

Sexuality and the Mess We're In

by Mark Ongley

Can it get any worse? Local congregations and entire denominations are fracturing over the issue of homosexuality. Anger abounds. A seismic shift in popular opinion has recently shaken the cultural landscape as momentum continues to swing toward state sanctioned gay marriage. Stinging testimonies of gays and lesbians wounded by the Church spur some to cry out, "Injustice!" And those who hold to the traditional view of homosexuality are increasingly seen as hand-wringing relics from a Puritanical past, clinging to a misinformed view of sexuality.

Yes, I believe it can get worse—but it can also eventually get better. That is my vision. And finding our way out of the mess we're in, I believe, becomes clearer when we retrace our steps on the path we've tread. Allow me to illustrate with a parable.

Tough Times for the Tifflebaums

Once upon a time there lived a family in great distress called the Tifflebaums. Not the distress that follows a crisis, but the type that accompanies the ongoing agitation of having an alcoholic parent. Lex Tifflebaum had made countless resolutions and sundry half-hearted attempts, but continued to fall into mindless stupors which complicated life for all in the Tifflebaum house.

For the onlooker, it might appear that no one paid for Lex's lapses quite like his wife Tiffany. When Lex was smashed he often became abusive, but Tiffany made sure his outrage and antics were confined to the bedroom—not that it kept it from the kids, really. All three knew well the weekly scenario. It had played out more times than they could even begin to count. Returning home well after supper, Dad's shouting would

begin at the door. Mom would walk him to the bedroom, shushing him all the way. The door would close softly, but the shouting would soon begin full force. The kids had learned to comfort each other, leaning mostly into Biff, the oldest brother. He had taken upon himself the role of parent, finding the snacks, making sure homework got done, turning up the TV to drown out the racket, and making sure everyone stayed in line until the bickering subsided and Mom was able to return. Rarely did they talk about Dad Tifflebaum or his issue with the bottle. There was an unofficial “no talk rule”. Actually there was a “no feel rule” as well—they could not express themselves in any manner. On the rare occasion when the kids spoke up, Tiff was quick to relate the latest promise from their dad that this would not happen again.

Money was tight for the Tifflebaums. Frequently Lex would miss work or arrive late, but Tiffany did her best to cover for him, calling in to report he was “sick” or out for a doctor visit. Nonetheless, she could not keep him from losing job after job, with the household income usually sliding downhill. As the kids grew older, Tiff took on work outside the home, handing chores over to the eldest. Actually, Biff rose to the occasion, taking charge of his younger siblings and even consoling his mom from time to time. Though barely 12, he was the little man of the house.

As time went on, and Lex’s lapses continued to take them lower, the younger kids also found their way of dealing with life in the Tifflebaum abode. The youngest was Marsha, who felt lost in the shuffle. She began to retreat into video games, TV dramas and internet chats. Friends were few and she rarely saw them face to face. And certainly she would never have anyone over to the house.

Teddy, the middle child, feeling quite left out, sought for attention by a different route. Though in the end it would bring much pain, he knew his mom would rescue him. Sometimes his behavior at school forced her to leave work early to meet him in the principal's office. Whether it was fights with the kids or spats with the teachers, a regular cycle began to unfold month by month. Teddy's grades began to tank as year by year he barely squeaked by. In seventh grade, to Tiffany's horror, a plastic baggie of marijuana was found in his backpack. While she tried to put the best face on the discovery by making him promise to never use any drugs ever again, the rest of the family would not let it slide. Marsha emerged from her shell long enough to scorch him with scolding. *Didn't he realize Mom had enough trouble without him adding to her stress?* Dad piped in with a stiff warning of painful punishment should this ever happen again.

But no one was more belligerent than Biff. He was irate. Had Teddy only heeded his warnings and followed his example, this would never have happened. Punishment was most certainly called for, and if Mom and Dad did not oblige, he would be happy to step in. If the baggie had been discovered at the school, what shame he would have brought on the family! They had plenty of problems without him stirring up such trouble.

While in other families such a scene would have been sufficient to correct the straying one, this was not the case with Teddy Tifflebaum. His grades sank lower and he began running with the wrong crowd. When Teddy's best buddy was arrested for vandalism, brother Biff sounded the alarm. Something needed to be done! It was just a matter of time before Teddy would find himself with a record. While Tiffany assured the

family that Teddy had promised to try harder, Dad sided with Biff. Boot camp for bad boys might be an option. Or maybe a counselor could straighten him out. The latter option was more convenient and so soon became the agreed upon course of action.

The counselor was quick to see what is likely already plain to you the reader. The real problem in the family was Lex, not Teddy. The unreformed alcoholic dad, whose behavior had been enabled by the rescuing mom, had set in motion dynamics typical for this kind of dysfunctional family. With no one providing parental care, Biff was forced to grow up early and to take on that role. And as is typical for the youngest child, Marsha was lost in the morass and found dysfunctional ways of escaping the pain. Then arises a “scapegoat”, as is usually the case. Finding little nurturing coming his way, Teddy decided painful attention was better than none at all, and so began to get in trouble. At this point, Biff assumed the role of hero, seeing the misbehavior in black and white terms. He was quick to channel the family anger toward the wayward sibling, calling for swift action to save the day. And yet all this time the “elephant in the room,” that is, the alcoholic dad, was spared the consequences of his errant behavior.

Unpacking the Parable

Organizations, corporations and, yes, even denominations, can adopt similar patterns of relating. Robert Kuyper once identified this dynamic within his own denomination, stating that the “scapegoat” for decades has been homosexuality. Like Biff, the eldest child, Evangelicals have taken upon the role of hero and enforcer. Seeing the issue in black and white terms, they have largely blamed the Scapegoat for the problems in the denominational family and culture at large. While certainly meaning well, they have unwittingly wounded scores of believers who either struggle with same-

sex attraction or else love someone who does. Those from the Social Justice arm of the Church have worn the mantle of the rescuing mother. Having long believed that homosexuals have been treated unjustly, they have rushed to their defense with fervor. Casting the issue as a civil rights matter, they have advocated vigorously for the ordination and marriage of homosexuals within the Church.¹

But what is the “elephant in the room”? What is the alcoholic dad in this scenario? It is the runaway Sexual Revolution that the Church in general has never known how to handle. While self-avowed and practicing homosexuals have received the brunt of prophetic pronouncements and pulpit pounding, little has been done to address the other more prominent problems which have resulted from the Sexual Revolution: sexual abuse, sexual addiction and sexual aversion. In fact, the Church generally has found it very difficult to talk about sexuality in any terms other than, “Just say ‘No!’” And in this way we have been very *unbiblical*. While we have splashed barrels of ink on pages about the six passages of scripture addressing the practice of homosexuality, precious little has been done to discuss the amazing wealth and breadth of wisdom the Bible shares concerning God’s creation of us as sexual beings.

Our inability to discuss sexuality is a *cultural* inhibition, not a biblical one. The scriptures are very forthright in describing God’s design for our sexuality and in addressing the brokenness which results when his design is ignored. The deviant dalliances of David, Solomon, Samson and others are not glossed over. And even the issue of withholding sexual intimacy from a spouse is candidly addressed by Paul—written in a letter to be read, of all places, in corporate worship!

¹ Kuyper 1999, 190f.

But in western culture, Christians have been tight-lipped on all things sexual for many generations. When the Sexual Revolution of the 1960's and 70's hit, the Church was clearly caught flatfooted. And so as secular culture has become incredibly flippant and indiscrete in speaking of sexuality, the Church, by and large, still cannot bring the discussion to the table without being cutesy or condemnatory. To their credit, seminaries are now calling for classes on sexuality to be taught. Recently I have been privileged to teach one such class as an adjunct professor at Ashland Theological Seminary. But we Protestants are about 40 years late in responding to this revolution which has ripped our culture apart.

Of course there are important questions to address regarding the scapegoat of homosexuality. Realistically, the Church at large is years away from reaching a consensus on this controversial subject. But can we not, as the Body of Christ, learn to hold this one issue in tension as we join our efforts to rein in the rampaging Elephant and minister to those wounded and limping in its wake?

Is it not time to corral the elephant? Is it not time for the Church to be equipped to address issues of sexuality intelligently and to minister to the sexually broken effectively? That is my vision. And that is what drives Restored Image and this blog.