When Jerusalem Meets Vegas

Part 2 of 2: Conviction and Civility in Ministry to LGBT persons
with
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So with that in place, let’s come back to the identity question and that is: so how does Christian identity intersect with that kind of tiering of sexual identity?

Well, I think about it a little bit like I think about my church. So I’m in a multi-ethnic church that was launched specifically to bring people together of different cultural backgrounds who would recognize their cultural differences as real but also celebrate a kingdom identity that transcends those other identities. And I think with the three tier distinction there’s a sense in which the believer has a Kingdom identity and an identity in Christ that supersedes all of the other ways that we talk about ourselves.

And that can be in all kinds of categories, not just sexuality, right?

“All kinds of categories. And yet in the same sense when I’m in a multi-ethnic church you don’t talk so much about a Kingdom identity as though we aren’t different in our cultural differences. Like there are genuine differences with people who are Latino, people who are African American, people who are Caucasian. So we want to recognize those differences and in some cases listen to each other, be sensitive to how these differences inform their life. Well, let’s say someone experiences strong same-sex sexuality. I think you want to be careful about imposing, “Well, I just heard this guy on a podcast, and we should have a Kingdom identity that trumps everything else.” Well, yes and no. Yes, it does, but if the person’s same-sex sexuality means that their life is significantly different than yours for reasons that you’ve never firsthand fully appreciated, it’s an opportunity to listen to them and unpack what the complexities of what that life must be like for them and not just drop Kingdom identity on top of them so you can kind of go on about your business.

It’s a wiping out, it’s not a nullification. Is that what you’re saying?

Yeah. Exactly.
Yeah. Alright. I’m going to shift gears now because I want to work with another phrase that we often talk about on these Podcasts on this topic and come back and develop it. We’ve kind of worked it from one side. So now I am since I got you back I got the chance to work it on the other. It’s your phrase “Convicted Civility,” and we’ve spent a lot of time talking about the civility, developing the empathy, trying to listen and learn. In fact we’ve spent much of the first half hour doing that now and to get a sense of how to engage in a conversation and dialogue. And now I want to deal with the conviction side of things and how that works and how you see that playing it out. Because I think some people when they listen to the phraseology and they think about it and they hear the civility part and particularly the concern to be what I would consider to be properly empathetic, that they say, “Well doesn’t that end up washing out the truth? Do we ever say where we are and what taking a moral stand is and how does that look and what does that look like?” So I’m kind of giving you an open-ended chance to respond to what I think is a common criticism of this approach of people who feel some urge to stand up and take a moral stand on what this represents.

Well, it was very kind of you to attribute the phrase to me but let me say that I stole that shamelessly from Richard Mow who when I met him said he took that from Martin Marty. [Laughter]. So I don’t know how far that traces back.

That pedigree may or may not help us so go ahead.

~But the observation is that you have too many Christians who are strong on convictions, but you wouldn’t want them representing you before the culture because of how they talk about different issues. But on the other hand more to your point here, you have people who are so strong on civility that you have no idea what they believe in, right?

Exactly.
Mark Yarhouse: So yeah I think there’s the challenge is to balance the two. Now you’re always going to have people who temperamentally or their role that they have in the culture—they’re drawn to more one than the other. I mean people in more cultural discourses and politics are probably going to be more on the convictive side, and they’re in a setting where as a believer that’s the venue that God’s called them to but I’d encourage them can you do that with civility? Can you have an irenic tone too. Now someone like me, I’m probably on the side of the civility piece I probably spend more time because I’m trained in the field of clinical psychology and the therapeutic stance of sort of erring more on that side and you say, “Well Mark, what do you believe in?” And I’m hoping that I am clear in my convictions, and I’m not leaving people wondering, “Gosh, what does he really believe about sexual morality?”

Darrell Bock: Stan, what advice do you have?
You know I think that the balance is very hard to maintain, but it is an important balance to maintain. I think that you can maintain it in your personal relationships and even in your clinical relationships, people counseling relationships, but do we also have to do it in terms of institutions. I’m thinking of a time recently where I happen to be visiting an evangelical church with which I’m familiar. It was almost an accident that I was there that morning, although nothing is an accident in God’s providence. And I happened to be in the congregation on the Sunday when the church leadership announced that it was changing the positions and policies of the church to be inclusive of monogamous gay couples. And afterwards the pastor knew who I was and asked my opinion about things, and I exchanged quite an email correspondence with this individual where I tried to affirm that as far as I could tell the church was still preaching the gospel. They were preaching that we needed to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord. That we needed to seek forgiveness of our sins through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the cross that their core message was still Gospel-oriented and Gospel-grounded. But I also said that the consistent teachings of the scriptures and of the church for two millennia has been that this is a mistake. This is not God’s intended will, and I tried to argue that I don’t regard the step that you’ve taken as heresy, but I do regard it as a significant misjudgment, a significant mistake in pastoral leadership and teaching of the church. I believe that you have let false teaching creep into the moral instruction of this particular local church. And we had an exchange, and I was very gratified. I was forceful, but I was also trying to communicate that this is really significant. And I was very gratified that the pastor afterwards was able to articulate how the church leadership had come to a point of disagreement, but the pastor shared all my correspondence with the church. And several people wrote me afterwards and said, “This is a fair interchange where I felt respected, I felt heard, but it was clear your conviction is that we have gone in the wrong direction.” So I think that administratively in terms of leadership I think at individual levels and at corporate levels, there are times that we need to be really clear. I think that some people use clarity, however, as a defense to push the other person away. We have given up on that person, and we can sort of make the proclamation of the hard line a way of saying, “I don’t need to engage you.” And I think that God would have us engage people who are in the wrong place and what scripture teaches in the wrong place in this area, but we should engage them in love and that the moral message is not the first thing that needs to be on our lips. But if we’re afraid or hesitant to say the moral message when it matters, then something significant is missing. So it really is a judgment call that really it depends on the situation, it depends on the nature of the relationship, it depends on the move Holy Spirit as to what they are really ready to hear. But institutions like churches really on the line. People want to know what does the church teach about this area and there is a need for clarity in a time when there’s a lot of confusion about it.
Yeah. And I think he introduced a couple of categories here that are helpful to think about there’s how I relate to the person as the individual in the individual exchange that is happening, but then there’s also the corporate responsibility of being an institution like the church in which you’re trying to model certain behavior. I like to give this illustration of kind of the tension and begin by saying both of these texts are in scripture. And so the question now is: how do we relate these two pieces to one another? And the one is the very famous passage in Paul in 1 Corinthians where Paul is urging the church to discipline someone who’s been engaged in incest and basically makes the point you know that this is something that doesn’t even go on very often in the pagan world, and so it really is a strong direct call for the institutional discipline. And then in the Gospel of John we’ve got you know Jesus’s remark when the woman is caught in adultery about who’s going to cast the first stone followed by after that and everyone scatters his remark about saying, “Sin no more.” And so we’ve got on the one, one is more an individualized passage. The other is a more corporate passage but you are seeing this tension. We live in a fallen world in which we live in the midst of tension and where we’re trying to balance things and it doesn’t seem to me that the solution is to cherry pick between those two passages. Oh I like the John 8 passage. I’ll take that over 1 Corinthians. No, what I’ve got to do is wrestle with what is the relationship between these two passages that keeps me faithful to the whole of what Scripture is doing.

That’s right.

What do you think Mark?
Mark Yarhouse

Yeah. I mean those are tensions I feel as I was listening to you talk about it. I mean, I get the sense that if the one case had been adultery that was going on and it wasn’t being discussed, I think Paul would have said, “Hey I understand what is going on this needs to stop.” And I think in the other case Jesus is responding first and foremost the ways in which people were applying the laws to this person and in their hearts constantly trying to trick Jesus and capture him and get him doing something that they could hold against them. So I think knowing their hearts trumped the situation by taking it in a different direction. But of course the rest of us have to kind of figure out what are the scenarios that we’re in and when are we responsible in an ecclesiastical setting, in a church setting when are we part of shepherding the body, responsible there. Those are more doctrinal positions I think, overseeing with policy and so on. Others are more shepherding the individual and pastoring them and looking at how people might set them apart for special condemnation so that they get a pass, the people making condemnation. So I think it’s incumbent on Christian leaders to pray for humility and for wisdom and how you interact with the people of God.

Darrell Bock

So let me, I’m going to go through a list of kind of scenarios that people do often come up against and in just what I’m interesting in hearing here is not so much an answer although in some cases I think we may get that but the process that you got through in wrestling with this. And the first scenario is maybe the hardest one I’m going to mention. That is you have a child and they walk into your living room and they announce in one way or another that they are gay. That this is who they see themselves as being, and they’ve come to let you know that. Now I suspect that in the counseling that you all do that this has probably happened more than once in your dealing with parents who find themselves in this situation and not just the parents this is important too to keep an eye on all the players, the child who’s worked up the nerve if I can say it in that way to say it to their parents. How do we deal with both of those groups? How do we deal with the parents, how do we deal with the child if I’m a pastor who finds that someone in my parish or congregation who’s dropped into this situation and the parent and or the child has come to them and said, “Pastor I need your help in negotiating what’s happened here.” What would you tell them?
I’m going to start, and I think that there are some very bad stories out there in the ways that conservative Christian parents have handled this. There have been some very rejecting and punitive and horrible sort of examples that I think we should avoid. I think if I were in that situation, if I was that parent what I would want to embody at that moment, of course you would be stunned. What would be running through your mind is this is not the scenario I had dreamed of for my child. This is not what I had hoped for, the trajectory I had hoped for, but I think it’s a very important first to just listen. This is really an incredibly difficult thing for children to talk with their parents. The children are anticipating all kinds of horrible reactions, and parents are often times taken off guard and they did not see this coming which is itself unfortunate, but I think that the principle that we need to have in mind is that I’m in this for the long haul. I love my child. I want to embody the best of what God himself, I think parenting is at its best an attempt to reflect the enduring love of God to our child the way that God loves us. So to have in mind that I want to embody God’s very character in the way that I respond, so I want to communicate that my love will never cease for you. I have views about the morality of this, but the important thing is for me to listen. And the child may be saying, “I’m coming out, and I’ve made a whole set of moral commitments,” it can be, “I’m in a relationship; I’m leaving the church” and so forth and so on. But it can also be, “Here’s the feelings that I’m struggling with” and so those are very different sort of presentations and very different scenarios, and I think that parents just need to say, “That’s a shock. Tell me about that, but as you tell me about it, I am committed. Please know that my love for you will never change. It will never erode. I am committed for the long haul.” But part of loving a child is I want their best, and so I’m committed to helping them try to understand what they’re going through to being a resource for them. And the difficulties lie down the path in terms of what form that love takes, but in the initial situation ideally the parent is a resource for the child that the child really does know no matter what my parents love me. They’re going to stay in relationship with me, and they’re going to be there in the same way that God is going to have a persistent love for me no matter what.

Mark?
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Mark Yarhouse  Yeah. Very similar. I would open with, “I love you.” My first response, “Thank you for sharing this with me. I acknowledge how challenging that would be.” The data here is very clear that parents are often the last to know. So let’s say they’re 16 or 17, well they may have experienced same-sex sexual feelings as young as 13, 12. So they may be navigating this terrain for many years before they share this with their mom or dad. So what that often means is that they’ve talked to a peer group and peer groups in our culture today are struggling too. How do we respond to a friend of ours that’s shared this with us? But nine time out of ten, can often be a very supportive peer group environment, and so the real challenge is really bringing it back to mom and dad. So first of all for parents keep in mind that you’re catching up now emotionally with where your child may have been for a while. I would also say that to a child that as you share this with them, you’re parents have not had the last couple of years to be on this terrain.

Darrell Bock  This is new for them and it’s old for you.

Mark Yarhouse  ~Yeah and so giving them 48 hours is not going to help them catch up too right.

Darrell Bock  Yeah.

Mark Yarhouse  But so as a parent I think you want to say, “I love you and I want to thank you for sharing this with me.” And I think what you’re essentially saying is, “I really appreciate that you would trust me with something like this, that must be scary.” And I love the idea Stan brought up of taking the long view. We know from all kinds of research that they will be navigating this terrain for many years to come. I think many parents in our culture are socialized to think in problem solving mode. “Well, if we can wrap this up if we can get to the end of this. If we can figure this out together meaning for most of us it’s a project that I can wrap up in the next couple of weeks.” And as a clinician parents often bring people to me and say I’m hoping to be able to pick them up in about 50 minutes, you do a 50 minute or an hour I’ll pick them up, and we’ll be in a good spot. I mean it’s that kind of mentality towards something that you really need to take the long view.
Stan Jones

I think that I’ll say, Darrell, that I’ve been thinking a lot about trial recently. I’ve had a lot of complicated personal medical situations that have been demanding and I’ve through reading a number of resources and personal reflection I’ve really come to the way I can articulate I guess the way I think we want to respond to trials, and this is a trial. It’s a trial for the parents, and it’s a trial for the child - that’s important to remember that this is a burden that is that they feel different. And they do, as Mark was emphasizing earlier, they face unique challenges that are really pressing and difficult now. When we face trials, we often times don’t want to accept the trial, we don’t want to accept the reality for it so we sort of distance ourselves from it, we resist in accepting this is what God has allowed to be put on my plate right now. And we also spend a lot of time asking a set of questions that have no possible answer - why is this happening to me, what went wrong, you know where’s the justice in this and so forth and so on. And but when you’re faced with trials that there’s one question that is really the pressing question in the trial, and I think it’s a question that God will answer for us and that is, in this trial I am given an opportunity to manifest God’s character in how I respond. I have the chance to live the Gospel right now in the midst of this trial. How does God want me to exhibit faithfulness in this concrete reality right now. And so as a parent that that’s the question that I would the parents to be framing as they receiving this testimony of the kid. And that’s what I would want the parent to try and be communicating to the child in a sense of I want to listen and I want to be there for you, but the biggest thing I want for you is that you approach this challenge in your life in a way that helps you remain faithful to God and ask how can I exhibit that faithfulness in the way that I respond as I move forward with my life and that’s going to be a long-term project for which you have to be in relationship with the child.

Darrell Bock

Now we’ve kind of looked at it from pretty much from the parents’ side what about the child’s side. And the child who makes the effort to do this. What counsel would you give to the child who’s taking this step and or to a pastor who’s going to come alongside?
Mark Yarhouse  

Well, I think for a child it depends a little bit on the age that we’re talking about but to be able to come to your parents, they will hear this differently if you make a declaration about a gay identity and sort of plant a flag in the middle of the family room at Thanksgiving and say, “This is who I am,” and let the parents - their minds go through all sort of ramifications of that and some young people do that. And I do think it’s more of an act of resilience at that moment of like “This is what I need to do to make this work for me.” You know I recommend that young people grasp how that language affects parents. That generation before them is not going to respond really well to some of those key words in ways of thinking about yourself but to say, “Mom and Dad, I have been dealing with something in my life for a while now and I want to bring you in. I want you to know about something because I know you love me, and I need you now more than ever.” I think that prelude to sharing about your same-sex sexuality pulls on a parent’s natural desire to love their child and to protect their child. I think parents aren’t often given the opportunity to respond at their best when it feels more of a declaration with language that pulls a almost a visceral reaction from them and many parents you know are under the impression that they’re the ones that caused their child’s homosexuality. They often feel like they’re somehow culpable in their child’s – there can be kind of an evangelical subculture shame around homosexuality that now not only is my child dealing with this, but my family is dealing with this. We are dealing with this and what does that mean about me as a father, me as a mother, us within our faith community. I think that’s why many people feel like it’s a zero sum game with the local church is that the way to move forward is that I’m going to have to choose between my church or my child. And oftentimes people feel like they don’t have a way to stay in connection with both.
And Darrell if I can also just throw in thinking you brought up the issue of the parent who’s receiving it and also the pastor in a sense. What does the pastor want to leave with this young person, this young adult who’s made this declaration? And I really think of the power of some of the issues that Mark talked about in his talk where in terms of what the church is giving the child. When a person is struggling with this, when a young person is struggling with this what they’re hearing from the church is very little and very late. It’s sort of this is not a good thing but we don’t have a compelling alternative to offer. And what we’re hearing from the gay community is that we’re ready for you. We’ve walked this path, we’re ready. So I think that for the pastor to be able to be the listening resource and to be ready to invite the child even if the pastor doesn’t have this well worked out to say that God can open up a path of fullness for your life in the midst of this that can lead to a life of blessing. This is an experience that you’re having that is not outside of the domains of the grace of God. God can open up a path of blessing for this. I will journey alongside you with this. And I can be a resource to you as I find out more about this.

Now the difficulty -here it seems- to me is the sense of communicating, I struggle with how to say this, but that and I’m talking about the pastor now, coming alongside and saying in effect I want to be there alongside you and recognize that you’ve taken this step, but there’s this discomfort of am I supporting something that represents a violation of a moral standard that the church has, and how should I think about that? How should the pastor approach that tension?
Well I think at that point the pastor needs to recognize that sort of the pastoral office of sort of declaring the word of God is sort of an important office to exercise but that they’re dealing with a young person whose intention about the church’s teachings at that point in time. And the way to help that person best at that time is not to sort of ratchet up the pressure and just sort of no “this is what you must believe.” Don’t turn – stay with the convicted part. You have convictions. You have convictions that are based on the Word of God but what’s going to help that person at that point at time is to say, “Let’s create some space where we can look at it.” I keep coming back to the fact that the scripture is replete with so many instances where God embraces and allows the doubt of his people. Whether it’s the rich resources of the psalms where people are crying out with their pain to God and so whether it’s the testimony of the book of Job or whether it’s in Jesus’s response to the doubts of his disciples where he works with them, and he continues and teaches and he teaches and he teaches again. I think that if we can say, “Tell me about your doubts. Tell me about where your fundamental struggle is.” And keep the relationship going. To respond in a way that doesn’t give up on the conviction at all but also says lets work with honest problems. There’s a lot of confusion in the church today. Let’s read some books together. Let’s read a book the reinforces the traditional view, let’s read a book that challenges the traditional view. Let’s work them through and see which ones make sense. I’ve really been impressed by several people that I know who are living chaste lifestyles as people who are experiencing same-sex attraction but they’re living as traditional Christians and one common very common theme among them is when I really got down to what the Bible really said. I walked through that with someone and I really came to the point where I had to make the decision to be a faithful disciple how do I need to conduct my life and by them I had fallen in love with Christ and I knew that I didn’t want this outcome or that outcome I wanted the faithful outcome that Christ has asked me to do. So for the pastor to help that person face the complexity of those questions I think is really, really crucial.

Darrell Bock

Anything else Mark?
Mark Yarhouse —Yeah. I would as a pastor in that moment, I would nurture their relationship with God and you want to help them grow into greater spiritual maturity over time and a friend of mine who’s dealt with this in her own life, navigating the issues of same-sex sexuality in her own life said, “Look how do any of us come to trust and follow God’s revealed will for human sexuality? The only reason any of us ever even consider that is we believe God is a good and loving Father whose plan is better than our own for how we would live our lives, but how do any of us trust God to be that kind of a good and loving father?” And it’s at that moment with that pastor they realize wait a minute this pastor who represents God to me loves me like a good and loving father and is willing to be in a sustained relationship with me as a representative who Christ is in this world and that sustained relationship that doesn’t say that I love you on a condition that you follow these things. No, I’m going to stay all in with you and love you, then they can begin to believe that there is actually a God who is a good and loving father whose plan is good for them and then they would consider living into that in their sexuality.

Darrell Bock Well we barely got started on these scenarios, and we’re out of time. Let me wrap up this way because we do need to kind of pull it together. If you were to give one piece of advice to people who wrestle in this area and who are trying to deal with the contention between their convictions and their civility and the directness of the challenge of their convictions what advice would that be? I’ll let each of you get one shot at it. Mark.

Mark Yarhouse This is for the person who’s trying to balance conviction and civility?

Darrell Bock Yeah.

Mark Yarhouse Well I think realize that you gravitate towards one or the other and it’s easy to surround yourself with people who gravitate towards the same area that you do. So I think that the challenge is to always prayfully and in humility is to consider is my growth edge in the area that I gravitate towards or in the other area and what would God have me do?

Darrell Bock Stan?
It’s very tough to give one piece of advice. I suppose my advice would be when you’re ministering to people who are in pain, it is a good thing to remain absolutely committed to your convictions but to err when challenged on the side of civility and care because you can always return to the conviction. The issue is more difficult when you’re talking about how institutions form themselves, and institutions are delicate mechanisms and delicate creations. And I think we need to really work at both dimensions of it, but I think for institutions we can maintain that balance of conviction and civility especially if we work harder at grounding our teachings or our convictions about homosexuality in a broader set of convictions about sexuality in general so that we have a more persuasive winsome positive message, and the conviction is not just “this part is wrong,” but the conviction is “here’s the broader story of what the goodness of God, how the goodness of God is manifested in his gift of sexuality. Here’s what’s good, and here’s the type of moral virtue toward which we’re all trying to be shaped.” All Christians. All things.

You know, my sense is that you know when we talk about conviction particularly in this area we’re ultimately thinking about well at some point there’s a challenge that’s going to offered in terms of the way a person may be thinking about this. And my take has been that you’re always in a better position to challenge if the person you are interacting with knows that you care for them, love them, trust them. You’re in a relationship of trust with them, and they know that you care about them. And so building that foundation of care and trust actually can put you in a better position to have an honest, direct, forthright conversation that’s honest on all sides about what everybody is thinking than if you simply apply your standard and walk away. So well, I thank you all for taking the time to be with us yet again on this topic which we keep coming around to and I suspect that it’s not going away. That we’re around for a while on dealing with this and helping the church wrestle with an area that really is one of tension that we all wrestle to negotiate with and that no one has the clean crisp answers to because we do live in a world in which we all struggle to walk faithfully with God in one way or another. So I thank you for taking the time to be with us today. And we thank you for being a part of the Table where we discuss issues of God and culture. We look forward to seeing you again.