

256 *Facing reality*

Remember my new friend, Sybil?^[249] She has been pretty desperate in our last two phone calls, talking about ‘no point in carrying on’. At the heart of the terrible reality of her life is broken and abusive relationships in her family, down through the generations, sometimes including misuse of one of God’s most beautiful (I think) gifts, sex, thus causing psychological damage.

By contrast, the reality that Sue and I are facing is a medical one, Alzheimer’s, and our response is to accept the reality of the situation and spend more time together, making the most of the opportunities we do have. We feel very privileged in all that we have going for us, and we feel physically much closer than ever.

Another sad reality is the continuing increase of marriage breakup – how many families do *you* know who *don’t* have children split between parents? The improvements in contraception and the 1960s ‘sexual revolution’ have allowed us to see sex as a form of recreation, as a commodity, and, within marriage, maybe as a right (usually a man saying that?). So a God-given gift which, within a committed relationship, is a beautiful and powerful force for good, can end up destroying relationships. Ask Sybil!

So, as Christians, we want to stand against that low view of sex and to encourage our young people to see it as something very, very special, to be held for committed relationships. But again, being realistic, we don’t want to heap guilt on them if they haven’t kept to that high view.

And being realistic about divorce, how should we apply biblical principles? Thankfully (in my view), the churches are easing off on their policies of not re-marrying divorcees. Yes, we know from the Bible – from Jesus’ own teaching – what the ideal is, but how can we be realistic and apply the biblical principles to the situation we are in today?

My final reality check is that some people have same-sex attraction as part of their natural make-up. Thankfully, through our increased understanding of the physical and psychological roots of human sexuality, we no longer see being gay as a mental disorder (yes, it was on the WHO list as a mental disorder until the 1990s!) or as a personal choice (though some religious groups don’t accept the scientific evidence). So how can gay Christians apply biblical principles to the reality of their situation? And how can the church as a whole help?

The idea of a monogamous gay relationship (marriage) is something that didn’t exist in Bible days, so that makes applying biblical principles more tricky. But then the church has had to develop a policy on other science-affected issues, such as contraception.

Personally, I would encourage the same relationship-affirming ideal for all of us: either celibacy or holding sexual intimacy for a committed, monogamous relationship. So I would totally support a change in church policy towards gay marriage,^[255] as a way to face the reality of same-sex attraction, and to celebrate faithful relationships as the core of our society.