

Vista 30: Mission on the Margins

A response to 'Let's talk about LGBT inclusion'

As one unashamedly passionate about mission in Europe, who longs to see its peoples, subcultures and those on the margins of society, bow the knee before Jesus, I was very interested to read an article on LGBT inclusion by Danielle Wilson in a recent edition of Vista. How do we more effectively reach this very small but growing minority, who up until very recently, have not been accepted in Western society? I could see right from the outset that Danielle has a heart for her LGBT friends to spend eternity with Jesus! So do I! As a missional community, we need to be developing a more robust missiological approach to this group, both in theory and in practice, that will yield fruit for eternity.

That said, the biblical and theological questions this endeavour raises are not peripheral and must be addressed. As evangelicals, committed as we are to the authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice, we must raise the question of what conversion and sanctification looks like for this group. I was looking forward to what Danielle might have to say about the biblical call for repentance as it relates to human sexuality. What might the author say regarding the need to love LGBT sinners like Jesus does, and at the same time, to hate all sin, LGBT sin included, like Jesus does too? In today's climate in Europe, where the church and mission organisations are under tremendous pressure to conform to new cultural norms around homosexual practice and same-sex marriage, I was even hoping there may be exhortation to the sometimes thankless and unpopular prophetic role. Unfortunately, this article fell well short of my expectations. I was disappointed with what seemed to me to be a lop-sided treatment of this urgent and important topic.

This is not to say Danielle has not raised some good points for us to contemplate further. Danielle clearly has insight into the struggles of those within the LGBT community who are genuine seekers or possibly on a journey to faith in Jesus. How difficult it must be for those who not feel included or welcomed by churches or Christians. Further, many same-sex attracted people find that church communities have precious little empathy for their struggles. It is easy for you, they might say to the average married pastor, to demand a life of celibacy.

Danielle's piece might well help us build bridges to the LGBT community. As much as it sounds obvious, it is good to be reminded that gays, lesbians and transsexuals are not "missionary projects" or "headaches" but people whom God loves. Moreover, a genuinely missional church will not wait for those who identify as LGBT to come to them. To do this, we need to divest ourselves of the pharisaical approach to "sinners", where we effectively send this kind of message: "if you want to know Jesus or taste something of Christian community, you'll need to clean up your life first." Jesus addressed his parables of Luke 15 to counter precisely this mentality (Luke 15:1-2).

That said, my biggest problem with the article is that it conveys a common misunderstanding of Jesus and the gospel amongst some evangelicals. Jesus is only ever portrayed as the compassionate, caring Saviour figure. For Danielle, the deep underlying truth of the gospel, far more important than other matters of theology, is that all of us, including LGBT, are loved by Jesus. I do not want to question for a moment Christ's love, especially as it is demonstrated in the death of Christ for sinners (Rom.5:8). However, this is only one aspect of the gospel.

These days, gospel preaching is often conflated with communicating this one key idea. This is quite different from the evangelistic preaching of the early church, particularly the speeches as recorded in the book of Acts. We notice in Acts that "love" rarely rates a mention in its gospel preaching, as much as it might be implied. The thrust of the message to Jews and Gentiles is that they are under the judgement of the Creator, yet because Jesus has been made Lord / Judge by the resurrection, all who come to him in repentance and faith will be saved. Those who repent and believe receive the gifts of forgiveness, the Holy Spirit and eternal life (see for example, Acts 2:36-38, 10:42-43, 17:29-31). So, Christ's love is different from the world's love! It does not condone sin nor give license to practice it. Yet for those who would submit to Christ as Lord, the one who died for sin and is now highly exalted, there is the free offer of forgiveness, conversion and life in the Spirit.

The heart of the biblical gospel is that Jesus is both Saviour *and* Lord of all. Our missiology must be shaped in the light of our Christology, otherwise it is clearly deficient. Relational sensibilities do not trump the need to speak the truth in love. I want to challenge all of us who are involved in mission in Europe to think through what it means to faithfully bear witness to the full Christ of Scripture in the LGBT community? At a minimum, outreach must aim and pray for a humble, costly repentance. Just like Jesus demands that the wealthy surrender their riches to his Lordship

(Mark 10:21), so he demands that sex and sexuality conform to the biblical model. In general, this will not be popular or welcome, but it is the most loving thing we can do. If we earnestly desire that same-sex attracted people experience the joy of eternal life, we need to take seriously verses like 1 Corinthians 6:9b-10 (NIV): “Do be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who have sex with other men, nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”¹

By all means, let’s create open-hearted communities where all are invited to begin a journey with Jesus. But let’s make sure we don’t introduce those who identify as LGBT to a diluted Christ or a diluted gospel. Rather, let’s prayerfully strive to proclaim the mystery of Christ clearly as we should (Col.4:4).

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¹ While some say Jesus never spoke against homosexuality, we need to understand Jesus of Nazareth as a devout first-century Jew steeped in Old Testament ethics. Christ himself declared that he came to fulfil the Old Covenant (or law) down to the letter (Mat.5:17). Sex here is strictly reserved for marriage and homosexual sex is condemned (Lev. 18:22 and 20:3). Note wherever Jesus comments on matters related marriage or sexuality, he therefore affirms Creation or Old Testament norms (e.g. Mat.19:5). Jesus’ condemnation of sexual immorality (“porneia”) in Mark 7:21 must be understood against the model of sex within marriage laid out in the Old Testament. Paul also makes it clear that the Old and New Testament positions on homosexuality are the same when he uses the Septuagint translation of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:3 in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, quoted above.