

What are you looking at? Re-Thinking Sexual Identity with the Mind of Christ

I Corinthians 5:16-21. ¹⁶ So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

I wonder how it would be if I started out by saying at that I am not a heterosexual. I don't know if that has changed at all how you're listening to me now, if it's given me more credibility with you, or less, if you're listening closer, or if you've suddenly tuned me out. I don't know; but if it has changed how you're listening to me now, it's all the more reason for me to start here: What if I were to say that I don't consider myself to be a "heterosexual."

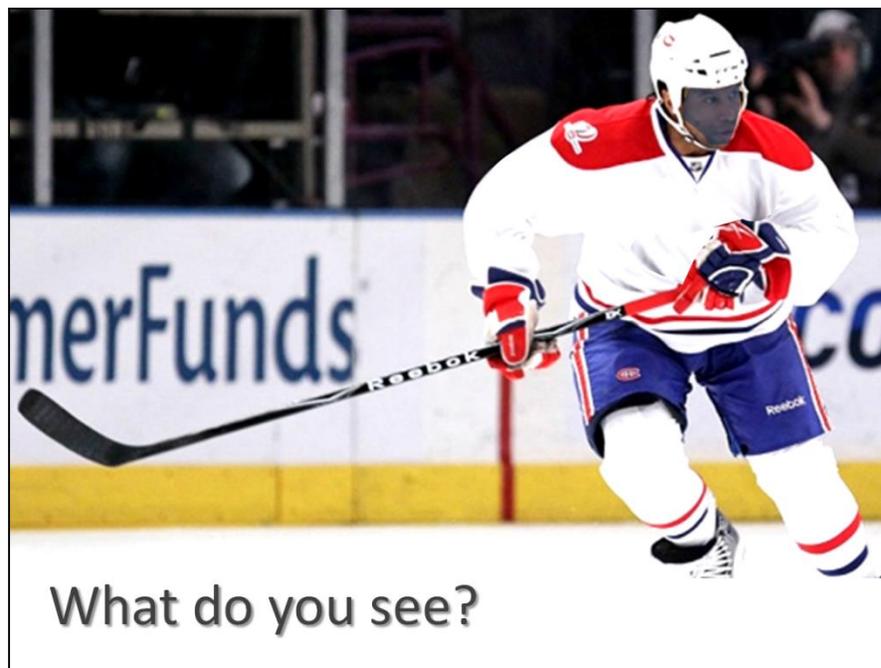
Now: people who know me well, of course, would know that in one sense that statement is nonsense. I am happily married to my high school sweetheart and have been so for almost twenty years, in which time I have been exclusively faithful to her. And, while I do experience feelings of admiration and affection for other males in my life, while I often enjoy their

camaraderie and sometimes fear their rejection, I don't sexualize those feelings, or experience them as an erotic attraction.

So people who know me would be within their rights to say: If that's not a description of a *heterosexual man*, Pastor Dale, then what is? What could you possibly mean by saying you're *not* a heterosexual?

Well. Maybe it would help if we thought about it like this. If I were to ask you "What do we have here?" What would you say?

Now: I need to confess that I am not a hockey fan. (I don't know if *that* has changed at all how you're listening to me now... if it's given me more credibility with you, or less ... but it's true). So: can someone who *is* a hockey fan tell me something about the person in this photo?



Well. It's hard to say much when all you have is a plain white jersey to go on, so what if we got a little closer. Now what do you see?



A *Canadien*? Someone who plays for Montreal? What if we were to ask a Boston Fan, what would they see? What if we were to ask a Leafs fan?

Well. It's still not much to go on. So maybe we should zoom in even closer.



Now what do you see? Okay: I'm *not* a Hockey Fan, but even *I've* heard of Georges Laraque. But what can you tell me about him? What if we were to ask a Haitian man, what would he see? A role model? A hero? What if I were to ask an old-timer hockey fan from rural Alberta, who's only even seen "white guys" playing hockey. What would he see?

Well: maybe you're even less a hockey fan than I am. So probably I should show you an image of our Hockey Player in action.



Now what do you see? What if I were to tell you that he had 154 fights over the course of his NHL career; that *Hockey News* unanimously awarded him the "2003 Best Fighter" award, and in 2008, *Sports Illustrated* named him Number one Enforcer. If I told you all that, then what would you see? An enforcer? A "goon"?

Well. Maybe just one more question. What if *Jesus* looked at this person. What would he see?

A male, human being, as much in need of God's grace as the next guy.

Now do you know what I'm getting at when I say that I am not a "heterosexual"? I just mean that my sexual feelings do not *define me*, anymore that Laraque's Habs jersey *defines* him. Not in Jesus' eyes, they don't.

And it's not just in Jesus' eyes; I mean: even in terms of how we understand sexuality in the first place, and what it even means to say that someone is "gay" or "straight" or "homosexual" or "heterosexual"—the idea that our sexual attractions somehow *define us*—well, a number of scholars these days are saying that's probably not the *best way* to think about sexuality.

So I need to go carefully here. Because we live in a culture that says, basically, that human sexuality can be neatly divided up into a handful of straightforward categories. Either you're heterosexual, or you're LGBTQ, let's say. And our culture tells us that those labels actually say something essential about who you are as a person, and that in order to *be* who you are as a person, you need to "express" this identity in some way. You need to "identify" as a "heterosexual," or a "homosexual," or what have you.

But the thing is, this idea, as common as it is, it's actually just that, it's *an idea*; a modern, Western *cultural* idea. Certainly not all human cultures around the globe or at every point in history would assume, or agree, that there is something *identity-constituting* about your sexual feelings, something that actually defines who you are.

In her book, *The End of Sexual Identity*, Anthropologist Jenell Williams Paris puts it like this: "Defined in a wide variety of ways," she says, "social identities related to biological sex (such as male and female) and gender (such as boy and girl) are common across world cultures. Identity categories based in sexuality (such as heterosexual and homosexual) are much less common. Most cultures that have ever been present on the earth ... didn't have heterosexuals,

per se. They didn't have homosexuals either, because heterosexuality requires homosexuality; each makes sense only with reference to the other."¹

To be clear, Paris is not saying that same-sex sexual activity itself is a modern Western thing—almost every culture *everywhere* would have some framework for thinking about and talking about same-sex sex; but the belief that this kind of sexual activity actually expresses something essential about your *identity*—that belief is a relatively modern one.

So back to my opening disclaimer, about me not considering myself a “heterosexual.” My point in saying that is just this: Like everyone else in this room, my “sexuality” is a messy, mysterious network of feelings, desires, relationships, fantasies, social roles, behaviours and biological functions which can't be neatly wrapped up with a simplistic bow like “heterosexual”; and when I *identify myself* as a “heterosexual,” one of two things are likely to happen. And neither of them are very helpful.

So on the one hand: I might actually deceive myself into thinking I'm doing a whole lot better than I really am, when it comes to how I experience my sexuality. After all, labels like “homosexual” and “heterosexual” divide the world up into nice neat binaries, don't they? Heterosexual=“ok,” and homosexual= “not ok”?

But of course, if I were to lay out *all* of the feelings and impulses and desires and thought-patterns that are part of *my sexuality*, it wouldn't take long to see that at any given time, in any given season of my life, some of those things are ok, and some not so ok; some are healthy, some are hurting, *even though none of them have anything to do with same-sex attraction*.

¹ Williams Paris, Jennell. *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is too Important to Define Who we Are* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Books, 2011), 45.

And if I “whitewash” it all—if I make it all “ok” with a simplistic label like “heterosexual”—it might actually prevent me from being honest with Jesus about what’s really going on in here; it may actually prevent him from healing some things in me that *aren’t* “ok.”

So that’s one thing.

But the other thing that happens when I “indentify” as a heterosexual in an unexamined way, is that, without even knowing it, I can actually be conforming to the pattern of this world instead of conforming to the pattern of Christ.

What I mean is that, in one sense, I can’t use the label “heterosexual” without first adopting this prevailing cultural assumption that people *are*, in the end, defined by their sexuality. After all: When I say I am a “heterosexual,” aren’t I also saying—at least in our culture—aren’t I also saying “I am not a homosexual”? And when I do that, in a way, don’t I just *reinforce* for myself this idea that we *can* divide human sexuality up into nice neat categories, and then we *can* group people into one or the other, and label them accordingly, and the group you belong to actually *does say* something about your value, your worth, your identity as a human being?

If I *am* reinforcing that idea in myself, then I need to repent of it. Because I, like everyone else in this room regardless of their sexual orientation, I am far more than the sum of my sexual feelings. My identity rests, not in my sexuality, but in Christ. And when Christ looks at me—like everyone else in this room—he sees a beloved human being, as much in need of God’s grace as the next guy.

So: why all the back story? Well: because I was asked to introduce “where our movement, the FMCiC, is starting from when it comes to ministry to, among, and with the

LGBTQ community.” And I expect when I say that, some people in the room just heard me say, “I’m going to tell you what the FMCiC’s ‘position’ is on ‘homosexuality.’”

And I’m hoping that all of that “back story” will help people understand what I mean when I say that, in one sense—in the modern “sexual identity” sense of the term—our movement doesn’t really have a position on “homosexuality.” At least not one I can see.

Don’t get me wrong: we acknowledge that the Scriptures speak very clearly about same-sex sexual intimacy—the Manual puts it like this: “Same sex sexual intimacy is regarded by the Scriptures as immoral because it is a distortion of God’s creation design.” We also insist that biblically, marriage can only be the union of “one man and one woman.” We recognize that the church has a corporate responsibility to be God’s agent of transformation for all people, as they learn to pursue the best of God’s design for healthy sexuality.²

In *that* sense, the Free Methodist perspective on sexuality speaks quite openly and directly to questions of same-sex intimacy: it is not the best of God’s design for healthy sexuality.

However, when it comes to homosexuality as a sexual identity category, our documents are wisely silent. You’ll actually notice, if you read through the Manual, that the word “homosexual” only occurs twice. Once in a reference to “homosexual sexual relationships,” in the employee code of conduct in Chapter 8, and once in the index. Aside from those two technical uses of the term, however, The Manual only discusses same-sex sexual activity and it does so alongside certain kinds of *hetero-sexual* sexual activity that we *also* believe are “not in keeping with God’s design.”

²*The Manual of the Free Methodist Church in Canada* (Mississauga, ON: The Free Methodist Church in Canada, 2013 revision), Chapter 6, page 15, ¶630.2.8.

The Manual is very careful to differentiate between same-sex sexual behaviour and same-sex sexual attraction. But this is more than just a simplistic “love the sinner/hate the sin” distinction, I think; it is our way of recognizing that your sexual feelings simply do not constitute your *identity*. People are not the sum of what they “desire” sexually.

I don’t want you to misunderstand this. In his book *Torn*, Justin Lee describes a “Side A/Side B” framework as way of understanding the basic positions Christian churches take when it comes to homosexual relationships.³ “Side A” Christians would see homosexual relationships as having the same value and the same “creational-integrity” as heterosexual ones, that is, that in the sexual intimacy dimension of life, homosexual sex is God’s creation design for that person. “Side B” Christians hold that only male/female sexual intimacy, experienced in the context of an exclusive, permanent marriage covenant, is the Creator’s design for sex. To be clear, the FMCiC is a “Side B” movement in this model.

However, the distinction between sexual desires and personal identity helps us to nuance this “Side B” position in important ways. A genuine “Side B” position—at least the position the Manual of the FMCiC articulates—does not “sanction” heterosexuals and “condemn” homosexuals; rather it calls *all* Christians, out of their identity in Christ and regardless of their sexual attractions, to uphold and preserve the exclusive, permanent male/female marriage covenant as the only context for sexual intimacy that reflects the Creator’s design. And this is as much true for the married woman who finds herself erotically drawn to other women, let’s say, as it is for the unmarried man, maybe, who finds himself erotically drawn to many women.

So: I’m dwelling on all of this because, as I’ve wrestled with this idea personally—that people *really aren’t* just the sum of their sexual desires, and it is a sin to view them as such—I

³ Lee, Justin. *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs-Christians Debate* (Jericho Books, 2012), 225.

have come to see some things in *me* that Jesus needs to change, if I'm going to see people the way he sees people.

Just the other day, for instance. A woman I had come to know through my work as a pastor was is dying of cancer. The doctors have only given her months to live, and so her friends threw her a “celebration of life”—a final chance to cry and laugh and love, and say good bye. She doesn't go to church but she called me and invited me to come. When I got there she was sitting in the corner with two close friends I'd never met before. Let's call them Alan and Ed. From their posture, the touch and glances they exchanged, the way they talked about their life together, my mind very quickly jumped to the most handy “identity categories” I had.

All I saw was the Hab's Jersey.

It was only because I had been doing so much reading in preparation for this talk tonight, perhaps, that I caught myself, but I did: I was playing by the world's rules, and letting this *particular* aspect of their lives define them for me. What work of the Holy Spirit was I about to miss, in that moment, because I had “bought in” to the prevailing sexual identity “paradigm,” and was letting the “homosexual/heterosexual” binaries do the thinking for me?

I started talking to Ed. Found out that he was a music producer, found out that we shared a common love of music; he asked me about my work as a pastor; he shared some of his own spiritual journey; I found out that he had actually been involved for many years in a charismatic church, had worked with some Christian bands, had...

Okay. No one prayed the sinner's prayer that day. This isn't one of “those stories”—but *I am* praying the sinner's prayer now.

Because I've come to see that in my impulse to "categorize" these two men in terms of their sexual behaviour—and not *even* their sexual behaviour, but what I thought I knew about their sexual behaviour—in giving in to that impulse, I was betraying Jesus, who died for them.

And what's more, I was at great risk of *missing* the prevenient grace of God at work in these men's lives. Their profound friendship and care for a dying woman; things that God was *still* doing in them and through them, despite the fact that their sexual activity was not in line with his design (assuming, of course, that my prejudices were even right, in the first place).

So I'm praying the sinner's prayer today, and asking Jesus to change in me this habit that I picked up from the world, this tendency to *categorize* people according to their sexualities; I'm asking him to forgive me for conforming to the pattern of this world, and assuming that our sexual feelings somehow define our identity as human beings. I'm praying that prayer today.

I wonder if you will join me?