

## 229 *Christian inoculation*

What factors have inoculated your friends and family (FF) against the wonderful message of God's love in Jesus? What turns them away from taking seriously what you believe?

This week, one FF told me that in the 1950s his dad converted to Catholicism in order to marry his mum. Dad's brother, by then an anglican vicar, wrote a strong letter warning him of his error. Then when women became vicars, the uncle converted to Catholicism. Quite a strong vaccine!

While sexual abuse in the church – and the church's unwillingness to confront it – is scandalous, I don't see it as a strong vaccine because we can agree with the FF that it is terrible, and can apologise, so hopefully it won't stop them taking the gospel message seriously.

Many people I've met have been inoculated by preachers banging on about sin and hell, 'every time I go to church', as my Mum used to say. Other have been put off because churches exclude women from leadership, or refuse to remarry divorcees.

The church's attitudes to these have softened; indeed, my own interpretation of the Bible has changed on a number of issues, but one that I wonder about in today's church is what would your church say to people in long-term relationships who aren't actually married? I think the Bible is pretty clear about sex outside marriage, so if such a couple came to faith, should we insist that they get married before allowing them to take any responsibility in church?

(I wonder if you've guessed yet where this is leading.)

How many of your FF are inoculated by the church's attitude to issues of sexuality? Indeed, what *is* your church's attitude? I've spoken to many friends from different churches, and the attitudes vary widely. One said yesterday that their church welcomes gay people but won't allow them to take any up-front roles, such as being involved in service leading or welcoming.

I may have misunderstood the views of those I've spoken to, so here I just make some general statements about what churches' views might be. But remember that this isn't just an interesting theoretical discussion; *this is about the lives and emotions of real people*.

Most extreme is that gay sex is evil but that God can 'heal' people.

Others say that gay sex is just plain wrong, or maybe just not God's ideal. So it is 'sin' – but then we're all sinners.

Others might say that we've learnt that sexuality does vary and that attraction to those of the same sex is very real. Some Christians who know this attraction feel that they should stay celibate.

Some might say that 'being gay' isn't something that has any validity and that we're giving in to the pressure of the world's views.

I actually think this discussion is vital to the church's future. If you are willing to address this issue, I have already recommended David Gushee's *Changing our mind*.<sup>[216-17,219-221]</sup>