

Dear Pastor:

I was going to tell a bit about myself to introduce this letter but, as I spill my guts enough throughout the article, that would be rather like bringing owls to Athens. I do want to say this one thing about myself, though. I was a pastor in the LCMS for 25 years. I withdrew from the ministry for two reasons.

Firstly, since it was becoming obvious that I was going to have to say something about homosexuality and the manner in which the LCMS deals with the topic, I wanted to do what I could to distance myself from the congregations I had served in order to do as little damage to them as possible. They are great congregations filled with amazingly wonderful people and did not deserve to be impacted by the repercussions of what I need to say.

Secondly, I found the ministry is a bad place to be when one is going through emotional difficulty. It tends to be isolating. Pastors have a hard time making close friends, they live life in a fish bowl yet can truly open up to very few others about any personal struggles of their own they and their families may have. Also, while the pastor spends a great deal of his time delivering the Gospel to others, there really is no one who regularly delivers the Gospel back to the pastor. Yet the pastor, perhaps more than his members, often feels a tremendous need to know the love and forgiveness of Christ. I found such isolation to be very unhealthy when I entered a period of severe depression. I had to help others face their problems but there was really no one I could turn to when I myself needed help. Apparently I am far from being the only one to experience this as statistics are beginning to show a high rate of stress, depression and “burn-out” among pastors of all denominations. Perhaps in this, you, as a pastor, may be able to identify with LGBT kids in your congregations. They too experience isolation and depression and high levels of guilt. Unlike pastors, however, they did not choose to be gay and they can not simply stop. So if you have ever been at that point where you desired to leave the ministry because of loneliness or unfulfilled need to know that God loves you as He loves those you serve, please take that experience and translate it to the 11 or 12 year old kid, or the teen, who finds himself attracted to the “wrong sex” or to the kid who feels he or she was born in the wrong body (I don't deal with the transgender issue here as it is not something I experienced, but hope what I say might help a bit there too) and perhaps you will understand their situation a little better.

One other thing before I begin. If you are looking here for arguments to win the debate on marriage, you will find very few. In fact, I am sure no one will be happy with my stand on things like gay marriage. Those on the affirming side will not be happy that I can not fully endorse gay marriage as blessed by God or as a “right.” But I suspect most of those to whom I am writing will be even more unhappy that I don't condemn it either. I don't think it is morally right. But within the sphere of the Kingdom of the Left I do not object to it in our current culture and I do think gay people should be given all the protections anyone else enjoys, especially in terms of employment and housing. So to those who think I am “compromising with the world” let me say this: If you knew a divorced man who believed remarriage following divorce was a sin and who elected to remain single for the rest of his life because of that, would you condemn him if he said that he understood how other divorced people could be so lonely they just had to get remarried and that he would support them in their decision to remarry if they chose? Or would you admire him for living his convictions in his own personal choices? By the same token, for all the whining that goes on about how persecuted Christians feel for their “stand on marriage,” by choosing lifelong celibacy I have probably paid a far more costly price for the principle of biblical marriage than almost anyone reading this. When and if you pay a similar costly

price then I will be willing to listen to your criticism. Until then, it might be wise for pastors to opine a bit less and listen a bit more .

So I want to talk to you about homosexuality. And for those who might not want to read 30 pages or in case the reader gets lost when I digress on one tangent or another, I have two specific points I want to make, two specific requests for Pastors of the LCMS. So here is the TLDR (too long, did not read) version of this article:

1: Please remember that, as a pastor, your primary audience, whatever you say or write, is not “the culture” but your congregation and the same sex attracted people and their families within in. What ever you say, thinking you are addressing “modern culture” is actually being read and absorbed by the same sex attracted kids and adults to whom you are called, most of whom feel tremendous guilt and shame for being attracted to the “wrong sex.” Any law given, therefore, whether in sermons, blogs or discussions, is law being applied to repentant sinners and may (and will) drive them to despair.

2: Please be generous with the Gospel when discussing homosexuality. Spend some time considering how to illuminate and illustrate God's mercy grace and love. Let it truly predominate in discussions of homosexuality. One line about the forgiveness of sins occasionally thrown in to the discussion is in no way an adequate application of Gospel.

With that in mind, for those willing to continue further, let's talk about homosexuality:

What Does the Church Currently Offer in Ministry to Gay People?

I was about 8 years old when I first realized I was an abomination. Not that I knew what the word meant, or was even aware of it as a word. But it is the only word that describes that moment. I was sitting in the bedroom I shared with my siblings, watching the end of the sunset. That moment just before it gets dark when the sky is kind of a brownish orange. And I knew deep in my heart as I watched the last moments of evening that I was wrong. Not that I had done something wrong. Nor that I had thought something wrong. But that my existence was wrong. My being was wrong. I was wrong.

I don't know if it was something that had been building gradually or if, perhaps, I had overheard some kind of adult conversation that impacted me. I don't know if the realization came naturally because I did not “fit in” with other kids or if it was the sum total of the non-verbalized but obvious attitudes of others, of the culture and the Church.

I did not know exactly what was wrong about me specifically. But I was aware it had something to do with the whole boy and girl thing, that it had something to do with the fact I preferred to play dolls with the girls in the corner of the playground rather than football with the boys. And I knew that it had something to do with the words boys sometimes called each other. Words like “fag” and “queer” and “gay.”

Not that I got called those words very often. I was actually not bullied or teased very much, at least as far as I remember. There were one or two bad years in school, but for the most part other kids treated me pretty well. This is something I have noticed in the whole debate over homosexuality. It is easy to blame the bullies for the damage they do and ignore the greater damage done by those who are silent or

who, out of the best intentions, destroy the soul gently. For myself, and I suspect for many, my faith and trust in a God who could love me was ripped apart not by bullies on the playground nor, even, religious bullies like the Westboro crowd. Such people were so extreme and ridiculous that their opinion had little impact on me. No, my faith was under attack from a much different quarter

As I grew older and became more aware of my differences from other boys, I had my first crush on another boy at age 11 and by 13 had realized that I had absolutely no sexual attraction to girls, I began to listen carefully to what Christian pastors and adults I respected had to say about homosexuals. I searched the Bible and the very few resources available to an adolescent on the topic of homosexuality in the 70s. By the time I was 15, I pretty much decided on celibacy as the only God-pleasing option open to me. With the exception of some pretty mild experimentation during a year and a half early in college (I never “went all the way” nor even kissed anyone) I have kept that commitment. Nor do I regret that decision. But it has come with a very high price, especially in terms of lost faith.

There are those who blame the “culture” for creating homosexuals by glorifying homosexuality. But nearly all the knowledge I had about homosexuality came from the Church, not the culture. The only cultural portrayal of homosexuality I can recall seeing before graduating from high school was Billy Crystal playing a gay/transgender man on Soap. And his portrayal was so pitiful and ridiculous that it created zero desire in me to be such a person. If anything, he only increased my desire NOT to be gay. No, my identity as gay and my opinions about it are direct result of the words and actions of Christians far more than those of the culture in which we live.

Let me be clear. I am not saying that Christians hate gay people or that Christians are a bunch of meanie-pants who just want to make the lives of LGBT teens miserable. Quite the contrary, I think Christians are quite sincere when they say they want to “tell the truth in love.” I think that Christians do care. And certainly I have seen Christians go to greater lengths than any other people I have ever met to feed the hungry and help the sick. Christians are kind and loving people. But it is their very niceness that gives their words and attitudes an authority in the mind of a teen like I was far beyond the impact of the words of playground bullies or politicians. In my mind, as a teen, bullies were just jerks to be endured and ignored. But if Christians who were so kind and loving, conveyed by their words that they despised people like me, then I must be despicable indeed.

I have waited nearly five decades, hungering for hope and Gospel from the Church and, especially from my denomination – the LCMS. For this reason, back in 2009 when Iowa became the first heartland state to have gay marriage and the ELCA officially sanctioned committed same sex relationships, where others saw disaster, I saw hope. Perhaps, in response to these actions, at last the LCMS would be forced to deal more directly with the topic of homosexuality and show how to do it the right way, with a proper application of Law and Gospel. Maybe I would finally hear more than the Law on this topic. Perhaps I would finally hear the church I loved tell me from the God I adored that I was truly forgiven, love and wanted.

A few years ago, at the direction of President Harrison, the LCMS formed the task force on homosexuality, now called the task force on sexuality. Specifically, he wrote that the Synod had been looking at engaging in more intentional ministry to those who struggle with same sex attraction. At Last! My church was going to deal with ministry to those of us in her walls more than simply complaining about society and politics. Finally I would be fed on the Gospel and know I, too, would hear the great good news of Christ given to me and others like me.

What resulted however, was a series of articles in the Lutheran Witness and the Reporter that could, frankly, have been written by almost any high schooler with decent composition skills and access to religious blogs on the internet. I am not sure why they needed people with high level theological degrees to write those articles. There was almost nothing there that I did not know perfectly well and by heart by the time I was a high school Junior. The application of Law and Gospel was rudimentary at best. The arguments presented could be found repeated over and over on hundreds of pastors blogs around the internet. They dealt with almost none of the day to day difficulties or questions a same sex attracted conservative Christian might face. And the best that could be said about the Gospel was that it was not completely absent.

Jumping forward a couple years, Concordia Publishing recently released a book called “Sexual Morality in a Christless world.” Knowing the author and having had a few conversations with him (I rather think that I am the man he calls “Bob”) once again my hopes soared. And I will say that he does have a little bit more Gospel application than the documents from the LCMS task force. Nevertheless, once again, I was left hungering for true Gospel and true hope. I will say that his historical research is much better than most and his treatment of what the Bible has to say about marriage is pretty good. He also does a better job than most of confronting heterosexual sins. But the majority of the book is Law. The Gospel, as presented, is better than most but still falls far far short of being adequate to address this topic. In other words, for a person in the LCMS, striving to be obedient to God's Word, there was very little there. And even when it comes addressing the culture, most his arguments are fairly irrelevant and, while they will seem probably strong to someone who already agrees with him that gay marriage is wrong, they are not the kind of arguments that will change the mind of anyone who supports gay marriage. If a person wanted some interesting research on the sexual attitudes of ancient Israel or classic culture, the first couple of chapters can be recommended. Beyond that, however the book contributes little either to the culture debate over homosexuality or to actual ministry to those in the church who are same sex attracted.

Right now, sadly, these resources, the documents from the task force and the book by Pastor Rueger, are pretty much all that the LCMS has presented, at least officially, in the last 7 years. So I will refer to them several times and, I hope, give better answers than they do.

Innate? Immutable? Irrelevant

Since a great deal of ink and internet pixels have been dedicated to debating whether homosexuality is inborn or changeable, let's deal with that issue. Thankfully the task force avoided this debate but, in his book, Dr. Rueger spent a lot of time on the issue of whether homosexuality is inborn and/or immutable (essentially a good part of 2 chapters). He also spent a little time in an interview on Issues Etc on the subject. I understand why this is since he began his talks at the university by addressing the Supreme Court transcripts from the ruling establishing same sex marriage in Iowa which did use the supposed innateness and immutability of homosexuality as part of the reasoning behind the establishment of same sex marriage. In reality, this is the lesser issue, in my opinion. But, because he did spend a lot of time on it and because, shortly after his interview, Issues Etc also interview the author of a recent review of studies on the subject and because what he said and wrote is very similar to the approach of many pastors, I think it is important to address this.

The problem with pastors spending a lot of time dealing with the issue of the innateness/immutability

of homosexuality is that it simply doesn't address the heart of the issue.

The Studies may not show what you think they show: Firstly, none of the studies on either side actually provide nearly as much certainty and information as people seem to think they do. Those who believe homosexuality is innate will point to certain studies that seem to show homosexuality is not environmentally formed. Those who believe it is not in-born will point to studies that seem to demonstrate that homosexuality is not genetic. Those who believe a homosexual orientation can be changed will point to studies which are essentially personal accounts of those who have changed their orientation or behavior to one extent or another while those who believe sexuality is immutable will bring out case studies of those who tried to change and could not. In the end, most studies simply show how much we do NOT know about homosexuality rather than giving any actual knowledge about how homosexuality is formed or whether or how it may be changed. So arguing the studies is pretty much a waste of time as each side will simply choose to accept those studies and ideas that support their view point and reject the others. It's really just pointless.

Further, pastors often quote studies without being fully aware of what they do show and their limitations. Some studies, for instance, are designed research whether there is a direct genetic determiner for homosexuality. Too many times I have seen pastors equate “genetic” with “innate.” But demonstrating or disproving a genetic link is not the same as asking if a person is born homosexual. Between the genetic blueprint and its execution in the development of the body many things can affect the development of the child, especially in the production and reception of those hormones which determine the development of the genitals and may have some influence on sexual orientation. Even though these hormones may affect the child before birth, they are actually considered “environmental” in nature. So be careful that you are absolutely sure how the study was designed and what the result really do show before quoting the abstract of a study to support your position. A study which indicates little or no genetic link to homosexuality does not, in any way, prove that homosexuality is a result of how one was raised. So also, studies which seem to show a higher than normal incidence of sexual abuse in childhood among same sex attracted individuals or that LGBT people experience a higher rate of depression only show correlation, not causation. It may, indeed, be true that being sexually exploited as a child can have some effect on the development of sexual orientation. But it might as easily be true that a same sex attracted kid is an easier target for sexual predators because such kids tend to be more isolated from peers and family than other children and, therefore, are more vulnerable to adult affection and less likely to tell anyone about the abuse (both of which are factors sexual predators look for in their victims).

Frankly, I would avoid discussions of most studies altogether. But if you are going to talk about a study, make sure you have read more than the abstract and that you fully understand the limitations of the study and what it does and does not show.

Studies do not address the individual: Secondly, and more importantly, even if the studies could be shown to be generally true, what is general can not necessarily be applied to the individual. Even if sexuality were found to be mutable in some or most people, this would not mean that it is mutable in every individual. This can and does cause great distress among young people who want to change their sexuality but find that they can not.

In many ways pastors who insist on the mutability of homosexuality hurt same sex attracted kids in the same way faith healers like Benny Hinn hurt those who are handicapped. I recall a wonderful and

faithful woman who was impacted by polio as a child. As an adult she needed either crutches or a wheelchair to move from one place or another. One day she overheard a man who had been influenced by a Word-of-Faith preacher say “if we have enough faith, we can be healed from anything.” She looked him straight in the eye and said, “just how much faith would that take, sir?” Had she been younger and less confident perhaps that man's words would have been devastating to her. How many have lost faith because they have been led to believe that a handicap or an illness was their own fault, that perhaps, they were not saved or that God did not love them because their faith was not strong enough to speak healing into their lives? How many parents have been led to believe that the illness of their child was their fault for not having enough faith. And how many gay teens have taken their own lives because they believed it was their own fault, their own lack of faith, which made it impossible for them to be attracted to the opposite sex?

I think I was 16 when I happened across an article in some Christian magazine by a counselor who claimed to be able to cure homosexuality. I guess behavior modification therapy was in vogue at the time because he recommended rewarding ones self for heterosexual thoughts while mildly punishing ones self for homosexual ones - the method he recommended was to wear a rubber band on one wrist and snap it whenever a gay thought entered your head. I was thrilled. I could cure myself and no one would ever know I had been gay. The only problem was it did not work. I never did figure out what to do to reward myself for a heterosexual thought because I hardly ever had one. And punishing myself for gay thoughts did not lessen them in the least. I tried escalating the punishment from snapping a rubber band, to biting my tongue or fingers, to sticking myself with pins, to burning and, finally, by my mid 20s, to cutting myself. All I accomplished was to give myself scars. Worse, because my sexuality did not change at all, it caused me to wonder if God could love me and whether I was truly “Christian.”

Behavior Modification is no longer the accepted method. Today, NARTH's method of identifying and healing parental/gender hurts the gay child supposedly experienced early in life is more common. This, too, can cause damage. Parents have been led to believe they are at fault for their child's same sex attraction and led to feel a tremendous amount of guilt, even when they were great parents. LGBT people have been led to believe their parents have done something to damage them and have had their families torn apart through mishandled orientation change counseling.

Now it is not that the methods themselves are harmful when properly used. Behavior modification works for some things – just not sexual orientation. Sometimes there are family issues that need addressed whether or not sexual orientation changes. The damage comes when a general assumption, “sexuality is mutable” is applied to the individual; ie: “sexuality is mutable, therefore you can change your sexuality. Ergo, if your sexuality does not change it must be your fault; your faith is too weak, you are not working hard enough or you don't really want to change enough.” On top of the shame the young person feels for being attracted to the wrong sex, he or she must now bear the guilt of not being faithful enough to God or loving God enough to change in sexuality. This is a horrible thing to do to a kid and has led many to despair and some to suicide. It is this error, rather than the orientation change methods themselves, which damages people.

So, even if it could be proved that sexuality is generally neither innate nor immutable, we still could not apply that general truth individually.

Immutability and innateness are minor points in the debate: Thirdly, the assumed immutability and innateness of homosexuality are only 2 premisses of a 4 point argument in favor of same sex marriage.

And they are, in fact, two of the more minor premisses. The other premisses are: 1) that marriage (or, at least having a life-partner) is essential to happiness and satisfaction in life, 2) That the only legitimate foundation for marriage or a life long union is falling in love.

If, in fact, marriage is essential to happiness AND the only legitimate entrée to marriage is to fall in love, then to tell a person, “you cannot get married because you can not fall in love with the right gender” is, in fact, cruel as it prevents that person from holding any hope of happiness or satisfaction.

These last two premisses are so pervasive and so ingrained in society that they are usually unstated in the argument. Yet, if these two stand, then whether or not we win the issue on the minor premisses (whether homosexuality is generally innate or immutable) is going to be irrelevant. So the time and effort spent on arguing the minor premisses are simply wasted, at best.

I sometimes wonder if, as a celibate man, I don't notice more acutely than straight married people just how deeply ingrained the assumptions about falling in love are in our society today. From the time we are small, fairy tales tell us that the way to live happily ever after is to fall in love. Nearly every book, every song, every movie over the last few decades have included, often as the main story line, the concept of finding love, falling in love or losing love. Even mystery stories and adventure movies have their love interest. Superman must have his Lois Lane and the crime lab of CSI NY must be rife with romantic intrigue.

This centrality of sexual love is only further exacerbated in our highly mobile society by the loss of long-term friendships and the demise of the extended family, both of which are difficult to maintain over long distances, leaving romance and marriage to bear a burden that is far too great. To a large extent our entire culture is built around romantic love.

Further, sexuality plays a large part in friendships as well. You act very different around people of the same sex with whom you are friends than you do around those of the opposite sex. You are probably more circumspect in your friendships with opposite sex people, knowing the danger of sexual temptations. There are certain subjects you probably only discuss with same sex friends. But how does a kid whose attractions are reversed navigate that? Can he be close friends with other guys? What if they find out he's gay and reject him? Will that hurt more than not having friends in the first place? Should he join in when they joke and talk about girls? (which they do a lot). Or would that be lying? How does he navigate close friendships with girls without possibly creating expectations of something more in the relationship that he can not fulfill? As a teen all of those considerations are pretty confusing and sometimes insurmountable. As a consequence, many gay kids finds ways to isolate themselves from any close friendships without appearing to do so. They become masters of hiding in plain sight, of being friendly or outgoing without really attaching to anyone. - perhaps, most of all to parents and pastors (whom they fear will reject them if they find out about their sexuality).

So a kid, like myself, who, at 15, chooses celibacy is automatically isolating himself from being able to identify with 90% or more of the literature he reads, the themes he sees on TV or in the theater, and the songs he hears on the radio. The message of our culture to him is; “this wonderful gift that the vast majority of people have or can hope for, this experience which binds people together, this is not for you. You will never be part of this.”

So we need to spend a whole lot less time debating the innateness and immutability of homosexuality

and a whole lot more trying to figure out how to be friends and to minister to the same sex attracted kids and adults in our own community.

Gay or Christian?

Beginning at age 11, I began to pay more attention to what pastors and Christian adults around me said about homosexuals. By the way, pastors should be aware that most of what gay kids in their congregation hear and learn about Christian attitudes to homosexuality comes not in the sermon or the confirmation class but in the form of “coffee hour theology.” It is what you say in those unguarded moments when you are engaging in conversation with other adults of your congregation that often has the largest impact on the gay youth to whom you minister. Because they are afraid to ask you or their parents directly, they will pay close attention to everything they can pick up from you about how you feel about gay people. And this includes blog posts, by the way. In our tech savvy culture, teens will often turn to your blog before asking you directly about sensitive issues like homosexuality. As I listened, I picked up on two truths. The first thing I noticed about the way Christians addressed homosexuality was that “homosexual” and “Christian” were almost always nearly absolutely separate categories. The second thing I realized was that the Gospel and the love of God were very seldom and very weakly applied to the category of “gay.” Years of being steeped in this separation of categories and lack of the Gospel, especially during my teen years, led to the inescapable conclusion that one could not be attracted to one's own sex and be loved by God.

The categories we use: Given that one of the most common initial responses of young people to the discovery that they are attracted to the wrong sex is “I can't be gay, I'm Christian” and that the same response is echoed by friends and family members of those who “come out”: “You can't be gay, you're Christian,” I would have to say that I was far from the only one who received that message.

In fact, I would have to say that the very real but unofficial doctrine of the LCMS is “you can not be Christian if you are attracted to your own gender.”

Think of the typical Christian sermon (or even blog post) that addresses homosexuality and gay marriage. Generally, homosexuality is not the main focus of the sermon. But it does come in during the “Law application,” often as an example of how the world has turned from God. There may be some verses read from 1 Corinthians 6 or Romans 1. Then, at least in the LCMS, the pastor will probably say something along the lines of “but let us not forget, our sins are just as bad before God.” OK, true, and delivered with the best of intentions. However, notice how the pastor has just created two categories. Homosexuals, them, the world and those who have turned from God is one category. And Christians, us, whose sins are just as bad. That someone might belong to BOTH categories, that some teen in the congregation might be gay, that one of “them” might also be one of “us,” is overlooked. Saying “we are just as bad as them” does not undo the categories of “us” and “them.” From there, at some point, the pastor will move to the Gospel and describe how God has died for us and forgiven our sins. Now, in all fairness to the pastor, in his mind, he has probably conjoined the categories in the preparation of the sermon. Somewhere between the Law and the Gospel “us” was expanded to mean, “all people.” But the kid listening in the pew is not a mind reader. How does he know that the definition of “us” has changed? Homosexuals are “them” and the Church is “us” and he knows he is in the category of “them, the homosexuals.” But does he belong in the category of “us, those whom God loves and forgives”? This is the question on his mind. Can God love me if I am attracted to other guys or do I have to be straight in order to finally be among the “us” whom God

loves?

Or take a look at the documents from the task force on homosexuality on the LCMS website. This task force was specifically given the mandate to “begin working more intentionally in the area of caring for those who are same sex attracted” and it resulted in a series of documents:

- a) 1/3 of which address the political issue of same sex marriage (which may be part of the Christian vocation of citizen but does not fall under the pastoral call to minister to the flock).
- b) only 1/6 of which actually address the issue of same sex attracted people within the LCMS (that is half the amount of space devoted to same sex marriage – and this in spite of the fact that same sex marriage is already addressed in two other categories of “social issues” on the website. (more than twice the amount of space was devoted to arguing against same sex marriage as was actually directed toward ministering to same sex attracted people)
- c) nearly all of which allow the Law to vastly overshadow the Gospel as if same sex attracted or homosexual automatically equate to unrepentant.
- d) not one of which even addresses the day to day needs of gay people in the LCMS (apparently none of the authors considered that if a gay person, in accordance with God's Word, chooses celibacy they might be more than a little lonely)
- e) which directly tells same sex attracted people that they are loved by God a grand total of one time (in the article “It is Broken”). Although, there are a couple of times God's love for all people is mentioned, the primary use of the word “love” is to remind the reader that “love” does not mean failing to preach the Law.

Now I am not saying that these authors intended to convey that same sex attracted people are unloved by God or unwelcome in the Church. Were they to specifically think about it, they would probably say “of course same sex people can be Christians.” It is pretty obvious, however, that, at a deep lever, in the minds of the authors, homosexuals as “them, people outside the Church” far overshadowed the concept of gay people being within the Church and needing ministry. The focus shifted quite dramatically from ministry to evangelism as if dealing with “LGBT” people meant dealing almost exclusively with non-Christians. And, of course, this is from a task force of Church professionals who were specifically tasked with exploring “intentionally caring for same sex attracted people.” The situation in the parish is even worse where the majority of conversations overheard by kids about homosexuality take place during coffee hours as members discuss issues like gay marriage and gay rights. As such, the concept that some Christians are, in fact, attracted to their own sex is all but absent.

Further, even when Christians try to be loving, the separation of categories still remains. Look at the way we talk about faithful same sex attracted people and ministry to them. We call them people who “Struggle with same sex attraction.” Seriously, do we ever talk about heterosexuals “struggling with opposite sex attractions”? If we do we are probably talking about a sex or porn addict. How about “we need to get our hands dirty” when speaking of ministering to gay people. Really? I never hear such a phrase used about divorced people or single parents or couples living together without marriage. Or, “We need to love like Christ loved.” Christ's love was one from holy to the unholy, from the divine to the human, from the sinless to the sinner. No person can, therefore, love like Christ loved. Humans can only love other humans from the position of sinner to sinner. The moment we talk about loving like Christ we have placed ourselves above the other person. And how about when homosexuality is compared to addiction (as in the article “Is there Any Hope For ME?” - LCMS website). An addict is someone who repeats a behavior or the use of a substance even when it does harm to themselves. So

Christians compare a kid who is tempted by homosexual desires to a person who uncontrollably acts in ways destructive to himself? Moreover, a person may have a propensity to addiction to alcohol. But if he never takes a drink, he is not an addict. And even an alcoholic who has overcome addiction, will be able to earn a place of respect and responsibility in the Church. But when we view a kid as “an addict” based solely on his temptations we lock him into a label he can never overcome. And how about the voice that is used when writing about homosexuality. Nearly every book I have read by a straight author takes the tone of how shall “we” respond to “them.” Very seldom do I see a book that gives more than a passing nod to addressing gay people directly. One notable exception to this would be the chapter in Preston Sprinkle's book “Living in a Gray World” where he does a pretty good job (if rather brief) of addressing gay kids. Even when we are speaking of caring for same sex attracted people, the very terms Christians use illustrate the underlying assumption that gay people are, somehow, in another category, a lesser category, than others.

The Gospel is seldom applied to homosexuality: The second thing I noticed as a teen when adult Christians spoke of homosexuality was that the Gospel was almost never mentioned, as if the speaker simply assumed that same sex attracted people were all hardened sinners who needed a full dose of Law and did not yet qualify for Gospel. To me, as a kid, this meant that I must surely have to not only avoid sex but start wanting to screw girls before I could even hope to be forgiven by Christ.

Further, I noticed that in the few instances where the Gospel was given it was truncated, general, and limited to forensic justification with little or no application.

The Gospel is usually truncated. It is short. The law far outweighs the Gospel in both amount of space devoted to them and the strength with which they are presented in the LCMS task force documents – spiritually deadly for any same sex attracted Christian who should read them. The Gospel also forms, by far, the shortest chapter in Dr Rueger's book.

The Gospel, when included in Christian discussions of homosexuality, is usually general. It is presented as “God forgives us” or “Christ died for all.” Now, while this is certainly true, when the Law is presented in a manner that it says “God is angry at YOUR sin,” the gay kid needs to know “God loves YOU.” Think of a little boy who asks his dad after he has gotten in trouble and received a spanking, “do you still love me?” Does it help much if his dad responds, “I love all children”? So also, if the Law makes homosexuality a personal issue, the Gospel also should be given in a personal manner. But I actually have never seen this really done.

The Gospel is almost always limited to forensic justification. Now while forensic justification certainly lays the foundation, telling someone “Jesus died in your place to forgive your sin,” doesn't mean much if that person has no concept of what forgiveness is. Does forgiveness mean God loves me and delights in me? Or is it more like the forgiveness the Church offers? Does it mean He sort of tolerates me and holds his nose when I am around? Look at the documents from the task force and see how seldom homosexuals are told “God loves you” compared to the number of times the word “love” is used in the context of “telling the truth in love.” Moreover, there is almost no encouragement nor any suggestions on how to show love to gay people, how to offer a faithful gay teen the support and friendship he may need, how to help same sex attracted people experience God's love and what it means to be part of the Body of Christ. At best, the practical application is in the negative, that we should not engage in hate speech or make coarse jokes. Does love in a marriage mean only that your spouse never hits you? Does parental love mean no more than that the parent does not abuse the child? Is that all it means?

Then why do Christians seem to think that merely refraining from coarse jokes will convey love to a gay teen or help him to understand what forgiveness really is?

Oh, and the Gospel is often followed by a caveat, sometimes longer and more strongly emphasized than the Gospel itself, that proclaiming the forgiveness of Christ does not mean that we should cease to speak the Law. It is as if pastors were fearful that gay kids who finally received and understood a little Gospel would be so prone to sexual misbehavior that they might be in danger of immediately jumping in bed with someone unless hit with a still further dose of Law.

As a teen all of these things together carried a powerful message: other Christians did not think of me as part of the Church. I was not “really Christian” in their eyes and being “gay” meant that the Gospel applied to me only weakly, if at all. I must truly be an abomination, I thought.

Am I Christian or am I gay? In which category do I belong?: At some point the gay teen, having been inundated with the separation of the categories “homosexual” vs “Christian” reaches the point where he can't take it anymore. He has to know. Does my pastor see me as Christian or as homosexual? Maybe, because I am repentant and not having sex, my pastor doesn't really see me as “gay.” Maybe my pastor has a different definition of “gay” than the world. The world means anyone attracted to their own sex. But maybe my pastor just means someone who is acting on those temptations and who is having sex with other guys. Of course he can't come right out and ask his pastor that. So he asks, “OK, acting on homosexual thoughts is sin. But is it also sin just to have the desires? Are the desires sin too?”

Can you guess which verse gets pulled out? Matthew 5:27-28 “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (ESV) I find it highly ironic that a verse specifically aimed at heterosexual, intentional desire (the structure of the verse clearly indicates intentional lust) is used to condemn the unwanted temptations of a gay kid. The pastor of course explains that desires are sinful too and not just actions. But the kid wasn't asking about desires in the sense of a man following a woman with his eyes and intentionally undressing her in his mind. The kid was using “desire” as a synonym for “temptation.” His pastor has just condemned him for being tempted, as if homosexual temptation were so evil that the mere temptation itself must be sin. In so doing he has further separated that kid from the love of Christ. When, for instance, that kid reads Hebrews 4:15-16 “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need,” (ESV) he will be forced to say to himself, “But Christ was not tempted as I am for pastor says my temptation is a sin. Christ was, indeed, ashamed to be made like I am. And, perhaps, therefore, I am not welcome at the throne of grace.” Even worse, since the heart of his question was whether the pastor considered him Christian or whether, on account of his specific temptation, the pastor considered him “one of those homosexuals” about whom the pastor and other Christians speak so disparagingly, the pastor has now clearly told him in what category he belongs. In the pastor's eyes he is gay! And now everything that pastors say about gay people and homosexuality (much of which should not be said about anyone!) will be heard by that kid as applying directly to himself.

Here I do have to give credit to Dr. Rueger in that he does make an attempt to the distinction between homosexual temptation and homosexual sin. This is necessary and, unfortunately, often forgotten by pastors in discussing the issue. However, Pastor Rueger then tries to make a categorical distinction

between “temptation” and “desire.” This is a logical impossibility since temptation, by definition, always involves desire at some level or another. James is quite clear on this and Christ's agony in the garden also demonstrates that He Himself had a very strong desire to avoid the cross yet denied Himself in order to follow His Father's will. Unfortunately, by attempting to separate “desire” entirely from “temptation,” Dr Rueger has done the same thing pastors do when they misapply Matthew 5. He has condemned the same sex attracted kid for temptation rather than sin and only re-enforced the separating of categories rather than ministering to same sex attracted Christians.

And on top of all of this, should this a same sex attracted person gather the courage to approach his pastor, he may very well receive a huge serving of Pelagius instead of Christ. Instead of being told the Gospel and assured of God's mercy, he will be told, “you should put your identity in Christ instead of your sexuality.” Now, certainly Paul does speak of our identity being in Christ. But he is clear that it comes through the Gospel and he delivers a full helping of Gospel when he says it. To allow this little canard to stand in the place of the Gospel is pure Pelagian. It is the Lutheran version of “make a decision for Jesus” or “make Christ your personal Lord and Savior.” It turns the Gospel into Law and demands the hearer do something that can only be done through the Gospel. All it does is further separate the individual from the very identity of “Christian” the pastor demands he or she assume. Instead of being told “God does love you and Christ died for you,” the individual is pointed to his own efforts and shamed, essentially, for not having enough faith, for not being “Christian enough.” Having sought spiritual help and comfort, the same sex attracted person simply finds the categories of gay vs Christian re-established and himself in the wrong one.

Having been clearly informed that one can not be both Christian and attracted to one's own sex, having been turned to my own efforts instead of the cross, and having failed to achieve lust for females, is it any wonder that I and many LGBT Christian young people were tempted by thoughts of suicide? If all there is to look forward to in this life is loneliness and there is no assurance of God's love, what really is the point of living. Who can live without love? Who can live with neither human affection nor God's grace?

Interestingly, the study “Us vs Us” from the Marin Foundation found:

85% of LGBT people grew up in a religious community (compared to 74% of the general population who grew up in a religious community).

96% of LGBT people prayed at least once in their life to be made straight. 80% still practice prayer (compared to 79% of the general population).

Many of those who prayed to be made straight began going to church, sometimes even without family encouragement or against family discouragement, hoping that praying from a church or that being active in church would make God more likely to answer their prayers. (which partially explains the 11 point difference between LGBT people who grew up in a religious community vs the general population)

The greatest influence on LGBT people leaving their religious community was negative personal experiences compared to the number one reason for those among the general population who left which was “gradually drifting away.”

76% of LGBT people would be open to returning to the religious community of their youth (compared to only 9% of the population)

Of those willing to return, only 8% listed a change in theology as a requirement for their return to the faith of their youth.

It sounds like there are a lot of people like me, who were preached out of faith and convinced, out of LOVE of course, that God, or at least His people, did not and do not want them no matter how faithful

or obedient they might strive to be.

Perhaps, rather than reading yet another book arguing against gay marriage, pastors would do much better to keep in mind the words of Preston Sprinkle (“People to be Loved”): “...avoid off-handed comments about 'the gay agenda,' 'the homosexual community,' or 'the sin of homosexuality.' All of these phrases – and many others – often get misconstrued and misinterpreted, especially by the thirteen-year-old who is scrambling to find a gun because he believes he is an abomination before God. If you are a preacher, use your words carefully.”

Three Things I Believe about Pastors and Ministry to Gay People

Once again, I do not believe that pastors intentionally or consciously separate same sex attracted kids from Christianity. I do not believe pastors want to preach same sex attracted kids into despair and suicide. I don't think Christians are narrow minded homophobes.

1) I believe most pastor truly want to minister to same sex attracted members in a loving and Law/Gospel centered manner.

2) I believe pastors would like to have some influence on the culture in which their children and grandchildren will grow and live.

3) And I believe pastors would like to do this while remaining faithful to the Bible and the Lutheran confessions.

1) I do have to admit that the first of these statements, that pastors truly want to minister to same sex attracted members, takes rather a lot of blind trust on my part. There is really very little observable evidence that this is actually so. Bullying, suicide, loneliness are realities same sex attracted kids face. Non-heterosexual kids are more than twice as likely to consider suicide than straight kids, three times as likely to attempt suicide, and four times as likely to make an attempt requiring medical attention. The recent Bailey/McHugh “study” confirmed that even gay adults are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers. That same study also argued that LGBT people are more likely to have experienced sexual abuse in their childhoods and face far higher rates of mental health issues than straight individuals. Without addressing the methodology, which is highly questionable, you would think that if Christians were presented with evidence that a portion of the population is under this kind of stress, they would want to investigate and consider providing help.

Yet, since that study was released in the New Atlantis, although I have seen many conservative Christians hail it as “evidence” that homosexuality is not innate and that social stigmatization does not explain all the mental health issues of LGBT people, I have yet to see a single conservative Christian blogger or pastor suggest any way in which to help. In fact, in 40 years, I have seldom seen a conservative Christian pastor express anything other than a very mild rebuke against bullying of gay kids. And I have seen even fewer propose ways of preventing suicide among LGBT kids.

And this in spite of the fact that bullying, thoughts of suicide, and depression are actually MORE acute among the Christian same sex attracted kids who are striving to maintain an orthodox view of Christianity than among the gay-affirming LGBT kids. While the out and proud gay kid, at least in today's world, has multiple places to go for support, the gay kid who chooses to reject his own

sexuality has few people he can go to. He is much less likely to turn to his parents, may not have even told his friends, and certainly will not go to his pastor. He is, therefore, MORE vulnerable than the gay-affirming kid. You would think churches would be among the first to try and help. Yet churches all but abandon these kids.

So, although I believe most conservative pastors do indeed want to help and to minister to the kids in their congregation who are same sex attracted, that belief is based more on idealism than any actual evidence I have ever seen. I hope I am right but I honestly see little actual evidence in the LCMS that I am.

If the LCMS is going to truly minister to same sex attracted people, this has to change. We have to be willing to go beyond “telling the truth in love.” We are going to have to show that we care and that love means more than telling people when they are wrong. We are going to have to go much deeper than that.

2) The second statement, that I believe pastors want to have some impact on the culture, is actually related to the first, wanting to minister to LGBT members. If the conservative denominations today want to have some say in the future of our culture and society then we need to focus on ministering to the sheep God has given us. The weight our voice will carry is directly proportional to how diligently we care for our own flocks.

I am not sure where or when pastoral ministry and “intentional caring for same sex attracted individuals” translated into primarily opposing same sex marriage or when the LCMS elected to engage in the same methods that failed groups like Focus on the Family 3 decades back. But for some reason pastors are much more vocal about the politics of same sex marriage than about a Law and Gospel ministry to those same sex attracted members already among their sheep. And this is not only hurting those members. It is also emasculating our ability to influence our culture.

From the point of view of those outside the Church, far from helping same sex attracted teens within the congregation face the issues (often of life and death) they encounter on a daily basis, the conservative Church actually adds to the weight by applying far more Law than Gospel (though the culture would not use those terms) to already despairing sinners. As an example, think of a grandmother who has just learned her grandson is gay. Arguments about the good of society and the nuclear family being the foundation of society carry very little weight against the loneliness and sadness she sees in her grandkid's eyes. Especially when the Church has done very little to combat heterosexual abuses of marriage. As she looks around and she sees divorced/remarried members and young people living with opposite sex lovers in the congregation with little or no public rebuke and then sees how her grandson is ignored or, even, vilified, how do you think her views are going to shift on same sex relationships and marriage?

The corollary is also true. Failing to minister to people drives them away and reduces our impact on the culture far more than does the “gay agenda” and its supporters. Christ and His Gospel wins hearts and changes people and, thereby, changes the culture far more effectively than all the arguments against gay marriage in all the books written and published by Christian authors. Vilifying homosexuals and the “gay agenda” does not win people for Christ. True ministry does! In fact, I know very few people who first repented of homosexual relationships and then came to faith. In my experience, it has always been the other way around. Sexual faithfulness is costly emotionally and Spiritually. Such obedience

can only truly be achieved through the Gospel. People first come to faith in Christ, begin to be ministered to and learn who Christ is and what He has done for them THEN begin to ask themselves how God would want them to handle sexuality. Some notable examples of this are Rosaria Butterfield, Eve Tushnet and Melinda Selmys. Our impact on the culture is directly related to our faithfulness in ministry. Sexual obedience is difficult and costly and it can only follow conversion and the Gospel – not precede them.

The fact is the so called “gay agenda” is winning because it is the only game in town. The Church hasn't even come to the court. Social acceptance, finding a mate and finding an accepting community are all greatly effective in reducing depression and suicidality among LGBT people. Moral or not, when it comes to reducing suicide and loneliness, societal acceptance works. To be blunt, many of those who support gay marriage and the gay agenda do so because they have compassion on gay people and don't want to see them wind up dead. The kingdom of the left is using the only tool it has, that of the law, to try and create an environment in which fewer gay people will want to kill themselves. And to be honest, I can't argue with that because it does work.

Until the conservative denominations understand this and find their own ways to address the issues of depression and suicide among gay kids and adults through actual ministry, they will rightly continue to lose their voice in the public realm. Period.

So how much influence pastors and conservative churches have on the culture and society will be directly related to the compassion and ministry they deliver to the LGBT people within their own walls.

3) As to the third statement, “I believe pastors would like to minister to same sex attracted people and influence our culture while remaining faithful to the Bible,” I and other like me do need pastors to remain faithful to the Bible. Although I would attend a same sex wedding and wish the couple well, for myself I need a church which maintains a biblical view on sexuality. I understand why many LGBT people turn to the more affirming churches because I know how lonely and hard life can be on the more conservative end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, the fact is that all the gay-affirming interpretations of the the Bible are simply unconvincing. They are based on faulty history and language studies and come no where near convincing me that God approves of same sex intercourse in any circumstance. Further, I find that calling into question the veracity of God's Word on the Law also raises questions about the Gospel. If I can not trust God to tell me the truth in His Law then how do I know He is telling the truth when He speaks of His mercy and love? Thirdly, I find the liberal interpretations of the Bible just plain lazy. It is too easy for bypass difficult passages by saying “that was simply a cultural imperative. We don't have to pay attention to that verse today.” In so doing such interpretations not only show laziness in biblical interpretation but also miss many wonderful messages from Scripture that can only be obtained by truly wrestling with the text. I find this approach very unappealing. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, gay-affirming pastors can never truly understand nor respect my commitment to celibacy. It will never really make sense to them that I have chosen to remain celibate based solely on the Bible's teaching about sexuality and marriage, in spite of the fact that isolation is deadly to me (it tends to vastly increase my battles with depression and suicide). Even if they think they sort of understand why I deny myself, they certainly can give me little or no aid in maintaining my commitment. They may be able to comprehend celibacy as a personal choice. But not many are willing to support it as a response to a universal moral command, especially when the cost seems high and the benefit low. So yes, there are those of us who are gay and yet very much need the conservative churches to remain firm on the foundation of Scripture as the inerrant and inspired Word

of God and who want the Church to continue to call us to the path of self denial and obedience.

Let me say, however, that at this time in history, this is not a question of right vs wrong or good vs bad. We don't have a situation in which a church is doing the right thing vs a church doing the wrong thing. That option simply does not exist. What we have is a Church (the LCMS) which has a firm stand on the inerrancy of Scripture and the correct doctrine (on paper) but which is not offering forgiveness, grace and Christian love to same sex attracted people. And we have churches (ELCA and others) who are offering love to LGBT people but doing so in the basis of permissiveness rather than Scripture and the Gospel. Both are in the wrong and so, for people like myself, we have to choose the lesser of two evils. I can't say that those who have chosen the more "gay-affirming" option are in the wrong. Nor can I say that they are not saved. There is a huge difference between being mistaken and rebellious sin. I do not believe my Presbyterian friends are going to hell because they are mistaken about the Real Presence. Nor are my Baptist friends damned for being mistaken about baptism. And I don't believe my gay affirming friends are damned merely for being mistaken about marriage. Given the loneliness my choice of celibacy forces on me and others like me, if someone else has chosen a more gay-affirming option, even the option of same sex marriage, I can't honestly say their choice was wrong and I am not going to scold them for that choice. All I can say is that the more gay-affirming position is not one that can minister to me. For me, the Bible is just too important for me to be able to put it aside for my own happiness or, even, my own salvation.

It all comes down to this in the end, can the LCMS provide truly biblical and confessional ministry to same sex attracted people or not?

Some Principles of Biblical Ministry to LGBT People in the LCMS

I think the LCMS can indeed provide truly biblical and confessional ministry to same sex attracted people and I don't think it is nearly as difficult as we might suppose.

Be Aware of Your Primary Audience Some years ago I attended a meeting of pastors from several denominations trying to start a community pastoral alliance. At the meeting one of the pastors said "I do not consider myself a pastor of my congregation only. I believe God has called each of us to be pastors to the whole community." This is NOT a Lutheran view of the pastoral office. The pastor is called to be the shepherd of the flock to which God has called him, not to pastor an entire city or culture. If a you choose to speak out in a public forum on issues such as gay marriage, keep in mind that you do so only from your vocation as citizen, not from your divine office as pastor. And yet, even as you speak in your vocation as citizen, you are still a pastor and your first concern must always be for how your words will impact the members of your flock. A same sex attracted kid who may very well agree with you that marriage is to be between a man and a woman only will, nevertheless, feel the sting of the Law as you speak out against gay marriage because, at some level, he does desire such a relationship with another guy and experiences temptation in that direction.

This is why I often use the word "gay" to describe myself. I think I am probably the "Bob" that Dr Rueger wrote of in his book. At least some of the conversations he records having with "Bob" sound like some he and I had. If so, however, he only quoted part of what I said. I did tell him I use terms like "homosexual" and "gay" to identify myself because the culture uses these terms to speak of people who experience attraction to their own sex. But what he left out was the full reason why I use such terms (although, I don't use "homosexual" anymore because it is considered very demeaning). He said

that “Bob” claimed it would cause confusion. In fact, I use these terms, first of all, because a lot of people during the heyday of Exodus claimed to be cured from homosexuality when, in fact, they were still attracted to their own gender. In doing so, they created false hopes and expectations in people which, when they were not realized, caused a great deal of harm. On top of that, when it was discovered that they had not, in fact, changed in their sexual orientation itself, a great many people felt they had been lied to. By avoiding calling themselves “gay” or “homosexual” these leaders created a false and harmful impression that they had been “cured” of attraction to their own sex. Continuing to perpetuate that lie does not give a good witness to Christ. This was the “confusion” I told him I was trying to avoid by calling myself “gay.” But more importantly, I use these terms to identify myself because I want to confront pastors with the fact that there are gay people in their pews. I want ppastors to understand clearly that there are same sex attracted member, often kids, listening to what they say and reading what they write. And ANYTHING a pastor says about gay people, the LGBT community or “homosexuals” will be heard by those kids as addressed directly to them and to their situation.

So, if a pastor addresses a blog post of Law against same sex marriage in hopes that gay people will repent and be saved, he is, in fact, only applying the Law to the same sex attracted kid who reads it (and in this high tech world, kids WILL read their pastor's blog to see what he has to say about homosexuality as they decide whether or not he is a person they can trust and talk to). Let's face it, the gay community and their supporters have no interest in what a LCMS pastor has to say. It is only the most extreme hubris on the part of a pastor to believe that his blog post (or podcast) will in any way be heard by more than a handful of gay-affirming same sex attracted people. And the few that do read or listen don't care. It will have exactly zero effect on their lives. The only ones who are reading and listening, who do care, and who will be impacted are the same sex attracted people who already agree with the pastors and already feel a tremendous amount of guilt and shame. To them the pastor has applied Law.

Or let me make this a bit more clear. EVERY SINGLE BLOG POST, POD CAST, SERMON, BIBLE STUDY OR CONVERSATION IN WHICH A PASTOR HAS CONDEMNED HOMOSEXUALITY BUT NEGLECTED TO EMPHASIZE THE GOSPEL IS AN APPLICATION OF LAW TO REPENTANT SINNERS!!!! If a pastor EVER leaves out the Gospel in ANY communication about homosexuality, then he has violated his ordination vows! Period!!! Again, let me repeat this: If you are a pastor you have NO audience within the gay community. Your audience consists, firstly, of same sex attracted individuals within your congregation and, secondly, family members of LGBT individuals. Make sure you are speaking to those who are listening, not those you imagine or wish were listening.

Ministry to Gay People Must be Public: As a corollary to the first principle, the pastor must remember that his primary ministry to the LGBT people in his congregation will mostly take place in a public manner. I suspect most pastors have considered what they would say if a gay teen came to his office for advice or spiritual counsel. I would assume that a large proportion of pastors have had to speak to a member who had publicly “come out” and was actively engaged in sexual relations with someone of the same sex; a child or grandchild of a member, perhaps. But these individual and private conversations are not the bulk of the pastor's ministry to same sex attracted kids. Most ministry to same sex attracted kids comes in the public statements of the pastor in sermons, conversations, confirmation classes and blog posts where the teen can anonymously learn what they pastor has to say about homosexuality.

One of the big mistakes I have seen pastors make, especially pastors who have a gay member and desire to deal compassionately with them, is that the pastor simply stops bringing up the subject of homosexuality at all or remains silent when it is the topic of conversation. I understand this. The pastor does not want to add more law to the burden the person already bears or drive them away from the congregation. But silence is not ministry. Gay kids DO want you to give them answers. They do want to hear what you have to say. Being silent just leaves them to try and find the answers and help on their own. And that is not ministry. So pastors should speak about homosexuality in a public manner.

Undo the categories of Gay/Christian: The fact is that there are Gay Christians, people who believe in God, trust in Christ, yet find themselves attracted to their own gender. The concept that a person who is attracted to his or her own sex is either non-Christian or, in some manner, a lesser believer must be undone. And to do this I think straight Christians need to lay aside the mistaken belief that heterosexuality is “natural” and “normal” while homosexuality is “unnatural.”

The fact is that sexual temptation is always unnatural, whether it is a boy attracted to another boy or a boy attracted to a girl. Neither is ever presented biblically as a good and blessed thing but always as a temptation to be overcome. Temptation is, by definition, “unnatural” since it always seeks to use something God has made in a manner or for a purpose for which God did not create it. A boy being sexually attracted to a girl to whom he is not married is no more natural or any less shameful in God's eyes than a boy being attracted to a boy.

Nor does Paul make the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual in Romans 1. If he simply meant the difference between same sex attraction and opposite sex attraction when he spoke of men giving up “natural relations with women” in vs 27 then he was either as blind as a bat or a raving idiot because Roman men NEVER gave up sex with women. Brothels and mistresses were just as common as they had ever been in the Roman empire. Also, the early Christians did not limit the word “unnatural” to same sex intercourse. Especially in discussing vs 26, early commentators included adultery, fornication, prostitution and any form of sex that prevented conception (even if used between a man and his wife) as “unnatural.” So Paul can't mean heterosexuality as we think of it when he spoke of “natural use of women.” The ONLY “natural use” of sex Paul knows or acknowledges is within a marriage between a husband and wife. All else, including adultery and temptation toward sex between men and women, is unnatural and shameful.

Further, sexual attraction and falling in love are NEVER pictured in the Bible as a prelude to marriage. The only time falling in love is glorified is when it FOLLOWS the wedding and flows from the marriage relationship. Even Song of Songs, the most erotic book of the Bible, pictures a relationship between two people who are engaged and, therefore, legally married under the laws of ancient Israel.

Yet our world, and even our churches, continue to glorify falling in love as a path to marriage. We hand our teenage sons (when hormones are up to six times normal and decision making portions of the brain are not yet fully formed) money and the car keys and encourage them to take their girl friends out till late at night without supervision. And then we are surprised when teen pregnancies and STD rise rapidly among adolescents. A couple in the congregation gets divorced and one or both remarry other people, and they are welcomed and celebrated with barely a word of censure against the adultery they are continually committing according to God's own words. In most churches, the second marriage will even take place in the sanctuary with the blessing of the pastor. Not, by the way, that I want to see

divorced and remarried people hammered to death with the Law. But the full Law/Gospel ministry should be made evident in how the Church deals with divorce – not simply ignored. Sadly, this is not done. Instead, we talk of “defending marriage” only when it is threatened by the concept of same sex marriage, having essentially ignored decades when it was decimated by divorce and canoodling in sin without the benefits of vows. To be blunt, by the time gay marriage was legalized in even one state, it had already been so thoroughly degraded by the behavior of straight people, that there was precious little left of the concept of marriage to defend.

And then what do we say to gay kids? In the document “Princeton Prof to LCMS: Support Biblical Marriage” from the task force on sexuality, Dr Beverly Yahnke is quoted as saying, “We have the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and for the people in our churches who are living celibate homosexual lives, we want to wrap the Gospel of Jesus Christ around them.” Wait, What? Divorced people get remarried and, with barely a word of repentance for the life long adultery they are committing, they receive Gospel, forgiveness and inclusion in the congregation. But a same sex attracted person has to achieve celibacy before being given the Gospel? I thought repentance was what qualified a person for Gospel. But apparently, for gay people, that is not enough. We first have to actually achieve a celibate lifestyle (not just desire to do so or be trying to do so but actually be “living a celibate homosexual life”) before we can expect to have the Gospel wrapped around us!! Now, to be fair to Dr Yahnke, I suspect she was quoted out of context. Yet this misquote made it through doctrinal review and is on the official website of the LCMS! Is this now the official stand of the LCMS, that for straight people the way into heaven is through repentance and faith but for gay people it is through abstaining from sex?

How bizarre that when Christ said to pick up our crosses, our churches, in conjunction with the world, have painted the cross of heterosexuality with lovely pastel colors and festooned it with lace and roses and valentines and have called it “a gift.” But then we have turned to those who bear the cross of homosexuality and say “My God, what is wrong with you that you have such an ugly, disgusting and unnatural cross? You should drop that gross thing and pick up a pretty cross like ours!” Well, you know what, no one gets to choose which cross they bear. All Christ asks is that they bear it as long as He calls them to do so. And if a kid bears a more unpopular and difficult cross, maybe it is because he has a stronger faith rather than a weaker one. And if he winds up dropping it, maybe it is not all his fault and the Church must bear some responsibility for making it heavier rather than helping him bear it.

So until pastors and Christians begin to realize that heterosexuality is every bit as unnatural, every bit as much a temptation and every bit as sinful as homosexuality, the Church will continue to be largely unable to intentionally care for same sex attracted members and the world will go its own way. And if the world attempts to paint the cross of homosexuality with the same pretty colors we have painted the cross of heterosexuality, well, who can blame them? Right now it's the only answer the world has to keep kids from hating and killing themselves and the Church has done precious little to provide any other.

So, on a positive note, what can the Church do to undo the false categories we have established?

1: See all sexual desire as sin/temptation: Perhaps the best way to undo the false categories is to, first of all, broaden the answer to the question “is homosexuality sin?” The answer is not “homosexuality is sin” (as if it were apposed to “heterosexuality” as normal) but, rather, all sexuality outside of marriage is unnatural. It is either temptation or, when acted upon, sin.

2: Remove “falling in love” as the foundation for marriage: I think, as Christians, we can, and should, build up the concept that sexual desire has nothing to do with establishing a marriage. Falling in love is stupid reason to get married and, especially when it forms the major portion of the foundation for the marriage, it leads to utter disaster. Look at the number of divorces, the number of kids growing up without one parent or the other or with a series of step parents. Romance as the basis of marriage has been a huge failure in our culture. Marriage should be based on friendship, mutual affection, shared values and faith. And if, after the wedding, one falls in love with one's spouse, then that is a wonderful and exciting bonus. But it is not the foundation of the marriage. I am not saying we should forbid our kids to date or turn back to arranged marriages, I think that would be impossible and counter productive, but that we should emphasize to them continually that the world's foundation of romantic love is inadequate for a healthy marriage.

3: Treat homosexual sins and heterosexual sins equally under the cross: I have heard many sermons quoting Jesus when He said that anyone who does not pick up his cross is unworthy of being a disciple. Many pastors have exhorted their congregations to “pick up your cross and follow Christ.” But I have never heard a pastor include the context. The fact is that every single one of the disciples to whom Christ spoke those words royal dropped their own crosses within days. Judas betrayed Him. Peter denied Him. And the rest abandoned Him. Crosses get dropped. And when this happens, the gay kid needs to know that he will be treated with as much compassion and friendship as the straight kid, that he will be treated no worse than the straight kid who made out with a girlfriend, the couple who got divorced or your neighbor who is living with his fiancée. So be aware that how you talk about the “gay community” is witnessing to these kids how you are likely to talk about them and act toward them should they slip up and drop their cross. If the only love you show toward the gay community is the love of “telling the truth” about how “perverse” they are, then the kid in your congregation will believe that is all the love you will have for him. So when, for instance, a man like Franklin Graham scolds Christian parents for encouraging their kids to be friends with gay kids and invite them to church, the gay kid in your congregation needs to hear you confront the statements from Mr. Franklin and those like him in no uncertain terms. What he said was evil and was from Satan, not God. When a man takes a gun and kills dozens of gay people in a bar, the gay kid in the congregation needs to hear you condemn such atrocities. Churches should be on the forefront of confronting bullying of gay kids, helping people with AIDS and showing concern for suicide and loneliness gay kids face. Whatever love you show (or do not show) to those in the gay community is the love the same sex attracted kid will expect from you to him should he ever drop his cross. So before speaking about homosexuality or “the gay community” ask whether you would say the same things about divorce or about the single teen mother. If you would offer them the grace of Christ, then offer it to LGBT listeners as well.

Avoid Gospel That is Not Gospel: Whatever your impressions may be of the “gay community,” the gay people you are called to minister to are, by and large, repentant sinners struggling under the weight of guilt and shame. So ask, is the Gospel you offer when you speak of homosexuality truly Gospel?

The three biggest mistakes I see when it comes to Gospel are 1: the belief that our compassion equals the Gospel 2: the belief that strong law produces strong gospel and 3: the assumptions that because the Gospel is frequently applied in general, to all people, in our churches then surely same sex attracted members are receiving an adequate amount.

1: Our Compassion is Not Gospel: Preston Sprinkle's book “People to be Loved” is one of the best

books I have read on the subject of homosexuality by a straight author. But he makes the first mistake. He talks a lot about how Jesus loved people of his day, reaching out and spending time with sinners. And then he writes a lot about how we as Christians should emulate Christ and show the same compassion today. He has some good things to say. But, as nice as it is to know that Christ loved tax collectors and sinners and as nice as it is to know that Christians like Dr. Sprinkle long to show love to homosexuals, what I needed to hear and longed to read in that book was that Christ loves me. Dr. Sprinkle missed the middle and most important step. Yes, it can be inferred by the fact that Christ, during His earthly sojourn, loved sinners. But that is not the same as hearing it directly, that Christ loves you and Christ loves me. The compassion of Christians to others can be a powerful witness to the Gospel but it is not the Gospel itself and can not replace it. Yet too many Christian pastors, leaders and authors seem to think that being compassionate is the same as applying the Gospel. Perhaps this is the root of the old saw “tell the truth in love.” Maybe Christians really do love gay people. Maybe they do mean it when they say love motivates them to give the Law. But it is NOT GOSPEL. And when we let our compassion stand in for the love of Christ, we have failed to present the Gospel.

2: Strong Law Does Not Produce Strong Gospel: The second error is one I see happening a lot in many different areas of ministry in the LCMS. Back in seminary, a fellow student made the statement that if we apply the Law firmly and strongly enough, then the mere pronouncement of forgiveness should be such a relief that it ought to be all the Gospel needed in a sermon. It seems this attitude has become quite common and is most evident in the results of the task force on sexuality. The law is proclaimed and supported in many different, specific and powerful ways. The Gospel, however, is reduced to a statement or two that Christ died for our sins. Now, while it is true that weak law does, indeed, produce weak Gospel, the reverse is NOT true. Strong Law does not, in itself, produce strong Gospel. The Law does no more than what it is given to do. Strong Laws kills the sinner. It does not raise him back to life nor does it impart that power to the Gospel. That power is inherent in the Gospel and ONLY strong Gospel produces strong Gospel. Only the Gospel makes alive. For this reason, Lutheran pastors are to let the Gospel predominate. And that is NOT done by relying on strong Law but by putting time and effort into the Gospel.

3: Do Not Assume the Same Sex Attracted Person is Already Receiving Adequate Gospel: The third mistake is more clear in Pastor Rueger's book, especially the last chapter, in which he continually speaks about how the Church has the Gospel for the repentant same sex attracted sinner. Although there is one sentence in which he does actually apply the Gospel to the homosexual, for the most part the chapter tends to take the tone that the repentant gay person should be told about Christ and that the gifts of God's grace, given through the Church, offer forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Now, again, I think Dr. Rueger's intentions are good but saying that homosexuals SHOULD be told of the forgiveness and love of Christ is not the same as actually telling them and applying that forgiveness. Talking ABOUT the Gospel is not the same as Gospel. Now I suspect that Dr. Rueger is honestly trying to direct same sex attracted people to their local pastor and congregation, believing that there they will hear the forgiveness in many sermons and in the confession and absolution of the divine service. And while that sounds good, when the Gospel is not actually and directly applied in conversations and writing about homosexuality, it can actually turn the Gospel given in the general sense of “God has forgiveness for all” on its head. It can actually prevent the gay individual from hearing that Gospel when it is presented.

Perhaps this will make more sense if I give an example.

I am certainly no fan of Dan Savage. I find him coarse and obnoxious. But he did say something in a interview with Big Think called “How My Priest Helped Me Come Out” that I think expresses the experiences of a great many gay people and also illustrates the need for Gospel to be directly applied when discussing homosexuality. He said:

“I was afraid that my parents would reject me. I was afraid that they would throw me out of the house. Every day from the time I was about 11 or 12 until I came out to my mom when I was 17 or 18 and to my dad when I was 20, every day when my parents told me that they loved me I thought 'no you don't. If you knew me, if you knew what I was you wouldn't say that.' And that is a horrible thing and I was really close to my mom and we were really—you know total mama's boy—we were really tight and to doubt her love every day from 12 to 17 was kind of emotionally shredding.”

Now his parents were, in fact, very loving parents. And when he did come out, they accepted and loved him just as much as ever. But until he came out, he had no way of knowing that and so any expressions of love were tempered with “but you don't really know me so you can't really love me.”

Similarly, I hate Christmas. I really do. I see the red and green wrapping paper appearing on the shelves just after Halloween and the Christmas music blaring from store speakers in November. And I want to barf. Christmas is the worst time of the year.

It's not that I dislike the biblical account of Christ's birth. I love that. That God became man to die for sinners – that is a glorious moment.

No, I hate the presents.

Not the giving of presents. I hate getting presents. I really, really hate getting presents.

I didn't used to. When I was a little boy Christmas was for me, like for most kid, the most exciting time of the year. But then, in 6th grade, a new boy moved into our school, a boy with blond hair and blue eyes, and I had my first crush on another boy. It would not be my last. And suddenly I had a secret, an awful secret. Over the next few years I would find that I just could not make myself attracted to girls. I thought they had nice faces and pretty hair and smelled OK when you were near them. But they also had these squishy things on their chests that sort of made me think of balloons stuffed with tapioca pudding. And no matter how much I tried, I just really did NOT want to see them with their clothes off, thank you very much. But worse than that, I could not get guys out of my head. The thoughts other boys seemed to be having about girls, I was having about guys. Except I don't think my fantasies ever involved the actual sex act – mostly because I was pretty naïve and could not figure out the mechanics of how two guys would have intercourse until I got to college and a friend told me. Mainly I just knew I wanted very much to be around certain guys, to be held by them and to kiss them like I saw guys kissing girls. And there was a name for feelings like that – HOMOSEXUAL. And I knew it wasn't a good thing to be.

So what does a Christian boy do when he starts to realize he is “gay”?

Well first you feel a lot of guilt. A lot of guilt that you don't dare tell anyone about.

I was almost 8 when the Stonewall Riots happened in New York and homosexuality began to make the

news. Somewhere around my freshmen year of high school the whole Anita Bryant vs Dade County controversy broke. A year later, the TV show Soap introduced Billy Crystal playing a homosexual/transgender character. At the same time Dr. James Dobson founded Focus on the Family and two years later Jerry Falwell established the Moral Majority and homosexuality was firmly fixed as a political issue in the public square. So throughout my teen year, homosexuality was talked about among adults – a lot. And everything they said let me know quite clearly that they were disgusted by fags and that I could never ever let any one know I was queer.

In response to the incredible guilt such messages engendered, I tried really hard to be a good kid. I figured my parents did not deserve to have a homosexual kid and they certainly did not deserve to have me make parenting even tougher on them. So, I didn't rebel. I didn't do drugs or alcohol. I never broke curfew (of course, I never had one either – no point in giving curfew to a kid who seldom went out at night and never drank or partied when he did go out). I mostly got good grades. I never even got a traffic ticket. But it didn't matter how good I tried to be, I knew, down inside, that I was a pervert and a queer.

And there lies the roots of my antipathy for presents. Every Christmas mom would ask us what presents we wanted. And I went on a quest to find suggestions that would be expensive enough for mom and dad to feel they had actually given me something worthwhile but cheap enough that I would not feel guilty that they had spent too much on a gay son. The number one question on my mind as I considered each possibility was, “can I live with the amount of guilt this present will give me?”

The point is that the guilt of being gay can, and often does, create a barrier between the kid and the expressions of love from his parents. They say “we love you” but the kid says to himself, “they can't really love me because they don't know me. And if they did truly know me, they would not love me.” And so the parents' love is nullified.

The same thing happens in Church with the Law and the Gospel. If a gay person hears homosexuality condemned under the Law but the Gospel is seldom or never directly applied to the issue of homosexuality, then it makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to apply the Gospel he hears in general to himself. The pastor pronounces absolution but the gay individual, though he may intellectually know that the death of Christ covers his sin, on a deep level feels that that forgiveness is for everyone else, for others, not for himself. “If my pastor knew what I am,” he thinks, “he would not really say Christ loves me.” And the evidence he sees and hears is that his pastor seldom or never applies the Gospel when speaking of homosexuality. His heart is merely reflecting the practical heterodoxy of his pastor and his church in which homosexuals are people to be readily spoken against and condemned but forgiven, if at all, only reluctantly.

The Lutheran Church is not a church in which one is supposed to forgive one's self. It is a church in which the pastor and the congregation are to give you forgiveness as if from Christ Himself. The reality is that the Gospel is not a self serve buffet. If your pastor and your Christian peers are not applying the Gospel to you and for you, then it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to apply it to yourself. And yet, too often, because pastors do not directly give the Gospel to same sex attracted members when speaking of homosexuality, gay kids are left with little option but to try and apply the Gospel to themselves, often with disastrous results.

So again, the Gospel must actually be applied when homosexuality is spoken of. No pastor should ever

say “homosexuals should be given the Gospel” or even the general, “Christ died for all people.” Both these require the gay reader or listener to apply the Gospel to himself. Rather, they should say “Jesus died on the cross for you. God loves gay people. God gave His life for gay people and straight.”

So ask yourself, is the Gospel I am speaking truly the forgiveness of sins and the love of Christ? Or am I merely offering human love and speaking about the Gospel without actually applying it?

In Applying the Gospel Go Beyond Forensic Justification: It is true that forensic justification is the foundation of the Gospel. In fact, most of the other “theories of the atonement” wind up being pretty bizarre, weak and nonsensical if forensic justification is removed. But, often, in the LCMS we make the mistake of limiting the Gospel to justification. Forensic justification, by itself is not the whole of the Gospel either.

I used to own a book by O. P. Kretzmann that contained a series of Lenten sermons on the last words of Christ from the cross. I was always struck by his treatment of “It is Finished.” He pictured heaven as receiving her victorious King. He used some beautiful poetic language about the nails being reforged into the crown of victory and the thorns becoming the diadem of glory. And then the King Himself enters the high gates of heaven accompanied by.....1 lone thief. Not much to show for the years of toil and deprivation, the cross, the grave and the lash. Yet in that thief was the promise to come of a long line of sinner who would die with his words on their lips, “Lord, remember me.” The genius of that passage from that sermon was that Dr Kretzmann took the wondrous victory of Christ, the glory of heaven and placed it all in the arms of that lone and forgotten thief, whose name we do not even know. This love was for him, this victory earned for him. And then he bound that thief to the fellowship of the Church itself in the long parade of sinners who would enter the same gates of life with the same prayer he prayed. This is the application of the Gospel because it draws the listener to see himself in that long line of sinners saved and welcomed by Christ while also placing each listener in the position of the thief, the receiver of the gifts and victory of the cross. I seldom see such effort put into applying the Gospel in sermons today. Too often “God forgives sins” is all the Gospel given. And while it is true and the forgiveness of sins is powerful in and of itself, such brief treatments of Gospel show a tremendous disdain on the part of pastors for their call to preach and teach it. I see much effort and variety in the Law, especially in the Law as applied to same sex marriage. But so little effort is put into the Gospel. We need to proclaim that the Gospel is also life and love from Christ.

In his book, “Christ have Mercy,” President Harrison tells the story of how his little boy intentionally caused a bike accident with his brother and wound up with a broken arm. Pastor Harrison's worry and anger were clearly coming through to his son on the drive to the hospital. Crying, the boy asked his dad, “but, Dad, do you forgive me?” Now I don't think that kid was asking about forensic justification, about his dad taking on the penalty for his sin by, for instance, being willing to pay the hospital bill. What he wanted to know was “do you still love me?”

So also, if all Christ did on the cross was to “pay our debt of sin” then it doesn't really mean much. In fact, it does not mean anything if it does not also establish a relationship in which God loves us. It especially doesn't mean much to a person who has grown up thinking neither God nor His people can love them.

When I was a teen and feeling especially lonely, I used to imagine what it would be like when I died and how God would throw open His arms and welcome me to heaven with a hug. I stopped imagining

that long ago. Not because I am less lonely but because I can no longer picture it. I can imagine God letting me in to heaven, yes. But being glad about me being there? No way! In the intervening years since I was 15 I have simply heard too much law and too little assurance of Gospel to believe God wants me anymore. I simply no longer possess the capacity to imagine anyone, least of God, being able to rejoice over me. And neither reading Pastor Rueger's book nor reviewing the results of the LCMS task force on homosexuality offered the least bit of real assurance that God actually rejoices in the same sex attracted Christian.

Yet the parables of Luke 15 are all about the joy of God over the returned sinner. The father doesn't merely pay the son's debts. He rejoiced that he is home. The house wife doesn't merely put her coin in her pocket with the other nine and the shepherd doesn't merely put the sheep back in the pen. They call on their friends and neighbors to rejoice.

Further, we seem to forget that the active obedience of Christ is also part of the Gospel, just as much as His passive obedience on the cross. The author of Hebrews used the active obedience, Christ facing temptation for us, to invite his readers to the throne of grace. Christ specifically chose to live among and defend sinners, tax collectors, the poor and the sick. In fact, it was His willingness to be identified with these sinners that caused the religious leaders to call Him "a son of satan" and to crucify Him. I think a gay kid can readily identify with the longing that someone would identify with him and stand between him and the bullies in school and church, that someone would care enough for him to take the abuse with him. Well that is exactly what Christ did and does. This could really be developed into a wonderful message of God's mercy though I do not have space to do it here.

So same sex attracted kids need to know more than forensic justification. They need to know that God delights in them, loves them and wants them. People will always go where they are loved. And if the Church offers only forensic justification and no warm love from God, then gay kids will go where they are wanted and rejoiced over – and it won't be the Church.

This should really be the easiest step of all given how many passages in the Bible speak of God's love for people and His joy in redeeming them. Pastors simply need to be dedicated in applying that message when they choose to speak or write of homosexuality.

Do Call Us to Sanctification - But Do It through the Gospel: When I was 7, my father decided it was time for me to learn to ride a bike. I can really sympathize with Calvin in the cartoon by Bill Watterson when Calvin envisions his bike as a monster set on mangling him. I agonized over that bike all summer. I received a lot of bruises and cuts and one spectacular fall over the handlebars. But my dad insisted I get up and try again and again. As a 7 year old I thought my dad was being pretty mean. I didn't need to learn how to ride that old Bike. But then, one day, I picked it up and rode it around the block. And then two blocks. And then all over town. Now my dad knew something I did not. He knew that once I learned I would have immeasurably more freedom to explore my world. He knew, though I could not see it, that the gain was worth the blood and pain.

I do not know why God says it is wrong to have sex with another guy. Very few of the so-called "Natural Law" arguments put forth by gay marriage opponents actually make much sense. They are not at all convincing. It does not make logical sense that a boy should not fall in love with another boy or that man could not commit to sharing his life with another man. I don't know why God says "No." But I do know WHO says no. It is the same God who sent His Son to be born in a manger, to live a life

of poverty, to die alone on the cross, to love sinners, and who welcomes His children into heaven. And knowing Him, knowing He is both loving and wise, I am willing to give Him the same trust I gave my dad. In this life, here and now, what I see are only the bumps and bruises. But I do trust God knows what He is doing and that, in the end, doing as He asks will either benefit me or, in some way be an immeasurable blessing to someone else. So, trusting Him, I choose to obey. But that obedience can only come as a response to the Gospel. It can never be divorced from it.

So also Paul calls his readers to sanctification. Yet he always goes back to the Gospel to do it. Because Christ died for us we are members of His Body – therefore, treat one another as members of the same Body. Because Christ died for us and made us His brothers – therefore treat one another as brothers in Christ. Because you are members of Christ's Body – be responsible in the sexual use of your own body.

So do be willing to call us to costly obedience. We want to know that our choices mean something and that our sacrifices are known and precious to God. But we want to know this through the Gospel because only in the Gospel can we receive faith to follow where God, through His Word, will lead. Since you must send us through valley of the Shadow of Death (and all privation foreshadows death) then send us with the Shepherd whose rod and staff may comfort us.

A Note: The suggestions I have made so far take little long term effort. They are mostly a matter of pastors being aware of what they are saying and how it is heard by LGBT kids in their congregation. It can all be done fairly quickly through changes in how we talk and communicate about homosexuality. The last two things I will ask, however, are much more complex and require fairly significant effort on the part of the pastor and the congregation. I can't even begin to give full answers about how to accomplish them. All I can do is ask that pastors at least begin to discuss them in their blogs or conversations and in their congregations. If gay kids see their pastor discussing these issues, at least it will send the message that he is aware of their needs and is interested in helping. And that, alone, will mean a lot:

Be Aware of and, as Much as Possible, Provide Us What We Need To Remain Faithful: Sexuality not only dictates one's relationship with the opposite sex, it also affects relationships and friendships between those of the same sex, with the family and with his church. And choosing to be celibate is not merely a matter of avoiding sex.

How does one make friends with other boys when those boys are also the ones he is attracted to sexually? Straight kids have role models to guide them through the differences, often subtle, between interacting with girls and interacting with male friends. “Out and proud” gay kids have GSAs and counselors and vocal adults with whom they can identify. But what does the gay, celibate Christian kid have? In confirmation class and youth Bible studies, when the subject of sex comes up, the pastor or youth leader affirms his empathy for the straight kids in the class, sometimes with a joke or two. But when homosexuality enters the topic, the whole tone changes. Homosexuality is clearly viewed as “something in the world, not the church.” And the few gay Christian adults left in the conservative churches who are striving for obedience to God in their sexuality through celibacy or a mixed orientation marriage (when one person is LGBT and the other is straight) are essentially told to shut up and “just put your identity in Christ.” All this leaves the gay kid with nowhere to go for advice, no mentor to follow and, often, too afraid to make friends.

As a teen, the only advice I picked up from Christians about how a faithful kid could handle same sex

attractions was “avoid temptation.” So how does one have friendships if spending time with other guys also introduces temptation? For me, throughout my high school years, this clearly meant “you can not make friends and remain faithful to God.” My best friend was a kid named “John.” He lived on my route to school so every morning I would stop by his place and wait while he finished getting ready and then we would walk to school together. At the end of the school day we would often walk home together and I would wave goodbye to him at the bottom of his drive way. I had a vague idea that other guys got together on the weekends to do stuff or drove their cars up and down main street, joked or camped or spent the night at one another's houses. But for me, the most friendship I allowed myself was while walking to school and back. I never saw my “best friend” on the weekend, never saw him during summer vacation, and never even entered his house past the welcome mat inside the front door. To this day I still don't know where his room was located in his home.

As an adult I do not have to worry as much about temptation. But there are other barriers to friendship. Most men my age are married and have families. If I spend time with a friend, that may be time taken from his wife and kids – time which may be little enough as it is. Not to mention the fact that little practice of making same sex friendships in childhood has left me sometimes a little confused about how to go about making friendships in adulthood. This and other concerns make it tough for celibate gay people to establish close friendships.

Today, when I talk to other gay adults, one of the most common comments about their child hood is how desperately they felt the need for friends. When talking about their life today, the most frequent complaints is how lonely they are, especially in church. In fact, I know some Christian gay people who intentionally make a few non-Christian friends just so they will have someone they can really talk to and won't feel so isolated.

Although I have never been married, I do know some gay people who have chosen opposite sex marriage. And often they too feel isolated. With whom can they share their unique challenges of showing love and affection to a spouse they may never feel physically attracted to? And where can their spouse go in our romantically charged culture to share his or her sense of loss that their partner for life may never truly be “in love” with them? Too often they are left to find their way alone.

If Christians are going to ask gay people to live a life of celibacy or face the unique struggles they will find in opposite sex marriage, the Church could at least offer to provide other venues of human connection, love and friendship. Especially for those who are attracted to their own sex. Right now the world sees the conservative Christian denominations as not only attacking the world's answer of allowing gays to marry but also creating an atmosphere within the church walls that is so cold and lonely for same sex attracted Christians that being a celibate gay Christian essentially equates to choosing to live ones life full of self hate, depression and loneliness.

Frankly, I think the whole cultural debate over same sex marriage is over. It is here and it is here to stay for a long time. And, to be honest, I am not going to complain about that. If asked to attend a gay wedding, I'm going to go, wish the couple well, and be happy that here are two people who are less likely to kill themselves than if they had remained celibate in the atmosphere of the world and the Church today. But if the Church really wants to do something useful, something that has real meaning, Christians could offer something to those in her own walls who do face this issue and who, out of faithfulness to God, strive to forgo the world's solution of “falling in love in order to live happily ever after.” The Church could offer some real friendship tho those who most desperately need it. Just as

with hunger and illness, the Church has to stand ready to offer more than the spiritual blessings of forgiveness and salvation. Christians have to be ready, also, as much as they can, to offer earthly support, fellowship and comfort to those who may have to walk a lonelier road.

Let LGBT People Find a Place to Serve: Finally, there has to be some way for same sex attracted individuals to have a place in the Church. Melinda Selmys and Eve Tushnet frequently remind their readers that the Church has no vocation of “NO.” Just saying “don't have sex” is not a vocation. So also, President Harrison has said he would like to have something more to say to gay people than just “no.” The goal of ministry to same sex attracted people can not be limited to just keeping them from having sex.

Churches need to start asking not only “what can we do for same sex attracted people?” but “what can same sex attracted people do for the Church?” These are probably two of the most important questions and yet were barely even asked in Pastor Rueger's book and were not addressed at all in the task force documents from the LCMS.

To truly explore all the Church should do for gay believers and all that we can receive from them would take even more space than this already long letter has consumed. But perhaps an inkling can be gleaned from what Misty Irons wrote on her blog “More Musings on Christianity, Homosexuality & the Bible” about finding out that Ian Charleson, who played Eric Liddell in Chariots of fire was gay:

“.....So many times when I encounter a song, a performance, or a piece of art that strikes me as so true and subtle and poignant and uplifting I feel almost a spiritual connection with it, I later learn the artist behind it is gay. It's happened so often I now take it for granted. Maybe there's something about being gay that enables an artist to see more clearly what it means to be human, to identify certain truths about us all. Maybe it is the ones who are forced to the margins who truly understand what it is we all have in common.”

Now that I know Ian Charleson was gay it occurs to me that the dimension he grasped about Eric Liddell, which made that character seem so authentic, was his loneliness. To run for the pleasure of God had to be a lonely calling, one that neither your coach nor your missionary sister could easily understand. It's too religious for the athletic world and too secular for the Christian world. The Eric Liddell that Charleson portrayed was a man caught in between, and while both worlds sought to foist their own agendas upon him, he insisted on marching to a tune that he alone could hear; indulging in a private joy which, though mixed with pain, enabled him to carry himself with dignity throughout the chaos. Who else but a gay actor could understand so intuitively how these complex elements fit seamlessly together: to stand seemingly on center stage and still feel like an outsider looking in, to navigate through so many apparent contradictions and other people's attempts to define you, to drop an anchor deep within yourself and stay centered upon it with a conviction that reaches near spiritual heights?”

Along much the same lines as the words of this blogger, while I don't think either Mother Theresa nor Martin Luther were same sex attracted, neither were they emotionally healthy. Both suffered long bouts of darkness, depression, guilt, loneliness and being apart from God. Yet it was this very experience of being separated from God, of feeling very alone and dark that moved Mother Theresa to pour herself out for the poor and Martin Luther to fight so hard for the Gospel he learned to cherish.

Some believe Dietrich Bonhoeffer was attracted to men. If so, it would not surprise me. His obvious desire for Christian fellowship and his understanding of the cost of being a disciple could very easily flow from a sense of being isolated from others because of sexuality.

A starving child understands better than the well-fed one the importance and worth of food. A lonely man or woman understands best the value of friendship. A widower may understand more deeply the blessings of marriage. Denying ones self can, and does, produce a deeper understanding of God and of Christ's love and sacrifice.

Now, I am not advocating some “divine call of homosexuality.” But I do sincerely believe that the experiences of same sex attracted people can give them certain talents and insights that can be useful to the church just as the experiences of every individual do. So I think there are many things LGBT people can offer to the Church, if the Church will have the courage to let them find a place and be a part of the Body of Christ.

So this final step comes down to this: We need, first of all, to ask how we can help same sex attracted people, especially teens, as they face loneliness, shame, suicide and depression. What can we do for them from a biblical point of view? And secondly, how can we confidently use their gifts and talents, some of which may come from their struggle between their sexuality and their faith, in the Church?

I don't really know how to conclude this letter other than to say this; Few other modern issues demonstrate the truth of Lutheran theology and the distinction between the Law which kills and the Gospel which makes alive more clearly than issues like homosexuality, gay marriage and gender dysphoria. If they receive the Gospel properly, most of the LGBT people I know are willing to go to great lengths and to make great sacrifices to serve a God who truly loves them. But the key to ministering in all these areas is to remain very Lutheran in our view and not be distracted by the debates going on in the world. Above all, pastors need to spend a lot less time debating wedding cakes and bathrooms and a lot more time and space to actually ministering to those who are affected by these things. If we focus on actual ministry, I think the LCMS has tremendous potential to help those who desire to receive that ministry. If we continue to focus outside the Church and spend most of our pastoral time and energy in the kingdom of the left then, to be honest, I can not complain if the world tells us, even forcefully, to shut up. In the end, we should not be discussing “Sexual Morality in a Christless World.” We should, instead, be asking how to bring Christ to a world that does not truly know Him and how to help those who do know Him and are crying out for the Body of Christ to share His mercy with them.

I said earlier that my belief that most pastors truly want to minister to same sex attracted members in a loving and Law/Gospel centered manner takes a lot of faith on my part. I guess it is now up to you to show whether that faith is correct or not.

Resources

I know 30 pages is long for a letter or an article. And yet, I have not said everything I would like to say. I once tried to write a book on the topic but even at 300 pages there was more to talk about and I gave up, knowing no one would read that much. But I would hope I made some of you want to learn more. If so, here are some good resources:

Books and Blogs by LGBT Christians who Accepted Sexual Obedience Early in Life:

“Washed and Waiting” and “Spiritual Friendship” by Dr Wesley Hill are both very good. He also helps produce a web site “spiritualfriendship.org” which has excellent suggestions for ministry to LGBT people within a conservative congregation.

“mudbloodcatholic.blogspot.com” is an amazing blog by a gay Catholic man.

“aqueercalling.com” is a great blog by two lesbian women who chose committed friendship. Unfortunately, it has not been updated in a year. I hope it will stick around.

Books and Blogs by/about LGBT Christians who converted to Christianity:

Eve Tushnet's book “Gay and Catholic” is really great as is her blog at “patheos.com/blogs/evetushnet”

Melinda Selmys is another excellent gay author. Where Eve chose celibacy, Melinda married and has children. Her books are “Sexual Authenticity” and “Sexual Authenticity: More Reflections.” I much prefer the second book. She also writes at “patheos.com/blogs/catholicauthenticity”

“Is Love Wrong?” by Chris Plenkenpol is the account of the author's encounter with a gay man while attending a Christian college. It is good to read as it shows from outside what questions a LGBT person faces as he considers Christ and Christianity.

“People to be Loved” and “Living in a Gray World” are both by Preston Sprinkle and are among the better books about homosexuality I have read by a straight author. If I have any complaint it is that he spends too much time early in the books presenting and defending his theological arguments, which often have little sway in this discussion. But certain chapters are excellent.

Books by Christians who changed their mind on homosexuality and gay marriage:

Though both these authors reached a different conclusion than I did on the subject of gay marriage/gay relationships, they should be read as they demonstrate that, while those gay people who accept the traditional view of marriage usually did so after coming to Christ, the corollary is also true, that many abandon the traditional view of marriage because of how they have observed gay people treated by Christians rather than because they have rejected Christianity.

The Cross in the Closet by Timothy Kurek is his account of pretending to be gay for one year so that he could better understand the experiences of his gay friends.

“Two Words – How Hearing 'I'm Gay' Changed My Straight Christian Life” by Emily Timbol is her account of how having several gay Christian friends made her question her stand on homosexuality.

Both books illustrate that if we do not change the way we behave and speak about homosexuality then our words and actions will do more to drive gay people away from Christianity than all the theological/biblical arguments in the world.

I am sure there are many other good resources but these make a good start.