

How Are Young Evangelicals Responding to Homosexuality?

When Rosaria Champagne Butterfield spoke at FRC last year, she was well-received and her presentation was greatly appreciated. A former lesbian and person of the left, she came to Christ, had a dramatic (what she calls a “train wreck”) conversion and has married a pastor with whom she has several children.

When she spoke at Wheaton College recently, she was greeted by a couple of dozen students who offered what they did not call a protest but, rather, a demonstration. They were a quiet group and sat on the chapel steps.

“Students Justin Massey and Jordan-Ashley Barney organized ‘More Than a Single Story,’ the Jan. 31 demonstration where Wheaton students sat on the steps of Edman Chapel and held signs that said ‘We’re all loved by God,’ ‘his is not a protest,’ and ‘I’m gay and a beloved child of God,’ ” *Christianity Today* reports.

Wheaton handled the protest graciously, and its participants were respectful and even quiet. It was a courteous and peaceful event and did not impede the speaker from presenting her message. Philip Ryken, Wheaton’s president, issued a thoughtful statement that both gently addressed the students and reaffirmed Wheaton’s commitment to the biblical view of homosexual conduct.

“A key theme of the discussion around these events concerns the value of personal narrative as a way of pursuing truth and understanding,” he said. “As a Christian community rooted in the universal and unchanging truth of the gospel story, we believe that all stories, including personal stories, must always be weighed using the balance of God’s Word. Our

conversations as an institution are always rooted in biblical truth.

“Wheaton College’s conviction on homosexual practice remains as articulated in our Community Covenant, which is affirmed each year by all students, faculty and staff: ‘Scripture condemns ... sexual immorality, such as the use of pornography (Matt. 5:27-28), pre-marital sex, adultery, homosexual behavior and all other sexual relations outside the bounds of marriage between a man and woman (Rom. 1:21-27; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gen. 2:24; Eph. 5:31).’ “

There are some instructive things for evangelicals to learn, or be reminded of, here:

First, the nation’s young people, both evangelical and non-, have been raised in the milieu of *Modern Family* and similar television programs, films, books and plays that portray homosexuality with benign affection and of public educations that teach homosexuality is neither immoral nor volitional.

Instead, they have been taught (insistently) that homosexuality is endemic to the person and that identifying as “LGTBQ” should be countenanced as inconsequential to a person’s character and conduct. Added to this is the need to celebrate homosexuality publicly and enshrine its practice into law as a civil right.

Given that many of these young people have grown up in homes with no clear moral guidance and churches that are afraid of taking loving but firm biblical stances on difficult issues, it is little wonder that many young men and women, including those identifying as evangelical, have accepted the prevailing cultural arguments regarding homosexuality.

In tandem with this atmosphere is a very legitimate desire to express the love of Christ to everyone and objectify no one. Many young evangelicals have homosexual friends and relatives, and have experienced personal warmth and “ordinariness” from

them. It's hard for them to have to look at someone they love and respect and refuse to affirm a pattern of sexual conduct that is private to begin with.

Second, for whatever reasons, some young evangelicals seem confused by the Bible's teaching on human sexuality. Butterfield met with the students who had demonstrated. Here is her account of part of their conversation: "I shared my beliefs that ... taking my stance from the inerrancy and the inspiration of the Bible maintains that homosexuality is a sin, but so is homophobia. The sin of homosexuality is really misunderstood.

"I shared my beliefs that it simply is part of the general package of original sin, that we are all born that way (i.e., with a sinful nature), nobody's different, and that is a very big cross to bear, she continued. "In response, students shared with me that they did not feel that way. ... They believe that passages are mistranslated and misunderstood, and they believed firmly that there's a legitimate Christian position to be held in a gay-affirming way. And so, that's where we left it at that."

Butterfield's irenic response is what any Christian would hope for: firm but not contentious. What's troubling is that students at one of America's premier institutions of Christian education are so ill-informed and, perhaps, ill-taught on what the Bible says about human sexuality.

The passages in the New Testament addressing homosexuality have not been "mistranslated;" such inaccurate rationalizations smack of intellectual dishonesty and an effort to conform the teachings of Scripture to personal preferences. One might not like what the Bible teaches on human sexuality, but it says what it says (I've written elsewhere on this theme).

Thankfully, the students who demonstrated are in the minority:

Most evangelicals still understand that homosexual conduct is prohibited in both testaments. A late 2012 Lifeway Research study showed that 73 percent of “born-again, evangelical, or fundamentalist” Christians believe homosexual conduct is sinful.

Additionally, a new crop of younger evangelical leaders who hold to a consistent biblical sexual ethic is emerging and taking an increasingly prominent role in the movement’s public endeavors.

As one of them, Eric Teetsel, wrote last year, “Our work to rebuild a culture of marriage and family will continue. Restoration will require that we better brand ourselves and make our case more attractive.”

For now, it’s sufficient simply to quote the official statement of the Jerusalem Declaration of the Anglican Church in North America: “We acknowledge God’s creation of humankind as male and female and the unchangeable standard of Christian marriage between one man and one woman as the proper place for sexual intimacy and the basis of the family. We repent of our failures to maintain this standard and call for a renewed commitment to lifelong fidelity in marriage and abstinence for those who are not married.” This statement well represents Christian orthodox teaching on human sexual conduct.

Third, many younger evangelicals seem to think that same-sex attraction justifies same-sex conduct. It does not. Being attracted sexually to members of the same sex is not something over which a person might have much, if any control. Granted.

The issue is this: Does attraction justify behavior? The biblical answer is no: Sexual intimacy is reserved for the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. This discounts all other forms of intimate sexual expression, including heterosexual fornication, heterosexual adultery, homosexual conduct, etc.

I write this with the full recognition that this is what the Bible might have called one of Jesus' "hard sayings." To tell a person attracted to members of the same sex that he or she must remain celibate for life is difficult. It's also difficult to say that to unmarried heterosexual men and women, but it's the biblical standard. It is what Christ calls all men and women everywhere to practice: No sexual intercourse outside of heterosexual marriage—no exceptions. This truth must be presented lovingly and humbly, but fidelity to the Word of God and love for those for whom Jesus died demands it.

As Denny Burk of Boyce College wrote recently, "This is not to say that Christians who experience same-sex attraction will necessarily be freed from those desires completely in this life. Many such Christians report partial or complete changes in their orientation after conversion—sometimes all at once, but more often over a period of months and years.

"But those cases are not the norm," Burk said. "There are a great many who also report ongoing struggles with same-sex attraction. But that does not lessen the responsibility for them to fight those desires as long as they persist, no matter how natural those desires may feel."

Fourth, I wonder how many of the young men and women demonstrating at Wheaton grew up in homes and churches where (a) the Bible's teaching on human sexuality is not only taught but explained and (b) where marriage is honored not only as a matter of doctrine but practice.

In other words, how many of them come from broken homes? How many of them have witnessed the failure of the parents' marriages and been given cause to wonder if heterosexual unions are unique at all? As my colleagues at FRC's Marriage and Religion Research Institute have documented, "Only 46 percent of American 15- to 17-year-olds were raised with both their biological parents married to one another (belonging to each other) since before or around the time of their birth."

How many pastors, youth leaders, and Sunday school teachers have shied away from frank discussions of what the Bible teaches about sex and why it does so because they themselves neither fully understand it nor are comfortable with it?

Younger evangelicals need dialogue, to be engaged and affirmed. They need to be treated with respect. Their concerns are real. But they also need to be taught, lovingly and truthfully, what the Bible says—and why. Not to do so is not only to compromise the truth but also to show a troubling disinterest in the well-being of a generation.

Rob Schwarzwald *is senior vice president at Family Research Council. This article appeared in Religion Today on Friday.*