to be triggered by that past abuse which was portrayed by a male and they tend to develop an extreme aversion to a male sexual relationship. In these cases, the homosexual lifestyle has become almost an avoidance strategy for them.⁷⁴

A pastor must understand the difference between a surface and core issue. In the cases of sexual abuse, participation in the homosexual lifestyle may only be a surface cover-up merely to avoid the triggers produced by the core issue. In such a case, the core issue must be identified and addressed in order to move forward. In the case of sexual abuse, a pastor is somewhat limited as to the counseling he can give to the victim. While he can provide spiritual guidance and counsel from the Word, a referral to a licensed Christian counselor will most likely be of greater help to the victim. Each situation must be evaluated on its own, but a referral may be the most beneficial in this circumstance.

Understanding these underlying issues can only help the pastor and his flock. The more education a pastor can acquire on this subject, both in the Word and in the study of the sin, the greater help he will be to the family and to the straying loved one. In order to help the individual

⁷³ Dallas, 63-64.

⁷⁴ Interview with Dr. Brandon Hayes, Clinical Psychologist.

dealing with the guilt and shame of homosexuality, a pastor needs to be able to focus on the problem rather than on his inability to comprehend and understand the sin. If the later is the case, then he can be a detriment to the Gospel, rather than an avenue. Faithful study and involvement in the Word and the resources at his disposal will help him most effectively give aid and guidance to his members.

3.3 Instructing the Sheep

The Two Types of Churches

Our churches are facing an uphill battle in their dealings with homosexuality. With the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, it is common to point the finger of blame at the government for the conflict between the Church and LGBT's. However, this is simply not a valid resolution of censure. Christians are not to put their trust in the government to uphold Christian morals (Ps 146:3). However, the present law changes do reveal a growing number of the population who believe the homosexual lifestyle is natural and acceptable. A lifestyle is certainly difficult to change when an entire society accepts it.

In recent decades, society has presented more challenges for the church. With postmodernism heavily influencing thoughts and ideas, everything is becoming relative in the minds of many individuals. As a result, "boundaries become superficial. Authorities are unsubstantiated. Meaning becomes universally meaningless. Tolerance is the only thing that can be championed. Tragically, nothing is truly certain. This includes Jesus and his cross."⁷⁵ This presents a challenge when witnessing to the practicing homosexual. The Bible means nothing because truth in the eyes of the unbeliever is completely different from the truth a Christian knows. Somehow, everything seems to stem back to the garden and the serpent's question, "Did God really say?"

With such conflicting views, society has created stereotypes of churches today. It is commonly believed that there are essentially two types of churches when it comes to homosexuality. Churches who either welcome homosexuals and embrace them as they are, or those who hate homosexuals and hope they burn in hell. Obviously, this is a misconception, but

⁷⁵ Monday, 95

common all the same. It is no longer a surprise to drive by a church with a rainbow flag waving outside. It is also possible to encounter a church who broadcasts their hatred toward certain lifestyles.

Pro-gay churches claim to celebrate all lifestyles. They also claim to be centered around love. Their "love conquers all" arguments point to sections of Scripture like John 3:16, 1 Peter 4:8, and 1 Corinthians 13. At the end of the day, these churches that point to passages of love for the basis of all their practices contain nothing more than doctrines born from worldly pressures. After all, "it is as unloving for any church to say that God loves you and accepts your sin as it is to say that God hates you because of your sin."⁷⁶

Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas is famous for their extremist approach to the homosexual lifestyle. This law driven church flies a banner outside its walls that reads, "God hates America." Their members are commonly found picketing with signs damning homosexuals to hell. They are known for their unwelcoming nature toward visitors and their lack of love is displayed in their lack of members. These churches would do well to look at Jesus' parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32. Their proclamation of the law overshadows any Gospel they preach. This fact is made obvious by the signs of their actions. They have no love for sinners. Clearly they don't understand what Jesus meant when he said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mk 2:17). God is not pleased with churches or any believers with this type of self-righteous attitude. He sent his son to die for all, even the worst of sinners.

How then can we reach a happy medium within our own congregations? How can Gospel resound rather than condemnation? How do pastors train and educate their members to love the homosexual without condoning the sin? This will be the topic of concern in the final section.

Educating the Congregation

A shepherd knows his flock best. He has a deeper understanding of the character and conflicts of his congregation than would an outsider. That being said, sometimes a pastor is tempted to overlook certain topics because he takes it for granted that none of his members

⁷⁶ Monday, 112.

struggle with such things. The subject of homosexuality seems to be a common example of this. A pastor will study this topic on his own and conclude, "Well, I don't have any homosexuals in *my* congregation because we wouldn't put up with that." Such a congregation may in fact have several individuals struggling with homosexuality, but their shepherd will never know they are struggling until it is too late, because his attitude has become a roadblock to any kind of help he can offer them.⁷⁷ While the pastor may claim that his members don't struggle with this, he may only be covering up his own lack of education and fear of the subject itself. This is playing with fire. If a member in such a congregation were to reveal that he or she struggles with homosexual desires, can we really expect the brothers and sisters of that congregation to react in any other way than shock, or worse, condemning anger? If a pastor fails to educate his congregation on this ever increasing subject, he is playing with fire and his congregation is sure to get burned.

Just how common are homosexual tendencies among the members of our congregations? Psychologists and medical studies have shown that one in ten people have struggled with same-sex attraction at one time or another. Many times, no one around the individual will know their secret. Maybe they struggled with it, experimented when they were younger, and came out of it. Though homosexuality is no more prevalent today than it was in biblical times, the lifestyle is certainly less shameful and stigmatized, making it seem more common. Regardless of the numbers, the subject needs to be brought to light. Homosexuality is a struggle that exists, even among Christians. A pastor is smart to do this proactively, even before a member approaches him and confesses their struggle.

An openness to the subject is important. A pastor who shows he is approachable will be able to give far more spiritual help to the struggling Christian. Offering a Bible class on the subject is valuable; possibly a several week course, equipping members with the biblical passages while educating them on some of the most common pro-gay arguments. Through teaching and instruction, a pastor has the ability to put the sin of homosexuality into perspective. He can "normalize" the sin to his members, reveal to them the reality that this is a sin like any other. It is a sin from which one must repent, but a sin which was also paid for on the cross. Scott Barefoot does presentations for congregations on this topic. Regarding the reactions of members to this topic, Scott said,

⁷⁷ Interview with Rev. Richard Starr.

Bible study does wonders. A couple congregations surprised me because they were older congregations and several of them came up to me and told me how much they appreciated it. Before pastor led us through this Bible study I had a horrible mindset about gays and homosexuality. Back in the day we never had to deal with it because everyone led a closeted life and we didn't know these people.⁷⁸

People will struggle with the topic of homosexuality. Keep in mind, this is still a very sensitive issue. Some have a difficult time getting over the "gross" factor. No matter what the case, Christians will more than likely want to know more about the issue, though they may not admit it. We live in a world today where more times than not, people will know someone who is struggling with this sin. That fact alone is a good reason to address this proactively rather than reactively.⁷⁹ The more we reorient our mindset to this sin through education, the better. The more we display that we can help someone struggling with homosexuality, the more willing they are to approach us. Educating the congregation is needed. This is an issue at the forefront of Christianity. It cannot be ignored.⁸⁰

The most obvious way a pastor can educate is through his preaching. Even those who are absent from Bible class are going to lend their ears to their pastor's voice and the Word he preaches for twenty minutes each Sunday. Yet when an opportunity presents itself from the text to address homosexuality in the sermon, is a pastor making full use? You have probably heard homosexuality referred to in a sermon as a "sign of the times," or part of the reason "the world is so evil today." But is the other side of free forgiveness also recognized? If the preacher fails to emphasize that Christ paid for this sin as well, he is only adding to the stigma. If a man who struggles with same-sex attraction is sitting in the pew listening, is he going to feel like he can approach his pastor when all he hears from the pulpit is condemnation for *that* particular sin? Yet when it comes to more common sins in the congregation: greed, laziness, or licentiousness, forgiveness is certainly offered for sins such as these. The weakness here is obvious. The Gospel of forgiveness must be preached for all sins and to all types sinners. There are many sins in the congregation of which a pastor is not aware. Therefore, preaching in a balance way from the pulpit is necessary. All sin is damnable. If we continue to willingly live in sin, we will have eternal punishment to pay. But Christ still won forgiveness for every sin of all people. Although some will daily wrestle with the sin of homosexuality, they are no different from any other

⁷⁸ Interview with Scott Barefoot.

⁷⁹ Interview with Brandon Hayes.

⁸⁰ Interview with Joshua Mears.

Christian who struggles with sin of another variety. But a truly repentant heart regrets sin, and through faith, embraces the grace of God. Therefore, living anew in the knowledge of sins forgiven is a lifestyle which all Christians can happily embrace. While weekly Bible study is an excellent opportunity for educating, a pastor must also make use of his opportunities to educate from the pulpit.

Education can help congregations overcome knee-jerk reactions. When the sin of homosexuality becomes public in a congregation, reactions can vary depending upon the situation. In some places, the struggling individual will be ostracized almost immediately. The sin of homosexuality, unlike other sins carries a personal disgust with it. Many think to themselves, "That person is disgusting and immoral, I could never imagine myself doing that with another man." If the congregation is quick to judge by their own standards, the Christian wrestling with the sin or even the homosexual visitor will be quick to leave.⁸¹

In order to reverse this image, we must point our own members to the universal need for the Gospel. All sin is equally great in God's eyes. Whether a person struggles with pornography, gossip, or greed, he is equally sinful in God's eyes as is the homosexual. A congregation needs to be reminded that they are not a museum of saints. They all have their pet sins. While we want to recognize those sins, repent of them, and live a new life, some aren't at that point yet. We don't want to condone the sin. The Word instructs us to proclaim God's law to the impenitent. If this individual is a member, if they despise God's Word and they are excommunicated, now they have become a mission prospect. We want to continue to reach out to the sinner, building a door between them and the Word in the hope that the Holy Spirit will one day work repentance. All people have a need for the Gospel, some just don't realize why.

Jesus saw that universal need during his ministry. When the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus and they wanted to stone her, he didn't look down on the woman in disgust and demand she be removed from his presence because of her sins. Instead he bent down and wrote with his finger in the dust before straightening up and saying, "Let any of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7). To view a particular sin as worse than another is pharisaical at best. All Christians struggle with certain sins. This doesn't mean we give in to them, but it does mean we have a cross to bear. For homosexuals, they may have that cross to bear for the rest of their life. Just because they're tempted, just because they experience

⁸¹ Interview with Brandon Hayes.

homosexual urges doesn't mean that they cannot receive the benefits of God's grace. "Those who experience homosexual thoughts, feelings, and desires truly need much love and support. Many have given up or quit trying to change because they could not find or experience relationships of true love."⁸² Like every Christian, the person struggling with homosexual temptations needs the assurance of forgiveness. That being said, if there is no repentance, we cannot hold out the Gospel because it is sure to be misapplied and ineffective. Sorrow and contrition is needed to offer forgiveness. Like every other Christian, the homosexual needs God's help to overcome the temptation. This is an ongoing process.

Education on this subject begins already at a young age. A part of this responsibility lies with the pastor and his role as leader. Pastors have an excellent opportunity to teach children the Bible's teachings on homosexuality in confirmation class. He can emphasize to parents the importance of Christian leadership and instruction in the home. A pastor can educate men of the congregation and lead by example, giving them a picture of what a Christian father looks like as head of his household. He can encourage mothers to keep the spiritual instruction of their children as the top priority in their upbringing. In previous generations, pastors may have never addressed this, but now it needs to be brought to light because it is already being taught in the public sector, even explained as a natural way of life in public school health classes.

Today, more than ever before, it is imperative that parents teach their young children that the homosexual lifestyle is contrary to God's plan. At early ages, a child is easily influenced by outside sources. TV and media outlets give the impression that homosexuality is a valid way of life. Books in preschools and kindergarten classes display that one type of family has two dads, another type has two moms, and a third has one of each, but each lifestyle is normal and acceptable. Public school health classes teach a child to embrace their sexuality, no matter what orientation they lean toward. With all these outside influences telling children that homosexuality is perfectly acceptable, it's much harder to convince young people that this is out of place, that this is condemnable behavior in God's eyes. Parents have the advantage of being the most influential people in the life of their child. This is why it is imperative that they talk with their children at an early age. Parents can emphasize both the love of God for all sinners, and the seriousness of the sin of homosexuality through daily devotions with their children. Establishing a relationship of open communication between parent and child when dealing with

⁸² Cohen, 236.

the Word is important. The more we talk about this at an early age with our children, the less shock and confusion they will experience when they know someone who is a homosexual. In the same sense, if parents have openly discussed this with their children when they were young, the child will more likely ask their parents for help if they wrestle with those desires when they are older. Starting young will improve the way the next generation approaches the sin and the sinner. In the same way, starting young with the Word, will establish its importance and truth to the child in their life so that, when they grow old, they will not turn from it. Teach children from the scriptures how to befriend everyone while remaining unmoved in their own convictions from the Word. Parents must avoid the mistake of Eli who failed to guide his children spiritually. The scriptures give clear warning to this, "If you want to be a willing party to the death of your children, don't raise them in the Lord and don't discipline them either (Pr 19:18; 22:3-6). Instead we must teach our kids that the beginning of wisdom is to love and respect the Lord and all he says (Pr 1:7)."⁸³ Lot and his children also serve as a warning. Lot did not emphasize the seriousness of the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah to his children. As a result, he lost both his sons-in-law. It is important for young people to realize the spiritual forces involved in the conflict of homosexuality. Equip them with the spiritual weapons of which the Apostle Paul speaks in Ephesians chapter 6. Instruct children how to put on the full armor of God that they may always defend themselves against the attacks of the devil and the world.

Conclusion

What can a Christian do in response to a nationally accepted sin? Present the general message of Christ without specifically focusing on the issue of homosexuality. That is really not the main issue here. Our hope in Christ to deliver us from all sin is. This is always the struggle in an unbeliever, but with faith, everything else falls into place by God's grace.⁸⁴ Speak as Paul did to the Athenians about the general need for repentance, always talking in the first person (Ac 17:22-31). Speak the true Word to all who will listen. Live out what God's Word says to the best of your ability. Pray. Pray for Christians in society. Pray that the efforts of Christians to preserve God's natural law will prevail. Do all you can to be "salt and light" in the world, that the Gospel

⁸³ Monday, 171.

⁸⁴ Monday, 176.

will be heard and more souls come to a knowledge of the truth. Finally, imitate Christ's love in your lives, in the way you treat and interact with people.⁸⁵ The greatest weapon we use for all of this is God's Word, a weapon of love, and the only source of true love.

When a family has a prodigal child, the only way of gaining them back is with the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word and a continually intentionalized love unto them. Stating the truth in love is going to be difficult, especially when the family knows that this will offend their loved one. Yet at the same time, this is a part of their calling as Christians, to speak the things which they have seen and heard. Coincidentally, this is also the greatest way of displaying love to their child or sibling, keeping the eternal well-being of their loved one as the top priority. Along with the Word is the attitude which presents the Word. The family who is able to keep an attitude and tone of love for their child in the midst of conflict, keeps the door open for their prodigal child to one day return. When that day comes, that family can wrap their arms around their child, assure them all is forgiven, and look forward to the day when their wounds will be healed and their bodies made new at the resurrection of all.

When a Christian endures struggles like these, when they pray to God for relief, pray that he will lead their loved one back to the path of righteousness, yet they see no results, God's answer to Paul is certain to bring sustaining power. In our most discouraging hour, our Lord says to us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Co 12:9). Consider God's grace in these situations. We can easily grow content with our faith and our knowledge of the Word. Yet when the Lord allows a challenge like this to enter our lives, we see first-hand how he uses it to bring us closer to himself. Our Great Provider gives us so many promises and assurances in his Word. Yet how easy it is to look past those at times. When we encounter a family struggle like this, we find ourselves praying those promises back to God, holding him to his Word. We know our Lord is never going to leave us or forsake us. That doesn't mean he won't walk us through some difficult challenges along the way, using us to bring help to others. But he will use those struggles for the good of those who love him. We know he is a God of compassion and love. He is not going to put out a spark of faith if it still remains in our loved one. Therefore, when a loved one has fallen away, we pray ever more adamantly, "Please Lord keep that spark of faith alive so that our loved one can be with you in heaven. God you've promised that in baptism, you called our child by name, you made them your own. You said

⁸⁵ Monday, 129.

nothing is ever going to separate them from your love. Now I am going to hold you to that promise."⁸⁶

The families of the homosexual children are not alone. Countless Christian families have challenges with prodigal children. Their struggles may not be homosexuality, but the conflict and threat of eternity lost may remain the same. Though there is no easy fix, no five step cure-all formula, the tools and strength one needs is found in the Word. Found in God's plan for all people. This is displayed most vividly in Christ's love on the cross. May we always imitate that love in every challenge we encounter and with everyone we meet. Whether you are a pastor, a parent, or a sibling, we are all sinners, and we can all point people to the source of our deliverance, Jesus Christ, and himself crucified.

⁸⁶ Interview with Rev. Pieter Reid.

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