

the plausibility problem

the church
and same-sex
attraction



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I. THE PLAUSIBILITY PROBLEM

Peter

Meet seventeen-year-old Peter. He's a keen Christian and an enthusiastic member of a church youth group. The eldest son of a deacon and the Kids' Church coordinator, he plays electric guitar in the worship band, runs the Christian Union at his school, is doing well academically, and is well known locally as an increasingly promising competitive swimmer. He's the sort of high-achieving Christian young man that convinces people that the church might yet have a future.

But since the beginning of puberty, Peter has been consistently attracted to other guys. What he hoped was just a phase hasn't passed – despite his prayers and best efforts to fancy girls. He's become expert at faking heterosexuality, but struggles at youth group to push away the attention of some of the girls while trying not to focus too much attention on one of the guys.

The church youth group prides itself on its good Bible teaching. So its leaders take their responsibilities seriously, especially when it comes to explaining the church's traditional teaching on sex and relationships. Peter has been told repeatedly that sex is for the marriage of a man and a woman. Until then, he's to resist the temptation to be sexually active in both thought and deed. So, for instance, he's been told what to do when he's sexually attracted to a woman – of how it's not wrong to notice beauty, but of the dangers of a second look and the mental undressing that can follow. But the problem is he's attracted to men, so even the first look, the first attraction, feels wrong to him – he's been paralysed with guilt by the feelings brought on by watching that guy he fancies undress in the dorm on a church weekend away. For the one thing that he's heard about homosexuality is that it is all wrong – a no-go area for a keen Christian like him.

But boy, does Peter want to have sex. He's growing up in one of the most sexualized cultures since pre-Christendom. It is what teenage life is all about, according to the magazines he reads, the TV shows he watches, and the conversations that happen in the changing room. It's what shows you've grown up. It's what makes you a real man. Even in his youth group, it's talked up to be the most amazing, life-changing experience. A young couple on the youth leadership team were recently interviewed up front and shared how grateful they were that they'd waited to have sex until they were married. Talking to the youth group guys in a lads-only session after, the husband said sex was the best experience he'd ever had – God was so good to have created something so pleasurable. It would be that good for them too – if they kept it for marriage.

But Peter won't be getting any, if he sticks with what he's been told, if he lives in the light of the Bible's teaching. And

that seems unreasonable (to say the least) for seventeen-year-old Peter. Sex is everywhere. His desire for it is overwhelming. And his church says no to that – forever.

At the same time those magazines, those TV shows, if not yet the changing-room conversations, are telling him to go with his feelings. His favourite TV soap has a gay character that he both fancies and would love to be like – totally unashamed of his sexuality and getting loads of sex. A couple of furtive Google searches have shown him that there are Christians who think that permanent, stable and faithful gay relationships are right in God's sight. He might be able to get the sex he wants after all. And remain a Christian. He's keen on both.

Jane

Now meet Jane. She is in her late thirties. She's had a series of disastrous relationships with men – including a brief marriage that ended after his adultery. She became a Christian soon after and has thrown herself into church life; she's on the coffee rota, the welcome team, and coordinates the church's soup run for the homeless. At last year's carol services, she was up at the front giving her testimony as someone whose life has been totally transformed by Jesus. She's one of her church's few recent success stories.

But alongside her church family, a close friendship with a non-Christian woman at work has been one of her chief supports in recent years and, much to Jane's surprise, their close relationship has recently become sexual. Everyone has noticed how much happier she's been – her small group are praising God that he's answered their prayers for her (not knowing the cause).

Jane's church has taken a firm line opposing the recent introduction of gay 'marriage'. The Coalition for Marriage petition was much publicized. Jane hadn't realized that same-sex sexual relationships were wrong before. So she was soon around at the pastor's house, asking his advice on behalf of 'a Christian friend' of hers who had recently got sexually involved with a same-sex colleague. The pastor was clear on the need to call for repentance and to separate from the Christian friend if she didn't change her behaviour soon.

Jane is devastated. What she wants most in life is to settle down with someone she loves and who loves her back. As she left the pastor's home, she saw his wife and small children baking in the kitchen, and longed to have that sort of settled home life. She's always wanted kids and she's so loved being involved in the lives of her girlfriend's children from a previous relationship. What she had so often dreamed of had finally come true.

But if she does as she's been told, she will be ending things with her girlfriend tomorrow. Ending the best human relationship she's ever been in. And that seems so unreasonable. So unreasonable for her pastor to deny her what *he's* got. For him to say that something that feels so right is so wrong.

She knows what her girlfriend will say. She's been very respectful of Jane's 'religious side', but will tell her to ignore what the pastor said. And her appeal will be powerfully backed up with all that she offers. A shared home, a family life, an end to loneliness, the physical affection that Jane so needs. With her girlfriend gone, Jane will be back to her one-bedroom flat, irregular and painful visits to church families for Sunday lunch, the single life, and looking forward to the Peace at church because it's the only physical touch she ever gets there.

Our response

It is the Peters and Janes in our churches who are causing many evangelicals to lose their confidence in the Bible's teaching on sex and marriage. It is the real people like them who are tempting an increasing number of evangelicals to 'go liberal' on homosexuality. You might be one of them. How can you look Peter in the eye and deny him sex forever? How can we ask Jane to turn her back on the one human relationship that has brought her joy? It just won't seem plausible to them. It doesn't sound that reasonable to us either.

And what doesn't help them or us much is the standard evangelical response to what they're facing. We've basically adopted the slogan from the 1980s anti-drugs song: 'Just Say No!' That's often all we have to say – exacerbated by the proof-text parade if anyone raises any objections:

Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

(Leviticus 18:22)

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.

(Leviticus 20:13)

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

(Romans 1:26–27)

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(1 Corinthians 6:9–10)

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practising homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

(1 Timothy 1:9–11)

That used to convince. That used to be a plausible argument for most. To be an evangelical has always meant holding to the truth of ‘The divine inspiration of Holy Scripture as originally given and its supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct’.¹ And when it comes to homosexual practice, those Scriptures are pretty clear; evangelicals like clarity, and those verses were more than enough clarity for many, for years. We all knew where we stood.

But that is no longer the case. Things have changed. Although older generations of evangelical Christians might remain wedded to the church’s traditional teaching, younger generations are deserting it in their droves. I’ve spoken to countless church pastors in their forties and fifties who remain committed to what the church has always taught – but nearly all of them have said their children don’t even get where they’re coming from on this issue. You might be one of that

younger generation yourself. A generation who are changing their minds on homosexuality today not because they've suddenly revised their opinion of the cultural context of Leviticus, the meaning of 'unnatural' in Romans 1, the nature of homosexual practice in Corinth, or the translation of the Greek words in 1 Timothy, but because what they demand just doesn't seem plausible any more. It's people, not theology, that seem to be powering the rejection of the traditional Christian ethic. It's Peter and Jane – and others like them – not the Hebrew and Greek.

Many of us might not like this changing reality – but it is the reality we face. Ask around and you'll keep encountering it. I keep hearing of same-sex attracted Christians who think that what the Bible asks is just not doable in today's world. And who, only when they've concluded this, then find the books, the sermons, the theologians, that will allow them to dismiss what the Bible teaches. Their friends, family and churches then tend to walk the same well-trodden path soon after – simply out of their love and concern for them. It's in the whole area of practical plausibility rather than biblical exegesis where things have really changed in recent years. That's why the landscape is changing so rapidly – whether we like it or not.

Peter and Jane's response

And so this is my best bet on what will happen to Peter and Jane (unless we seek to help them more). Peter will head to university and will enter a world in which it is so easy to embrace his same-sex attraction. And a friendship with a guy will grow into something else, and his Christian friends won't know what to say. The student worker at the 'sound' church

that his youth worker sent him to might say something, but it will be easy for Peter to move churches and find an evangelical church that will turn a blind eye, or one that will be totally affirming. And his contemporaries from the youth group will struggle to see what the problem is, will meet his boyfriend, see how happy Peter is, and change their minds too – a response that will soon ripple out throughout his home church.

Jane will soon stop going to her church. She has been asked to give up too much. She will move in with her girlfriend and her name will be quickly wiped from church rotas. Talk of her at her small group will produce embarrassed silence, but outside its meetings, a number will conclude that it's great she's now so happy and will be baffled by how the church has treated her. Bumping into her and her girlfriend and their children at the local park will convince many that what they now have together is something the church should have not condemned but encouraged, even blessed. Just look at how much they love each other!

That's the most plausible outcome, isn't it? That's what will almost certainly happen to them. And we struggle to blame them. What sounds totally implausible today is asking them to turn their backs on those same-sex sexual relationships and to embrace lifelong singleness. The evangelical church's basic message to them: 'Just Say No!' just doesn't have any real credibility any more. It embarrasses many of us to even ask them to do it. It sounds positively unhealthy. It lacks any traction in today's world – simply producing incredulity from the majority. Melinda Selmys (a Catholic who experiences same-sex attraction) communicates this well:

Negative chastity, the kind of chastity that limits itself to saying 'Thou shalt not,' has consistently failed to persuade the postmodern world because it is *madness*. The vast majority of

people will eat things that are designated ‘unclean’ by their religion or ‘unhealthy’ by their doctors when faced with starvation. In most cases it’s not even voluntary. Unless you have strengthened your will to a superhuman extent it’s not possible to starve yourself to death. Likewise, unless you’ve devoted a huge number of character points to picking up the ‘Stoic’ superpower you will simply not be able to endure the kind of social starvation that negative chastity demands in the contemporary world.²

We have to start responding with more than ‘Just Say No!’ It doesn’t have enough power in our modern world. The single life we are calling Peter and Jane to today was plausible in the past – but it seems so unreasonable today. It just won’t be enough to persuade Peter and Jane and those who, rightly, feel for them. Unless, that is, we solve what I’m calling . . .

The plausibility problem

We have a plausibility issue: what the Bible clearly teaches sounds so unreasonable to so many of us today. And so it is (not unreasonably!) being rejected all over the place. A few high-profile leaders in our churches have already broken ranks. The worrying silence of a number of other key leaders and churches should prepare us for more and more sudden departures from the biblical teaching that sex is for marriage, and that marriage is the lifelong union of a man and a woman. You might, of course, be near changing your mind yourself.

What can we do about it? Well, this is where this book is designed to help. Its basic premise is simple: we just have to make what the Bible clearly commands seem plausible again.

We need to remind ourselves, and remind Peter and Jane, that Jesus says this to us all:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

(John 10:10)

And Jesus always speaks the truth. If that doesn't sound possible, plausible for people like Peter and Jane today, it's not because Jesus has got anything wrong, but because we have.

The solution

And this is when it all begins to be positive! For, it turns out, the reason that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality sounds so unreasonable is because of a whole number of missteps that the church herself has taken over the years; a whole host of ways in which evangelicals have become too shaped by the world around us. Correct our mistakes and what Jesus says about sex and relationships will become more plausible, will sound, again, more like life to the full. And that will be good news for all of us.

And that is what the rest of this book seeks to do: highlight these missteps so that we can begin to rid ourselves of this plausibility problem. We can do this in ways that will benefit the likes of Peter and Jane, but will benefit the whole church too; for these missteps haven't just damaged the same-sex attracted members of our churches, they've crippled us all. We shall all be called to repentance for ways in which we have, unintentionally, made Jesus' way sound like a bad deal, rather than the best way for any human life to be lived – which it is!