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Consistent Sexual Sacrifice

It's simple. It's radical. And it's essential to supporting church members with gay longings.

Kevin Miller | posted October 5, 2015



Last summer, at a wedding reception, a woman asked me, "So, what is it you do?"

I paused. Usually, if I say "I'm a pastor," the person responds, while stepping backward, "Oh, uh, I'm gonna get another one of these hors d'oeuvres—they're so good!"

But I told her. That didn't deter her; she said, "Which group?"

"Anglican."

"Oh, you're that group that hates gays." (She'd read headlines that some Anglican churches left a denomination after a man was made bishop who'd left his wife and was living with a male partner. But our concern would have been there even if the new partner had been a woman.)

So I said, "No, in our church, we have many people who feel same-sex attraction."

"Oh," she said, looking puzzled. "What do you do with them?"

"We walk alongside them," I said. They've come to us and said, 'Help me walk the way of Jesus.' And they know that for many of them their longings will remain, and that means a life of celibacy."

"But what you're asking of them—isn't that unfair?"

I said, "It is hard. I don't minimize that. But the way of Jesus is hard for everyone. We tell our heterosexual singles, 'You've got to stop sleeping with your girlfriend or your boyfriend.' We tell a married man, 'I don't care how alive you feel around that new person at work; you've got to stay faithful to your wife.' We tell our folks caught up in pornography, 'Come to our support group, where you'll admit to other people how much power

this has over you.' "

She thought about that for a moment, and her expression softened slightly, from contempt to consternation. I'd moved up one click on her dial, from a loathsome bigot, targeting gay people out of irrational animus, to a perplexing oddity, like an Amish man with beard and buggy on the streets of Manhattan. The difference was this: consistent sexual sacrifice. She now faced a community whose life she cannot fathom but whose internal coherence she can acknowledge and even, in her most tolerant moments, marvel at.

As a pastor, I do not try to foster consistent sexual sacrifice in the church in order to convince people outside. We can't convince people who don't want to be convinced. As P. T. Forsythe put it, "No reason of man can justify God in a world like this. He must justify himself, and he did so in the cross of his Son."

Why Consistency?

Consistent sexual sacrifice is not primarily for the culture, but for the church—not to convince others, but to keep them from convincing us. It is not to save them, but to save ourselves.

A twenty-something guy from my church came to see me; let's call him Reggie. Reggie had known of, and struggled with, his gay longings since boyhood. Now, he told me, "I've decided to start dating"—guys. He knew where our church stood, so he explained his choice: "Jesus spoke clearly on divorce, and yet churches give a pass to people to get a divorce, but he didn't say a word about homosexuality, and churches get all up-tight about that." The Inconsistency Defense.

Reggie's Inconsistency Defense reminds me that as a pastor, I have only two options to deal with the tension of asking someone feeling gay longings to do something as difficult as pursue celibacy:

1. Give him and everyone else a pass for cross-less Christianity, what Bonhoeffer called "grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."
2. Call everyone to bear the cross in the area of his or her sexuality.

Our church has chosen this second path. This is demanding, and it starts with me and with my heterosexual parishioners. Most of the work is here.

We have all in our society taken up the worship of the two-faced god, "My Choice / My Sex." We all believe, at a primal level, I choose. I make the call. No one can tell me what to do. Especially with my body. To be fulfilled, I must express what I feel. The worst thing that can happen to you, in this culture, is, as the movie title puts it, to be a "40-Year-Old Virgin."

Like Joshua, I hope to purify a people who have never known a day without their pagan idols. I must force a clear choice. As Joshua told his fellow citizens: "You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy and jealous God" until you "destroy the idols among you and turn your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel" ([Josh.](#)

[24:19,23](#)). Here's how our church is trying to do that, often with struggles and still with much to learn.

Not Looking the Other Way

Pastor Carey Nieuwhof blogged recently, "Be honest—pretty much every unmarried person in your church is having sex (yes, even the Christians)." I would not say "pretty much every," but I would say, "far too many," so his basic point stands. And since our church sits in a town with a Christian college, I also face that curious evangelical variant: "everything but"—"I can do everything but full intercourse." As if immorality gets better through casuistry.

I am not (thank God) a private investigator, but as situations come to light, I must show the courage and compassion of consistency. This means I have had to ask a dear friend to step down from a leadership position—a request so profoundly painful it took us both years to recover. In another case that tore our social fabric as a church, our pastors asked someone for a while to not receive Communion, our greatest treasure as Christian worshipers. (By the way, in each situation, the person stayed in the church.)

In addition, in premarital counseling, I ask specifically about the extent of their sexual interaction so far. If that sounds awkward, it is—but it's required. Depending on the answer, I may ask the couple to refrain from these sexual expressions, or even delay their wedding, for up to six months, and to abstain from relations during that time. How else will they learn to relate to one another without sex, and to handle the stretches within marriage, sometimes long ones, when sex is not possible?

No pastor enjoys this kind of work. But A.W. Tozer won't let me off the hook: "Where does Christianity destroy itself in a given generation? It destroys itself by not living in the light, by professing a truth it does not obey."

Not Just a Personal Decision

Many Christians view marriage as freedom from sexual sacrifice, an outlet for unfettered sexual expression.

But the person entering Christian marriage vows an all-but-one-person celibacy. That in itself is profoundly difficult, as any married person well knows. Then add in that the one person you can have sex with is the one person who can hurt you most. Add in sickness, stress, and the wearing down of a relationship over time, and it's not surprising that some Christians try to find a way out of their vows, by what the sociologists call "serial monogamy." They think, *I will have sex with only one person at a time, but it's time for me to find that new person—and I think I've already found her (or him).*

And even committed, godly Christians often feel that they, as individuals, can unilaterally determine whether there are biblical grounds for divorce and/or remarriage. What's church got to do with it?

As pastors, we feel lots of pressure to collude with this. If I tell a member, "No, I'm sorry, I cannot in good conscience remarry you," the person does not understand. He or she gets mad, feels hurt and rejected, and leaves—then goes down the street and gets married anyway. What have I gained?

The weight of such decisions is too great for any one pastor to bear, so the only solution is to let these decisions be made by a community of wise authority. In my polity, the bishop must authorize any wedding where one person has been married before, and only after careful consultation with the local pastor and regional dean. In other polities, a council of elders would fill a similar role. This is not bureaucracy but blessing: it allows me to say yes or no with great confidence and clarity.

Sometimes people who are told no still leave, but they find it less easy to blame it on something idiosyncratic in me. And when I am able to say yes, that person can enter the new marriage with head held high, with their church's full blessing.

Recently I met with a man to tell him he had our pastoral permission and blessing to remarry. His eyes filled with tears. You could almost see the sense of shame and guilt being washed away by the salty water dribbling down his cheeks. He apologized for crying; I felt close to crying myself.

On the other hand, telling people no taxes me. One man called to reserve the church for his wedding, to a woman who has been divorced twice. When I explained there would need to be a process of pastoral discernment, with our bishop, about the remarriage, he said he felt hurt, disappointed, even outraged, and he left the church. I like him, so this hurt, and I brooded on it for days.

What pulled me out of my funk was mentally picturing another man in our church, who some years ago desperately wanted out of his marriage. Instead of exiting, he took up his cross, and today, he tells me, he and his wife are doing much, much better. His two children benefit daily, though they don't even know that, from a culture of consistent sexual sacrifice.

Asking for Openness to Life

If I haven't already offended everyone, this section should rectify that. Part of the foundational Christian understanding of marriage is that it is open to life, open to children. While not every marriage can or will bear children, an openness to children is not optional but essential. In Genesis, God designed marriage not merely for companionship ("It is not good for man to be alone"), but also for children ("Be fruitful and multiply"). This is God's first command in the Bible.

This forces me as a Christian pastor to think deeply about birth control. Most people assume there are only two Christian approaches: "I can use it" (Protestant) and "I can't use it" (Catholic). But the question is not just means but motive. Like virtually all Protestant denominations, my tradition grants the use of some means of birth control—but never from "motives of selfishness, luxury, or mere convenience." Part of consistent sexual sacrifice is openness to allowing God to assign you the role of life-provider.

What We are for

What matters most is what we are for. A culture of consistent sexual sacrifice means:

We are for sexuality. Sometimes Christians can come across as hostile to sexuality—which as my friend Stephen explains, is "a very strange place to be for people who read the Bible." We agree with non-Christians that our sexuality is a rich and essential part of who we are. We express our sexuality by (1) engaging in marital activity and (2) refraining from non-marital sexual activity. Number 2 is not the absence of sexuality but the dedication of it to God. We follow a Savior who never got married or had sex, yet lived life to the full.

We are for the glorious possibility of finding meaning within restraint. When we choose the harder way, for the sake of following Jesus, we find a joy and inner freedom that are difficult to express but no less real for that. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it, Jesus has made "the way of the cross to be the way of life."

We follow a Savior who never got married or had sex, yet lived life to the full. *We are for grace.* At our church, we value what we call being "unashamed to need Jesus," and after going through painful church splits in the 1990s, we see with acute clarity how bad we are and how much we need him. So we try—admittedly, imperfectly—to follow Paul's counsel to restore gently, hearing confessions and declaring forgiveness, providing listening and prayer and support.

We are for the promise of the gospel. Lives can be transformed. No, we don't "pray the gay away" or, for that matter, "pray the straight away" or expect everyone's journey to be the same. But when Paul wrote "Such were some of you," he was reporting what he had observed, and we can report the same. Some members have moved from a gay self-identity into faithful heterosexual marriages and families. Some members, both gay and straight, female and male, have moved from promiscuity to celibacy. I refuse to let anyone invalidate the beauty and blessing of their lives.

We are for those who feel longings daily. Sometimes this is a straight woman who longs to be married, or a gay man who wants the same. Sometimes it is a husband whose wife is sick or distant. We hope to be the kind of community where they find consistency and compassion that helps set them free.

To create a culture where people find this kind of life and hope, acceptance and transformation, everyone must be invited to walk a countercultural way, the way of Jesus. No condemnation, just consistency.

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