When Jerusalem Meets Vegas

Part 1 of 2: Identity in the LGBT community
with
Release Date: January 2015
The Table Podcast  When Jerusalem Meets Vegas

Darrell Bock  I’m Darrell Bock Executive Director for cultural engagement at the Hendricks Center and welcome to the Table where we discuss issues of God and culture, and our topic today is sexuality in general. We’ve just completed a conference here at the seminary called Jerusalem Meets Vegas which is our way talking about a whole array of issues related to sexuality, and I have two very qualified people to discuss this topic with us. They’re both veterans of foreign wars when it comes to the Table. They’ve been here before and are back, and I’m sure we will have them yet again Mark Yarhouse is on my left. He holds the Hughes Endowed Chair and is a Professor of Psychology at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Thank you Mark for being a part of this.

Mark Yarhouse  Thank you for having me.

Darrell Bock  And then Stan Jones who’s Provost and Professor of Psychology at Wheaton College who actually had the privilege of launching our Table podcast as well as our Table chapels that we do at the seminary on the topic of same-sex issues, and he’s here with us from Wheaton and we thank you for being a part Stan.

Stan Jones  Great to be back Darrell.

Darrell Bock  I’m just going to just dive right in. Let’s talk about sexuality in the church in general. And I’m going to start with a premise. And that is that if you say, “Church and sex,” okay, most people are going to go, “All I’m going to hear is the negative. All I’m going to hear is what we shouldn’t do.” That kind of thing. And we’re probably a little guilty of that if I can say that in terms of the way we project ourselves. So my question is this (and I’ll start with you Mark): What’s the positive side of the story, and how would you encourage the church to be more positive when it addresses issues of sexuality in our world?
Mark Yarhouse  Well I do think that for many people their experience with talking about sex in church begins with a negative. The things that you’re not supposed to do or the things we need you to avoid, but I think there’s many reasons to think of a positive view of sexuality from the church. I mean I think from creation God designed us to be sexual beings and intended for sexual intimacy to be a gift you know to people who are brought into marriage. And so it ends up I think just starting out of the creation story that this was something that was meant to be a very positive, good thing for people to delight in, but so much of our conversation ends up being around the areas that we have concerns about.

Darrell Bock  And Stan as you think about this question and you think about building a foundation that talks about sex in a positive way or maybe even properly theologically framed. How would you get us to think about this?

Stan Jones  I think Mark is exactly right at the start of creation, and I think that the church is often times driven by the contemporary conversation. They’re concerned about the direction that culture is taking us and so the instinct is to resist and to protect, and particularly it gets expressed in the desire to protect children and I think that we forget that the best way to protect our children is to fully inform our children and to teach them the full positive story of God’s gift of sexuality. That if we teach our children how God’s gift is a good gift. It can be misused, yes; but if it’s used properly it will be a blessing in marriage, and it will be a blessing in singleness too. Our sexuality is a positive gift to individuals as well as to married couples. As individuals it robs us of any illusion that we can be isolated autonomous beings without needs for other people. Our sexuality is part of the basis by which we’re drawn towards relationship, and that I think we all discover as matured adults that you know having sex doesn’t end your needs for intimacy. It just points to something deeper that we want. I think what we ultimately want is a relationship with God, and so our sexuality is one of the ways in which God speaks to us that we’re not meant to be alone both at a human level but also in the relationship with God himself.
Now one of the interesting things that you have all both did today which I thought was fascinating was to discuss the role of singleness in all this because usually when you think of sexuality and singleness, those two conversations don’t go together too naturally. And yet there’s something also about being a single person affirmed even in the example of Jesus who himself was single and remains single that it’s a part of this story. What does singleness add to this conversation or at least what perspective or added dimension does it give to us on this?

—Well I think part of our sexuality is the longing for completion in “the other.” And so Stan’s point is that our sexuality points to transcendent reality and purposes. God wants intimacy with us and so you can experience that at one level in marriage in terms of sexual intimacy and delighting in our sexuality in one way, but in singleness you also delight in your sexuality because it also reminds you of the intimacy God wants to have with you. It’s in some ways like the ancient practice of the spiritual discipline of fasting. I mean you refrain from food to remind yourself that you only really sustain yourself on who Jesus is, and it’s his sustenance that gives you life. He’s the bread of life. And so sexuality I think properly understood I think for a married person or a single person is intended by God to be instructive of our need for him. Our desire to be in an intimate walk with him.

Stan.

Yeah I think that that single person in our church is- unfortunately evangelical churches all too often treat the single people as the folks that you’re trying to get married. So it can move into that status but we get uncomfortable with the idea of singles who are committed to chastity and really building deeper relationships with each other, and Mark is part of movement that I really appreciate to deepen the understanding of singleness and I think that we can deepen our understanding of friendship, we can deepen our understanding of what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ. We can build relationships that really do speak of the deep transformation that the Gospel can work in people’s lives and do so in a way that’s honoring to the teachings and scripture about sexual morality.
Darrell Bock

Now when we think about the way in which the church has responded to these areas and really the tension that the church fields itself under to some degree because there are divine standards and divine provisions if I think about it in more positive terms about how God defines the way we should express this intimacy that we’re talking about that shows itself in sexuality and we think about what’s happening around us in the culture, obviously there’s a tension that’s introduced there. And you have all both spent a lot of time talking about the kinds of “scripts” that are coming to us from the culture about sexuality and how the church really has almost been deaf if I can use a figure of speech to what those scripts are, the power of those scripts, what they say. Why they’re inviting and why they draw people towards them. So I’d like for you all to explain first of all what the script is and why it’s powerful but then secondly how the church should be responding to these scripts. Stan, I think I’ll start with you. So what scripts are we hearing about the way sexuality works in defining who we are as people, and why is that such a powerful message?
Stan Jones: Well I think the two scripts I talked about in my concluding talk today I think are very powerful in our culture. One is sort of an evolutionary script that says basically that the only purpose of life is to perpetuate itself in further life. And so this is I think something that comes weighted with this sort of as if this is the scientific view, and it’s sort of a validation of a sort of you know an empirical reality is whatever it is. I am what I am. I should embrace whatever it is that I experience, and it comes with a certain license to do what I want to do, and I think that appeals to sort of the arrogance of the human condition that we need to address. So there’s an attractiveness to that view that I think is actually dangerous that the church needs to understand even as it engages. And I think the other major view is that sexual identity is really fundamentally an identity that we construct; it’s a narrative that we make for ourselves. And as long as that narrative makes us to feel better it’s good. So the goal is to really become the person I’m inclined to be anyway and so self-acceptance becomes the theme that drives this movement, and the goal is to build an identity that again works for you. And I think that in some parts of the church we’re more influenced by what Christian Smith has called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” with the idea that God is just sort of there. He’s a good God. He kind of loves us at a distance. And he just wants us to play nice, and everything will work out just fine but the Christian message is really fundamentally different. The Christian message is sort of that God intruded into the world and is inviting people to come to true relationship with him and to come to true relationship we need to know how broken we are but that we can be transformed but I think the church if it can figure out where people are stuck in their understanding of sexuality what it is that they think their narrative about sexuality is doing whether it’s sort of a hopeless evolutionary view that there is no ultimate purpose or the narrative purpose of my sexual identity is all that there is. Helping people to know that there’s something more that you can get to through the person of Christ can give us hope for transformation. I think that a very powerful-

Darrell Bock: So if life doesn’t make any sense and there’s no real difference than it really doesn’t matter what I do with my life, but if there’s some rhyme or reason that’s a different kind of deal.

Stan Jones: That’s right.
Darrell Bock

Mark I know you’ve stressed another element of this other than the points that Stan has brought up that have to do with the draw to community and an expression of that acceptance. I’d like to hear you draw that out a little bit, because I do think that’s part of where the power of the script is.

Mark Yarhouse

−Yeah. I mean I was just looking through the research we had done, what is so emotionally compelling about the main stream gay community, and it seemed to be answering fundamental questions about two things that matter to all of us which is these two things are identity and community. So who am I and what community am I apart. And so I think what draws people in is what I refer to as a “gay script.” And I’m just kind of describing what I think. I don’t think you’re going to Google it and find a definition of it. But I do think it begins with the premise that same-sex sexuality distinguishes types of people. That there are categorically different types of people by virtue of their pattern of sexual attraction and that same-sex sexuality is kind of central to your sense of who you are as a person. It’s core, a core part of who you are so it’s at the center of your sense of self, and then when people come along and they evaluate you sexual behavior as right or wrong or they try to impose a sexual ethic on a person, that script says look there’s nothing here to judge. It’s simply an expression of something fundamental to who you are. It’s expression of your identity.

Darrell Bock

So you’re identity gives you the right to be there, and then the question is- and then alongside that comes an affirmation of people who say not only you have the right to be there but it’s a good thing to be where you are.

Mark Yarhouse

Yeah I think we end up at a place of self-actualization of your sexual identity or sexuality. I think that’s tremendously compelling emotionally. I think it’s a script that snuck up on the church. I don’t think the church saw that coming. You know I think the church was having a different kind of discussion in our culture while this was I think developing and sort of took on a life of its own. It was developed as a culture, as a community. And I think you have young people and really people of all ages who would be drawn to that particularly if the contrast in their local church has not felt life giving.
So in one sense the response to this is I would take it some kind of other compelling story, something thing if I can use this term challenge that understanding that way of orienting your life. And I’m assuming that there is something out there that the church can do and say that addresses these issues in a different way and yet hopefully supplies the kinds of things that either this does or cannot address. Would you say the church has such a story and such a place to take people?

I think the church has the capacity to speak into this area, but we have struggled, and I think we’ve been satisfied with an ex-gay story line that we believed that anybody who tried hard enough or had enough faith would be able to live into. That they would just become heterosexual. And that that’s what God’s provision would mean for them, and that’s a really delicate area right now within our larger cultural discussion. And I don’t want to discourage people who believe that they should pursue something along those lines, but I think most people that have gone down that path have not found it to be as satisfying as they hoped it would be, and so it’s been challenging for them. Part of what we hear back is “I don’t know that what I get on the other side of that is the kind of healing or heterosexuality I thought I was going to get.” That doesn’t mean that there can’t be some gains for that person. It also could mean that that person moves away from thinking and identifying themselves in one way, and they use different categories and language and structures. They discontinue a pattern of behavior that used to characterize them as a person and now they’re not doing that. For some people it’s going to be pursuing celibacy or other avenues so I don’t know that we’ve developed multiple story lines that feel as life-giving to somebody. And while all of this is going on, it’s all done under a magnifying glass of a larger cultural debate in which any of these story lines are being ridiculed in social media and elsewhere so that it feels that there’s not even this space to explore these possibilities, because anything other than living into a gay script feels like it’s being marginalized.

Yeah I think that’s really a pretty important observation that whether we’re talking about the church’s claim that the call is to go from being gay to becoming ex-gay, if I can just say it real simply and crisply or the call is to accept this is who I am and this is how I am drawn. This is how my attractions are drawn, but I’m going to live in a way that honors God and is celibate in the midst of that. Neither of those options is very welcome in the gay community and is very much challenged and in some cases mocked as taking away something that is essential from the person. Fair enough?
Mark Yarhouse  All of that is still under the authority of a moral vision that’s imposed by the outside and that’s the sort of fundamental discussion that’s happening in our culture at many levels is will I submit myself to something that I believe resides outside of me that I trust that has a moral vision for how I should live my life? And I think there is something in just our fallenness that reacts to that. I will not be subject to another, and yet the Christian says, “That’s exactly who I am. I am subject to a king.”

Stan Jones  And if I could add one thing it’s just I think that one of things that Mark and I have heard in conversations with so many people is that there’s such a sense among people who experience same-sex attraction that they are really the other. They’re in a special class of brokenness, and I think that we need to really emphasize the universal and Mark was doing exactly that at the end. Emphasize the universal dimension of this, of the bigger story that we need to tell. And that is: it’s a universal that we are all broken. This is not me the whole person talking to the broken person experiencing same-sex attraction this is me the broken person whose brokenness in the area of sexuality is just in a different area of brokenness than what this person experienced, but I am much more alike, and I am fundamentally like the person that I’m talking to and not fundamentally different. So we are part of the same human family experiencing, we have the same fundamental gift of sexuality, and the brokenness I experience is just as profound as that person’s brokenness just expressed in different ways.

Darrell Bock  You know I had a conversation with somebody who was exactly in this area, and it was actually, we were contending as to whether the way in which the church should respond to this situation is to insist -if I can say it that way- that a gay be told to move to an ex-gay lifestyle and let God heal them (that was the actual language that was being used) versus the option of this: “Yes I’m gay, and I’m oriented this way. And I’ve chosen to be celibate.” And I use this illustration to get at your shared brokenness picture, and this is to say that I am a male. Males tend to have desires and lusts and that kind of thing. That doesn’t go away simply because I become a Christian. I still wrestle with those areas in my life.

Stan Jones  It doesn’t go away because you got married either.
Darrell Bock

It doesn’t go away because I get married. You know it’s still there. So then the issue becomes: how do I deal with this if this is a reality in my life. If this is something and I don’t know what other word to use, I have to contend with in my life. And make choices about, volitional choices about it in my life. And it seems to me that that’s an analogy that the way in which one person may wrestle and struggle with one area in their life that challenges them is like another area that another person struggles with, a different struggle but the same fundamental kinds of choices that we face about how I’m going to conduct myself, and I tried to say to this person the person who chooses to say, “This is who I am. I’ve tried to change. I can’t change but I’m still going to honor God out of this place” is actually doing a very good thing in comparison to the person who either says, “Well that’s who I am so I’m just giving up,” or the person who says, “I’m going to try and make myself into something that really doesn’t feel real in terms of who I am” which it seems to me are your other two options. Is that a helpful way to think about approaching this, or should we think about the gay person as kind of being in their own class?
**Mark Yarhouse**

Yeah, I don’t think I want to say that they’re in their own class, but I do think we want to be sensitive to the fact that their set of challenges are different in important ways. So for example, if the three of us who are heterosexual and married talk about our unique challenges as though very comparable to a gay person’s, I think there’s a lot of gay Christians or a gay person who’s even celibate and Christian and look at it and say, “Yeah, but you have those releases and opportunities for intimacy and genital sexual expression with your spouse.” So the way that I tend to think about it is more of a principal of stewardship that we’re all called to be good stewards of the impulses that we do experience. And so if I’m married I still have to be a good steward of the impulses I have, and some of my desires might not be solely for my spouse and so I still have to be a good steward of those things. If I’m single I want to be a good steward of my sexual impulses. If I experience same-sex sexuality what’s it going to mean for a follower of Christ to be a good steward of the impulses that they feel. So there’s an element there that there’s something that hangs together. We all share something in common. We have sexual impulses, and we have this principal of stewardship, but there will be differences. There’s also just differences if there’s two single people, and one person’s heterosexual. Well they have the opportunity to date and have physical expressions of affection and things like that, and the gay person may feel quite constrained as to whether that’s even something they can consider and is that less experience of affection and intimacy, is that experienced differently for them? My conversation with gay people is: yes, it is experienced differently.

**Darrell Bock**

Interesting. Stan you brought up something that I thought was also important and gets also into some of the areas we’ve just been discussing which is the whole area in the way in which the volition is directed, and it was the quote that you put up. It was from John Paul II, it was “I have a choice between basically my identity pursuing who I am versus…” what I don’t remember exactly, who I ought to be or something like that.

**Stan Jones**

“The tension between the person that I am versus the person that I ought to be.”

**Darrell Bock**

Ought to be. Yes and I thought that was an interesting way of posing the question. What do you see – that’s a powerful picture. What do you see is wrapped up in that difference?
In that difference. I think it’s a fundamental question Darrell of Christians having the witness of God as an objective standard outside of ourselves that this, Mark spoke earlier about sort of the fundamental resistance of the person of all of us. I think the message in Romans I is not that people experiencing same-sex attraction are especially bad people. The apostle Paul is very explicit he uses that as an example to say, “No, no. We all rebel against God.”

Yeah absolutely he says -it’s in the plural in that passage that the remark is made against those that teach these things. It’s plural it’s all. It’s everything in the category; it’s not just one thing.

That’s right. That’s right. So it’s part of the universal condition to say, “I don’t want to receive a negative diagnosis about who I am,” but that’s God’s grace. That’s God’s hard grace to us. Is to say, “Let me show you a diagnosis, and I do in part through the law and I do in part through the perfect life of Jesus Christ,” against which measure all of us fail. And in that I see my brokenness, and so we face this dilemma that our fundamental choices are we willing to see that brokenness and are we willing to submit to God the possibility of transformation through forgiveness and then this infusion of new life in Christ so that we can pursue that person that I ought to be? And so that’s the fundamental, I think, option that is before us.

And that leads to discussion about identity and if I can say it this way: which identity trumps? What identity directs controls, guides life (pick your verb)? And you both also spent a lot of time talking about the importance of identity. So let’s talk a little bit about that, and I’m really setting up a situation where we’re going to talk about the other half of this, but let’s talk about core identity and where core identity lies, because in the gay script core identity is very much related into your sexual identity. That defines who you are, but we’re talking about an identity and an identification that really reframes that, if I can say it that way. So how do you see identity working in this conversation?
Mark Yarhouse — Well I do think that anytime you are in the minority those elements that define your minority status become more salient to you, so it’s not an unusual thing. If you experience same-sex sexuality for that to have more prominence in the way you think about yourself when the majority doesn’t experience that. So I want to be a little be a little bit careful not to over-respond to that piece. But when you talk with Christians who are navigating this terrain, some of them experience their same-sex sexuality as kind increasingly salient, and it ends up becoming for them a more orienting way of thinking about themselves. And yet there’s others, many who say, “Yes, this is an important part of my life but I choose not to form my identity around it. And I go in a different direction.” And there’s still others who say, “I’ll use this as an adjective to say that ‘I’m gay’ just to communicate to the world that this is my pattern of attraction, but fundamentally I think of myself in other terms as well.” So, I think there’s quite a range of ways to look at it.

Darrell Bock So you actually talk about three different ways to talk about this, three tiers. And we’ve done this before on these broadcasts, but it might be good to go over that ground because it’s an important distinction.

Mark Yarhouse Sure.

Darrell Bock Let’s talk about what those three tiers are and the difference between them as you see it.
Mark Yarhouse: Okay. So the three tier distinction is between same-sex attraction, homosexual orientation and gay identity, and it’s just based on large surveys that when you ask people to describe their experiences if they’ve ever had same-sex attraction you get a certain percentage of people that say, “Yes I have experienced same sex attraction.” You ask those same people how would you describe your orientation, a much smaller percentage would say I’m oriented towards the same-sex. So what’s the difference between those two? It probably has to do with the strength of the attractions and how enduring or persistent they are over time. And then we speak of it as more of an orientation, “I’m oriented towards the same-sex.” In the common vernacular today young people would then refer to themselves then as “gay.” They’re just telling someone else my pattern of attraction is sustained and enduring towards the same-sex, but they’re not going to use that kind of language to communicate it. And then the third tier is gay identity which is a modern socio cultural label for referencing one’s sexual preferences. It could just mean as an adjective, but it also could be more like a noun, and it could be saying to other people around you that gay for me comprises both identity and a culture. And I think a generation ago people would hear gay and think exactly that. Well you’re telling me something about your views of morality. Your sexual ethic. You’re telling me something more than just patterns of attraction. But you do hear younger people today more comfortable using gay as an adjective in a way that’s different then their parents’ generation. And I just think that’s something in ministry just to be aware of that if someone says they’re gay, there’s an opportunity to unpack.

Darrell Bock: You don’t know where they are on the tiers, is that what you’re saying?

Mark Yarhouse: You don’t. Yeah.

Darrell Bock: Another way flipping it around, so are you saying these are three different ways of talking about this, but it doesn’t necessarily mean that one tier has a stronger type of identification than another? Is it a scale in other words, or is it just three different ways to think about it?
Mark Yarhouse

I treat it as three different ways people talk about it, and I’m essentially deconstructing gay identity for people. And if it’s useful you know pastorally for someone to see this distinction. For some people it just lets them describe what they feel without making decisions yet about behavior or identity. Other people and in our culture, we treat those things as synonymous. If you experience same-sex attraction, your identity is gay and so why would you tease any of that out. So I only use it in settings where the persons feeling like they need to explore that or they feel like a conflict in that area, and it’s useful for them to tease it apart and to say well I want to be honest about my same-sex sexuality, but I’m not sure I’m prepared to make decisions today about my behavior. I’m not sure I’m ready to make decisions today about my identity. And it gives them just that space that they need to kind of walk out where they want to go and if they’re a Christian you know what they believe God is saying to them about how they should live their life and so on and so forth.