

Such Were Some of You: Testaments to Sexual Transformation

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Preface

I am honored at the opportunity to speak into your lives today. Despite my resistance, God has called me to pastor in a highly focused and personal way to an area of great brokenness. Today I stand before you a Wesleyan pastor serving in the role of marital sex therapist. I am proud to serve through both designations. I am also proud to be a part of a denomination that recognizes the critical nature of sexual transformation and even dares to put sexuality on the agenda. Through much of history the Church has been silent on this core arena of our selves and the cost of our silence appears evident to me. Thank you for even acknowledging the need to address sexuality.

Scholarly papers like this can be written in two ways. My preference is to distill the information from years of wise teachings, complete with footnotes to support the distinguishing points. My apologies to those who prefer this method for today I choose instead to use the method of personal testimony. Like the healed man in John 9, I choose not to take a stand on dissentious theological nuances, but on the truth that: this I know, once we were broken, now we are whole. Today, I present personal testimony of those who were mired in sexual brokenness and are transformed.

Introduction

Tony is a successful, attractive businessman in his late 30's. His wife of 18 years is divorcing him after learning of a long string of affairs that stretches through their entire married life. "I've never gone more than a week without having sex with someone since I was 14," he states. "If my wife wasn't willing, there was always someone who was." When challenged with a 40-day sex fast he was astounded at the thought, not being sure it was possible.

Robert is clear in identifying his homosexual orientation. He tried the straight lifestyle, but never felt he was being honest with himself or others and finally gave up. Following the counsel of a therapist he left his wife, put his highly visible career at risk, and pursued a series of homosexual relationships. He is still conflicted since his current lifestyle is in such contrast with his faith.

Shelly is a stereotypical soccer mom of 5 children. Her husband recently stumbled upon a secret online identity where she is developing relationships with high-risk men. Beginning with flirty talk she would begin exchanging photos that became increasingly revealing. This led to all manner of internet sex and eventually meeting in secret locations for sex. Confronted with her behavior and the potential risk to her children from these known predators she sobbed her concern that she would not be able to stop her behavior since a strong part of her did not seem to want to stop. Despite repeated earnest commitments to change her behavior, the detectives he hired were able to show her behavior was continuing.

James is a well-loved pastor who confesses to regular fantasies about women in his church and community. Further exploration reveals a long history of pornography and masturbation. He acknowledges the danger of his behavior but repeated confession and prayer for years hasn't seemed to do any good. He's not sure he can find healing. Besides, he's never acted on any of his fantasies.

While struggling with what it meant in the face of their confessed sinful lifestyle, each of these individuals professed a Christian faith. Each of these lambs sat in my office asking the questions this group has asked of me today.

Can people be transformed sexually? How does grace relate to sexual perversions and depravities?

In answering these questions, the Church often swings between what Mark Yarhouse (Yarhouse, in press) identifies as "arrogant optimism" and "cynical pessimism". At one end we expect everyone to be miraculously healed like people were in the healing services I remember from my youth. At the other end, we are jaded by those who seem to struggle for a lifetime in finding restoration. Eventually, we grow weary and lose hope that those caught in sexual sin *can* be restored. While both may be true for specific individuals, the Church must fight for a "biblical hope" (Yarhouse, in press) that energizes both the church and the seeker.

The simple answer to this question before us is that we serve an awesome God who is more than capable of transforming the worst trash pit we can create in our lives into a glorious garden whose fragrance is strong with grace, love and beauty. I have personally watched our Lord use the most wretched refuse of someone's life as the nutrient base for the most savory fruit of His Spirit in their life.

Yes, God can, and does transform people sexually and he does so instantly, progressively, and permanently through his grace alone.

To more completely answer the question, however, we need to look at the larger questions asked of this symposium: What was human sexual nature intended to be, what happened to this ideal, and can people be transformed.

Why is the sexual part of my life, a part that seems to hold the potential for profound beauty and enjoyment such a source of tension and pain? Can the wounding be healed? Can I find a healing that allows sex to become beauty?

Each individual in these testimonies is mired in a pattern as old as the fall of man. A pattern God himself, through our Lord Jesus Christ, has provided redemption from. Each broken, wounded individual and relationship in my office fell under the veil of deceit that kept them floundering. We have bought the lie of the world and we try to achieve what God promised, and we yearn for, through ungodly means.

Sex as our creator intended

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And God said, "let us make man in our image, in our likeness, ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them" (Genesis 1: 26-27) While we can debate the exact nature of this "likeness", it is clear we were created to reflect God. The ultimate design of humanity is to become like our creator, to be in his image.

Scripture reinforces this as God details ways we are called to reflect him. "Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Leviticus 11:44, I Peter 1:16). We are called to love as he loves (John 15:12) and to forgive since he forgives (Colossians 3:13). One of the more consistent ways he calls us to reflect him is through intimacy as we are called to be one (John 17: 20-23).

The God who created us is a profoundly intimate God. The nature of His intimacy has confounded theologians and scholars for millennia. The uniqueness of each in the Godhead is brought together with such perfection that the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Reflecting this, we were created in His likeness with the potential for our distinctive uniqueness to be to pathway for experiencing profound intimacy.

Initially, Adam and Eve reflected this intimacy. Not having the knowledge of good and evil - the ability to judge, they were able to be fully exposed to each other without shame (Genesis 2:25).

Wayne and Sara have been married for 27 years. While they struggled with the "terrible two's" developmental stage of marriage where each sought to impose their will and way on the other, they have worked hard to respect each other's individuality and strengths. Today, the differences that used to create divisionary conflict are cherished for the way those differences allow the marriage to advance like opposing cogs in an engine.

Today, sex begins as Wayne admires the way Sara balances the myriad of demands on their family with grace and beauty. Sara adores the strength with which Wayne focuses in on work and excels in a career that provides honor and resources to the family. They greet each other in the evening with a loving embrace that shows they are glad to be together again. Each anticipates the needs of the other as Sara nurtures him with a meal and Wayne patiently bathes the kids after playing on the floor with them. Once the kids are in bed Wayne fixes a cup of her favorite herb tea and they sit sharing their joys, frustrations, hopes and fears from the day. As they look into each other's eyes under the veil of emotional safety that comes from celebrating each other's differences, an appreciation of the beauty of their spouse leads to gentle touches that reaffirm their physical connection.

Wayne opens his heart to Sara and draws energy from the love and understanding that allows her to fully enter his heart. The focused attention and nurturing touch floods their bodies with chemicals of attachment and bonding as well as energy and growing passion. Like a worshipper becoming aware of the presence of the Spirit of God in the celebration of His nature, Wayne and Sara drink deeply of their connection.

Sara feels a stirring within as she sees the passion and well disciplined hunger building in Wayne's eyes. She takes delight in the awareness of the power her "Evenness" has over her husband as he surrenders to the excitement she sparks in him.

Because the focus is intimacy, Wayne never loses contact with Sara's heart. Were he to unleash the full intensity of his passion, he would be as destructive as if God had unleashed the unveiled power of his love on us. Instead, Wayne tempers his passion maintaining a cherishing spirit that allows Sara to safely surrender to him.

As they continue to lift the shades to their soul, each drinks deeply of the other. They know each other so intimately that she anticipates his desire and he closely follows her steadily growing excitement.

In God's design, reflecting him in oneness is the created ideal - the joining of our unique differences into an explosive oneness of sensuality, emotion and spirit. Sex is a profound object lesson in who God is. God's ideal was that sex be a lesson in His intimate nature. He reveals himself through, and we discover him in, our sexuality as we do all other areas of beauty in life.

As Wayne and Sara continue to pursue oneness they reach a point where they switch from one internal nervous system to another. Marked by an explosive rush, this internal handoff is one of surrender. Wayne and Sara

have reached the point where they know one another in a full and profound way. Now, in this post-surrender state they bask in the glory of their experience.

In writing the scripture, God chose the word “yada” to reflect the oneness Adam and Eve experienced that led to them reflecting God in procreation. The coming together of Adam and Eve in profound sexuality is a type of “knowing” that is experiential, and reflective. I believe God’s design for sexuality is a profound knowing of one another where we were meant to be fully sensual, fully entering, fully receiving, fully knowing and fully being known.

Wayne and Sara have pursued sensual touch with each other that is reserved only for the sacred and boundaried playground of their marriage. In God’s design, their first orgasmic experience came while they looked deep into each other’s heart forever associating each other with pleasure and joy. Today, Wayne has directed his desire to Sara alone allowing no other to be the focus. Drawing on the well-bridled energy of this desire, he made himself ready for her. As the priest prepared himself to enter the holy of holies, he prepared himself to enter her sacred space. Prepared, he stood at the door of her heart and gently knocked. Hearing his voice, she opened the door and received him in, not out of duty, but out of a longing for closeness. He opened his heart and she opened her body.

Each is able to be naked (emotionally, physically and spiritually) and be known because each is unashamed. Wayne and Sara are unashamed because of their personal and marital discipleship journey. Adam and Eve were unashamed because they did not yet have the knowledge of good and evil. God reserved the ability to judge for himself and told man not to touch it. “The moment you take it from me, you will destroy yourself.”

Sex marred by sin

Then, the enemy stepped in and began to deceive. “I know God said it will lead to death, but that’s not technically true. In fact, it will give you knowledge that will make you more like God. Isn’t that what he created you for, to reflect him? So in actuality, taking it is a good thing.”

Kathy sat in my office in tears. “How did I become this person? I always detested women who would have affairs. How did I become one of those women?” Detailing her story, Kathy discovered she had bought into the subtle lie of the enemy that told her she wouldn’t really be hurt. It wouldn’t really be costly; in fact, it would be pleasurable and good. In buying the lie, she stepped into a fantasy world where the sin continued to fester and keep her in the fog of its ever-growing deception. When her husband finally discovered the truth and her fog lifted she was overwhelmed with the cost of her sin. Over the next several months she continued to count new ways her sin had cost both herself and everyone she cared about. Had she understood the cost at the beginning, she would have never agreed to the enemy’s offer.

Pursuit of self

The apostle Paul is clear that when we turn away from God we begin to defile ourselves sexually (cf. Romans 1:24, Ephesians 4:19). I generally do not see this unfold as an act of open rebellion. Each individual I have described being caught up in sexual sin began by pursuing a God-instilled longing to be fully naked and unashamed with someone. Each pursued a longing to be profoundly accepted and deeply intimate. They pursued a longing to reflect God in the power of oneness that blows our mind with intense pleasure, connection and surrender.

Their sin occurred when they pursued this longing through their own pathway. In Galatians 5:19, Paul tells us “it is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness...” (The Message). When we demand God’s ideal through our own methods we quickly fall into sin.

Each individual I describe in this paper longs to reflect God. They long to be fully accepted, to have someone deeply desire them. They long to know and be known. They hunger to be healed of the wounds of their past. They desire to experience the profound pleasure of being surrendered to and surrendering to. Something went terribly wrong, however, when they demanded their own way. They sought a form of godliness, but denied the full power of it (2 Tim 3:5) to pursue what was right in their own mind.

In his pursuit of fantasy and pornography, James sought to have the knowledge of God in “knowing” women other than his Eve. He sought to know what the sacred places of their bodies looked and felt like. He sought to know what they were like in their moment of surrender without the full investment of himself. He demands the promise of God without the discipleship of the covenant.

In the Fall, God’s ideal was destroyed in the demand for self. In the same way, our pride becomes our downfall. We demand what “we deserve” in our sexuality without being willing to walk the road of discipleship.

Disincarnating sexuality

The second way God’s ideal is distorted is when we make sex less than God reflective. Sex is a powerful object lesson on who God is and how he chooses to connect with his bride. It is such an important object lesson that

God preserved an entire book in scripture that celebrates a husband and wife's sexual intimacy and the intimacy God pursues with his bride.

One of the ways sex reflects God is in that it is incarnate. Were I to teach that Christ was fully man, but lacked true divinity you would proclaim heresy. In similar fashion, if we teach sex that denies the spirit of the act, we have not only diminished the act itself, we have made it less than incarnate. It no longer reflects Christ. Teaching that Christ was fully God, but lacked true humanity is equally heretical but historically the church has not hesitated to proclaim the spirit of the act while denying the power of the physical.

On one end, we have the world disincarnating the sex act in proclaiming we are nothing but animals having sex. Sex is depersonalized and made inconsequential in disincarnating the act. On the other end, the church thought that sex must be undertaken to have children but "cannot be performed without sin" (Luther & Tappert, 1967, p. 91) and should not be enjoyed (Nelson, 1978). While the world strips the act of it's heart, the church strips the act of the sensuality of it's body and disincarnates the act. Both mar the ideal God designed.

Warping of the flesh

The third way God's ideal is distorted is in the warping of our flesh. Sexologists do not understand desire. We cannot adequately explain direction or intensity of sexual desire. Why some have a consuming sexual desire and others seem to be absent of any sexual hunger has consumed millions of dollars of research without an adequate answer. Why some connect sexual desire to objects, children, death, pain, specific gender, or specific attributes is speculated on but only partially explained in some circumstances.

Eric struggled for years to deny his same sex attraction. He thought marrying, having children and living the good Christian life would eventually allow him to choose. Instead, time revealed an ever growing and persistent homosexual orientation for his sexual desire. Despite what is often reported in the media, we cannot discover a physical basis for Eric's sexual attraction to men; yet, the power of his attraction seems very much out of his control. Whether from some yet undiscovered genetic flaw, some deep and unknown wounding, an early unconscious series of decisions, or any other host of unconfirmed explanations, Eric weeps that no amount of prayer, confession, repentance, or self-denial changes his desire. Something seems permanently warped in his flesh.

Much like those with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, autism, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, color blindness or any of the hundreds of other failings of our flesh, sometimes our sexual selves reveal the cost of sin in our flesh.

Yet, Jehovah Rapha can heal all these diseases can't he? (Psalm 103:3) And did he not promise we would see healing in his name? If these individuals truly desire healing, why do we not see more evidence of powerful, miraculous sexual transformation?

Barriers to transformation

I propose there are several crucial barriers to sexual transformation that bear exploring.

Stratifying sin

Krissy is a 26-year-old single girl with a particular fear and hatred for the church. She shares her life with me as a pastor with great hesitation. At age 21, on a date with her boyfriend, her hormones and passion high, she went "too far." Following the instinct inscribed in us by God, she failed to protect the boundaries God called for and 10 weeks later sat before her pastor to confess her pregnancy out of wedlock. As her pastor comforted her and spoke with understanding she relaxed and cautiously followed his counsel to share her testimony with the church on Sunday evening. Trusting in the nurturing acceptance she felt, she stood and confessed her sin before the congregation praying they would be as gentle as the pastor. Instead, she sat in stunned silence as the pastor got up and preached a hellfire and brimstone sermon on the infectious nature of sexual sin and publicly cast her out of the church following his selected teaching of the scripture. After five years she still shakes remembering the trauma she experienced that night as her family and support system turned on her and drowned her with unforgiving shame.

As is all too common, the church saw her sin of fornication as more heinous than the pastor's many sins including pride, deceit, slander, unforgiveness, and lack of love.

We, as a church, must do better!

Jennifer is a 16 year old daughter of one of the elders of the church. Raised in the church she has always been an active leader with her peers. She openly confesses her faith in Jesus Christ at school and is admired by her peers and their parents. After revealing she recently had an abortion, I asked why a girl with her faith in God would make such a decision. Her answer disturbed me about as much as her confession as she stated "I realized God would forgive me for killing my baby long before my church would forgive me for getting pregnant." The unfortunate truth is, I knew her church and believed her assessment was accurate.

We, as a church, must do better!

Stacie and Kelli, two attractive young women, sat in my office struggling with their life. "We were raised as Christians and believe in God and Jesus Christ. It's just that we now find ourselves three years into our monogamous,

but lesbian, relationship. We need to decide what we really believe. We don't want to continue to live this way if it's wrong, but we hear so many conflicting messages. The problem is there isn't a church in the area that will allow a lesbian couple to come in and earnestly wrestle with their faith." How desperately tragic when a seeker of the Truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ can explore the conflict between their faith and behavior if they are a glutton, drunkard or gossip, but not if they are a lesbian and being convicted by God's spirit.

We, as a church, must do better!

I fear for us as a Church when we stand before God and he declares he does not know us for while we preached and gave money in his name, we turned him away when he approached us with the leprous marks of sexual sin. "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'" (Matthew 25:45).

The apostle Paul points out that sexual sin is distinct from other sins in its cost (I Corinthians 6: 18-20), but not in its level of infection to the Body of Christ or in God's ability to wash the scarlet white. When the Church behaves as if sexual sin is an incurable spiritual cancer and the person carrying it is a pariah we steal the hope of transformation. In the absence of faith, transformation is not sought, and our self-deception that sexual sin cannot be transformed becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy we live by and teach with daily action.

Not respecting the complexity of humanity

Part of the struggle Stacie and Kelli faced was in buying into a lie the world tells and the church repeats. Stacie and Kelli were in a lesbian relationship and accepted this definition of themselves because that is what they were taught. They had been told they were lesbians because they found each other attractive. They had been told they needed to define their identity by their current sexual orientation. They were clearly destined to be lesbians and until they accepted the gay identity they would not be happy. The Church repeats that lie by locking them into this narrow definition of self. Sometimes the Church even goes so far as to declare that as homosexuals, they have been turned over to depraved mind (Romans 1:28) and thus beyond transformation.

In reality, a large percentage of adolescents will experience same sex attraction as part of their sexual development. Over 10% will question their sexual orientation yet only 2% settle into a gay identity. This is after walking a process of identity synthesis that takes an average of about 5 years but may take 15 years or longer (Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). When we "freak out" at an adolescent's comment that they might be "gay", force them into therapy to be "fixed", and either hide in our shame or announce to the whole prayer chain to intercede for our child's soul, we do deep damage. We are forcing them into an identity box of our own making. A box they may not fit or belong in. However, with the world and Church agreeing this box is where they belong, they eventually own the identity given them.

God made us complex in His image. We live in broken, sin corrupted minds assaulted by the enemy's lies. What if we recognized how confusing this is for adolescents and adults alike, trusted in God to lead, guide and convict, and simply took on the role given us – to love? What if we came alongside those questioning who they are and allowed them the freedom to wrestle with God? God's design will work. When the Church extends a powerful undeniable love, the Spirit of God within us serves as a mighty convicting force. The internal conflict they experience as they see love and feel conviction is a cognitive dissonance that opens the door for them to choose change. As they begin to stumble out of the sin induced fog of lies, they turn to the accepting, forgiving smile of love and allow us to lead them home.

Too often we confuse the effect of sin with the choice of sin. Like the disciples who believed the man was blind because of his or his parents' sin (cf. John 9), we blame individuals for the effect of living in a sin filled world and then defend our distorted righteousness. One unfortunate consequence is that in blaming them, we allow ourselves to be less compassionate and active in helping them pursue healing.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying we need to accept what God has told us not to accept. When God has spoken on a subject, our opinion no longer matters. God has said sex outside the boundaries of covenantal heterosexual marriage is sin. We do not have the authority to override this decree. We do not have the power to override his command to love, forgive and be agents of reconciliation either.

When we demand that those caught in sexual sin simply comply with our definition of right, they cower internally until their sense of being trapped leads them to attack and reject all we offer and we have pushed them away from transformation.

Which leads to the third barrier as we define sin more by what makes us uncomfortable than by what God declares.

Defining sin by what makes me uncomfortable

Steve was an attractive seminarian with a clear heart for transforming his world for God. He had volunteered to pick me up from the airport and transport me to the seminary where I was teaching for the week. "To

be honest," he confessed, "I wanted to spend some private time with you for some help." Steve went on to share the intense weight he felt in carrying his sexual sin and was considering dropping out of ministry training since he could not serve with integrity.

Steve had heard from mentors in his life that simply taking a second glance at an attractive female was lust and equal to adultery in the mind of God. "I find most women very attractive," Steve said. "There is almost always something about them I find beautiful whether it be their eyes, the flow of their hair, the joy of their smile, the grace of their movements, or the curves of their bodies. If I can't stop looking at them, how can I ever preach in my church?" He was ready to give up on his calling since he couldn't find victory over his lust.

In exploring with Steve, I discovered he was a passionate artist at heart. He loved to get lost in the beauty of music and would sit silently watching a sunset basking in its vibrancy. "Do you want to own or consume the landscapes you pause to admire?" I queried. "Of course not," he replied. "That wouldn't be right. That's not the point." In exploring, he rarely considered the women he admired as potential spouses until spending time getting to know their hearts. He almost never went beyond appreciating their beauty. He didn't want to touch, kiss, taste, know, possess, or consume them. He just took great delight in God's creation. "But because she isn't my wife," he said, "it is sin to lust after her."

Common quotes from St. Augustine typify a destructive teaching in sexuality prevalent in the church. Augustine's autobiography reveals a man caught in the conflict of who he desired to be in his spirit and the pull of his flesh into sexual sin. While his early prayer was "give me chastity..., just not yet" (*Confessions* 8.7.17), later in life, after confining himself to a monastery, he wrote that "for many, total abstinence is easier than perfect moderation" (*The Excellence of Marriage*, 15). It seems even the modern church has taken this teaching to heart. The result has been that the Church has developed a sexual theology that focuses more on repression than self-discipline. We seem to have forgotten Augustine's teaching that "Neither [eating or sexual union] is devoid of pleasure for the senses, and when this is regulated and put to its natural use under the restraint of moderation it cannot be lust" (*The Excellence of Marriage*, 18).

When God wanted to teach his people to honor the sacred, he did so by establishing boundaries. The Ark of the Covenant was so sacred that it sat in the Holy of Holies. If you were deemed a friend to the people, you could enter the city gate but only Jews could enter the temple court. Only Jewish males could enter the court of the Israelites. Only Priests could enter the temple itself and only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. And, before passing any boundary cleansing ceremonies must be undertaken. The Ark was surrounded in rules to protect God's people from profaning its sacredness and bringing about their destruction.

Similarly, God has established boundaries around sexuality to keep it sacred and protect us from destruction (Hebrews 13:4). Outside God's boundaries, sex is always destructive. Within God's boundaries it is a beautiful place to discover more about his nature.

The problem comes when we define boundaries scripture doesn't. Those who, as Augustine stated, find repression is easier than discipline, can be quick to assume all men are like themselves and prescribe boundaries God doesn't. Telling a young seminarian that taking delight in the beauty of the apex of God's creation is sin reflects more a spirit of repression in the teacher than of sin in the seminarian. The resulting damage is a young pastor struggling under the weight of shame for sins that aren't his. Which is the greater sin?

It is obvious in Christ's teaching that dwelling on fantasies of sexual acts with someone other than our spouse is clearly sin. Seeking to *yada*, to have intimate knowledge of someone other than my spouse is outside the sacred boundary God established and will always result in death and destruction. Defining boundaries God does not, however, becomes a barrier to sexual transformation. Seekers and observers watch as boundaries change with culture and individual growth. If one generation teaches oral sex as always wrong and the next teaches Song of Solomon references it the conclusion of the world is that none of the boundaries are fixed. Instead, sexual boundaries are viewed as subject to individual and cultural preferences. If this is the case, why should I be transformed if I can instead transform the teaching?

Thus, we have trouble at both ends of the spectrum. At one end, Steve drops out of ministry, or is at least rendered more ineffective due to his shame induced by a mentors repression. At the other end, Staci and Kelli meet with a pastor who teaches that the real principle of scripture is that God loves everyone and just as we don't believe sex during menstruation is wrong, we don't believe homosexuality is wrong. Both have defined sin by their own definition of righteousness not by God's definition of righteousness.

Defining sexual transformation by our standard of righteousness

Similarly, the Church often follows its own standard of righteousness in our demand that sexual transformation fit our definition of what is proper and right. In many ways, this is the most puzzling to me as we not only seek to define how God can act but once again make sexual sin more heinous than any other sin.

If Kelli were to develop breast cancer we would come alongside her. We would pray for healing. We might assure her the cancer was likely a result of genetic issues since it runs in her family. If God healed, we would rejoice, but most would expect her healing would come from surgery and medication. After the cancer is gone, she would make regular trips to the doctor to make sure it didn't reoccur. We would rejoice with her, but we would not expect full healing to include God replacing her surgically removed breast.

With sexual brokenness, however, we teach that healing must mean full restoration. Healing is only complete if the individual only desires sex as God intended it. There is no room for discipleship or self-discipline to be a part of the equation. Healing from the Gay lifestyle must mean you are no longer attracted to members of the same sex. Transformation is only complete if you are restored to full heterosexual desire. Conversely, the sex addict is only transformed if he is no longer attracted to any female form other than his wife.

I am Wesleyan, in part, because I am committed to the doctrine of holiness. We believe that God's grace is capable of sanctifying the believer. Similarly, we do right in teaching that God can free the believer of sexual sin. I would argue that part of why we don't see the transformation we expect, is because we are confusing the sin with the effect of sin.

Tony, the sex addict whose story I opened with, has reached a point in his life where he no longer desires sin. He has remained sexually chaste for several years and is now dating. He knows sin is just a decision away. "Sin is just around that corner," he told me. "I have a large brick wall between me and sin and have no interest in going there, but I know the wall would crash down quickly and I would be lost in the sin if I chose to go there." He closely monitors the catalogues that come into his house. He has blocks on his computer and cable box. He meets regularly with his accountability team. He *is* transformed. Like an alcoholic who cannot be a missionary in a bar, there are many places he knows he is susceptible to sin, but God has healed him. He is transformed.

Demanding what "I deserve"

While each of the above can be personal or corporate, the final barrier to sexual transformation tends to be more personal. In over 20 years of counseling people caught in sin, I have learned to hate the phrase "I deserve". Each time I hear "I deserve" it is eventually followed by sin. "I deserve a Biblical wife" essentially means "I know who God is calling my wife to be for me irrespective of who I am for her. Since she is not being obedient to my definition of God's will for her life, I am justified in pursuing sin to meet my 'need'." "I deserve a husband who will be the spiritual leader of the home" leads to fantasizing about the worship pastor. "Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death" (James 1:15, NASB).

While many others could wax more eloquent on this point, it is obvious in scripture that "the appetites of our nature swell to insidiously corrupt and leave us deathly frail" (Jeremiah 17:9, personal paraphrase). Anytime we "demand our own way all the time" we reap "repetitive, loveless, cheap sex" (Galatians 5:19, The Message), whether in or out of marriage. Demanding our own sense of right always puts my desire in God's place in my life and leads to sin. Sin leads to death – often, the death of God's best in our sexual lives.

How God transforms sexual sin

In Wesleyan theology we discuss whether God transforms us instantly or progressively. Does he bring about sanctification when we ask, when we diligently seek, or through a lifetime of discipleship? Far wiser men than myself have sought to answer this question and while I have an opinion, it often does not fit with what I experience in my office.

Maybe God is bigger than our theological categories. Maybe *he* chooses how he is going to transform each person by a wisdom and knowledge that goes beyond my understanding of how God should work.

Tony's transformation appeared to happen overnight. In a moment of surrender and brokenness, God lifted the weight of his sin. Though he still bears the scars of his sin, he is free from its weight and the pull it once had. His desire to experience sex outside the boundaries of marriage is part of his past, not his present or future.

James confesses to a divine transformation that has come through fasting and prayer. While still tempted to fantasize, browse porn or masturbate, he testifies that God has done a divine work in him and delivers him from the temptation each time he finds himself drawn toward it. He is clear that it is God who delivers him each time he is tempted.

Robert is also transformed, but it has been a long journey. Today he is clear that he finds the thought of sexual union with a woman repulsive. His temptation is still to see men in a sexual way. Robert's life shows external evidence of his internal transformation every day. He lives a celibate life with many close, boundaried males and understanding females. He devotes his passion and energy to coming alongside others who are mired in the shame of their sin and walks beside them while they wrestle for the freedom he testifies is possible. He would love to have his homosexual orientation healed, but knows the temptation is not a sin. He believes the cross of discipleship he bears is a light burden when compared to the just weight of sin (cf. Matthew 11:30, Romans 6:23).

While Tony, James and Robert experienced slightly different sexual transformation, there are important consistencies worth noting. First, transformation occurred after they gave up trying to accomplish healing and transformation in their own way and submitted themselves fully to God. “Everything connected with getting [their] own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities [was] killed off for good—crucified” (Galatians 5:24, *The Message*). Each needed to grow to understand that their will would lead them to sin and thus, they crucified it. Now, being absent of their own will, each decision became an act of the only will present in their lives – God’s will.

Second, they embedded themselves in a community of believers to whom they confessed their sin and became accountable. I have yet to see anyone experience ongoing victory and transformation while acting as a lone warrior. Victory only seems assured as we bond together as a mighty army of Christ against the strongholds of the enemy.

Finally, they remained humble. I have watched pride precede many downfalls as individuals forgot it was God’s grace that sanctified them and they began to believe they had learned the key to keep themselves whole. Sin is older, wiser, craftier, more seductive and filled with more deceit than any human can grasp. Were we able to defeat it, we would not have needed the cross. Because we have walked without sexual sin for several seasons does not make us more powerful than sin. Those who continue to live a life where they see the best they can do as unclean have no other option than to continually rely on God’s grace to keep them whole.

Conclusion

In defining a theology of sexuality that respects God’s original design, the nature of the fall, and the sanctifying grace of God, we must take care as a church that we seek to reflect God in his fullness. The enemy is subtle in deceiving us into believing our “right-ness” is God’s. In doing so, however, we fall to the extremes. Sin and transformation are so rigidly defined that only those who are like us are capable of sanctification and we begin to teach a cynical pessimism (Yarhouse, in press). On the flip side of the same coin, we hold to an arrogant optimism that states all can be restored to a pre-fall state and pile guilt on anyone who does not experience the transformation they promise.

As a body of Christ, we can do better in assisting seekers in finding sexual transformation based in biblical hope.

Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (I Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV)

I am daily rewarded as I see Jehovah Rapha restore and transform lives marred by sexual sin. As a fellow sex therapist said, “Sexual sins aren’t less forgivable than other sins. In God’s eyes such brokenness is merely an opportunity for building a greater monument and testimony to Christ’s redemptive power” (Rosenau & Wilson, 2006, p. 79). It is my desire that every pastor and church be able to observe the same grace of God in action.

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