

# LGBT Identity

What does the identity of being LGBT add to the identity of being Christian? What I want to do in relation to the LGBT question is first try to change the terms of the debate. In churches where there is profound disagreement right now we tend to talk about LGBT issues publicly in one of three ways:

1. Either we trade scriptural texts, with the seven texts taken to be problematic for LGBT identity, and held by some as a shibboleth of scriptural authority, set against a rather greater set of more unambiguous texts on similar subjects like divorce and further marriage, let alone killing or usury, that the Church was once strict on but seems to have muddled through to a point of compromise and pastoral nuance.
2. Or we trade rights, with one constituency talking about free expression, honesty, integrity and respect under the law, while another group bemoan that unauthorized bodies seem egregiously to be claiming the right to determine what they see as doctrine.
3. Or we claim the high ground, with one constituency rolling its eyes at energy expended on sexuality, and wishing to move on to global poverty, climate change and economic austerity, while another group wonders what could possibly be more important than the definition of human identity.

What all three of these battlegrounds have in common, I suggest, is that it's never significantly questioned that LGBT identity is a burden. It may be a burden that should attract more compassion, or shouldn't be permitted to trigger discrimination, or is no worse and perhaps much better than other comparable burdens. But almost never, in my experience, does anyone publicly stop and say, LGBT identity isn't a *burden* that the church should make allowance for: it's actually a *gift*. That's the transformation I want to assume here. And that's what I mean by aspiring to change the terms of the debate. What if we stopped treating LGBT identity as a problem for the church and started regarding it as a blessing?

I'm going to begin by describing briefly what I understand by the phrase Christian identity. I begin there both because to try to understand sexuality in reference only to itself is a lost cause, and because I believe the issues are not so much about the inclusion of a minority as they are about the renewal of the church as a whole. I want then to explore what we might mean by the phrase, 'The identity of being LGBT.' The language around sexuality is highly contested, and the terminology seems to be in an almost constant state of redefinition, so I need at least to identify what I understand to be the key directions around which to shape my argument.

I will then in the third part move to the little word, 'add', which is perhaps the most provocative word in my opening question. I say provocative because the conversation, as generally experienced in the church, seems to presume that the identity of being LGBT somehow *takes away* from the identity of being Christian – the only question being whether it takes away so much as to inhibit, obscure, or even obliterate the identity of being Christian. But if we assume that LGBT sexuality is a gift to the church, then the next question is, in what way does it add to what the church would be without it? Of course LGBT sexuality has existed as long as there has been human life on earth. But sociological and historical changes have meant that it's only in recent decades that one could genuinely speak of LGBT *identity*, and my task is to seek theological answers to questions the church has not got a long history of facing. Finally, in the fourth part of my reflections, I shall consider the notion of holiness, the quest for which is the goal of all Christians, and reflect on whether and to what extent a Christian notion of individual and corporate holiness is renewed or altered by discovering what the identity of being LGBT adds to the identity of being Christian.

I have a narrative understanding of what it means to be a Christian. In other words I believe that becoming a Christian is to transfer from one kind of a story to another. The story that one begins to inhabit is most easily



understood as a five-act play.

Act 1 is creation – the unfurling of the cosmic canvas, the inception of the unfolding of eternal destiny, the distinction between there being something and nothing at all, the emergence of creatureliness as a companion to and reflection of God. Act 2 is covenant – the Old Testament story of calling, enslavement, liberation, promise, discipline, faithlessness, exile and partial restoration; covenant isn't the story of the whole world, it's the story of the people through whom the whole world would find a blessing. Act 3 is Christ – the whole presence of God before humanity and the whole presence of humanity before God. This is the central act – of incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection – in relation to which all other parts of the story take their bearings.

Act 4 is church: this is an interim period between the decisive Act 3 and the final Act 5. The glorious liberty of the children of God lies in the fact that all the important things have already happened in the first three acts. Christians don't have to save the world; only to live in the world that God has redeemed. The calling of the Christian is threefold: to be faithful to the God revealed in these three acts, to let God in Act 5 tidy up the rather daunting accumulation of woe that seems set to remain unresolved at the end of Act 4, and in the meantime to act in ways that anticipate the life that's coming in Act 5. Finally Act 5 is consummation, the ultimate revelation of God's purpose in all four preceding acts – the purpose of sharing the overflowing love of the Trinity and making us God's companions forever.

To become a Christian is to transfer from a one-act play, in which everything must be completed within one's lifetime, or at most within the conceivable history of humankind, to a five-act play, where one finds oneself in Act 4, with the vital things having already happened and all that is unfulfilled resting safely in the heart of God. To be in Act 4 is to inherit an even mixture of liberation and discipline; the liberation comes from not needing to make the decisive moves oneself, the discipline lies in being faithful to the character of God revealed in the first three acts and that will ultimately prevail in Act 5. To be baptized is to move from a one-act play to a five-act play; it is the most dramatic and momentous thing that can ever happen to a person.

In the light of this narrative understanding of Christian identity, some significant themes in relation to this discussion come to light. For a start, creation isn't the only or even the first place we go looking for our notion of identity. In fact creation is never a criterion on its own – it's always mediated and modified by Acts 2, 3 and 5. This is an important point to keep in mind when we come to the understanding of LGBT identity in a few moments' time. Second, Act 2 isn't simply a series of random restrictive injunctions, as a quick glance through Leviticus might suggest. Act 2 is characterized by two profound experiences of adversity; the one, which Israel underwent through no fault of its own, which is known as Egypt; the other, which Israel received because of its waywardness, which is known as Babylon. Egypt sets the normative pattern for the Old Testament, that of miraculous liberation and everlasting covenant; Babylon counters with the alternative pattern, of mysterious intimacy with God and partial deliverance. These then become the two most explicit divine responses to human suffering: God brings us out of it, or God's face is made known within it.

Moving to Act 3, Jesus is not simply a new Moses, handing down a modified divine law. The New Testament is not to be scoured for stray pieces of a jigsaw of unalterable commands. Jesus is preparing a people to face hostility from the world and ultimately the judgement of God. Paul is striving to shape a disciplined church alive with the freedom Jesus' gifts of forgiveness and eternal life had brought. The key question about New Testament ethics is not, 'What exactly do these instructions require and are exceptions ever legitimate?' Instead the key question is, 'What kind of a community did the early church need to be to be faithful to Jesus in the light of the world's challenges, and thus what kind of a community does the church today need to be to do the same?'

Finally looking to Act 5, the full realization of the kingdom of God is not a counting house in which St Peter hustles some to the posh seats and others to the furnace, like some ghastly eschatological budget airline check-in routine. The kingdom is the perfect communion of God with human beings and the renewed creation, in



which, through Christ's grace, all that was once hostile is now creative and all that was once painful is now poignant. It quickly becomes clear that being a Christian in Act 4 doesn't mean keeping one's nose clean and holding one's distance from anyone who looks suspiciously like they might end up in the wrong queue on judgement day. On the contrary, it means finding ways to be with those with whom one will be spending eternity, empowered by the strength the Spirit gives to all who live God's future today.

So this gives us a sense of what we mean by the identity of being Christian, and of how that identity can give us a way of understanding our other identities.

And so to the identity of being LGBT. I want to discuss three judgements that significantly affect the way sexual identity is construed socially and theologically, and indicate my own perspective on each one. Each judgement call is difficult to make, and most people most of the time are reluctant to make such calls, but I believe I need to make them if we're going to answer the question before us.

The first call is whether sexuality is something you do or something you are. If you regard bodiliness, sense-experience and reproduction as integral to what it means to be human, and see human beings as animals dignified by some special quality such as intelligence, conscience or companionship with God, but fundamentally animals nonetheless, then you're probably looking at sexuality as something you are. In other words you'll see sexual orientation as one of the most basic aspects of human identity, and not something that can be chosen or altered, but something that must be received, cherished and enjoyed.

By contrast if you see your human identity as ultimately detachable from the body, as residing in the soul perhaps; and if you believe there is something that you are that is not identical with the things that you do; and if you locate your fundamental identity not so much in involuntary motions like being born and digesting and passing water as in voluntary choices and exercises of thought and free choice, then you're looking at sexuality as something you do. When someone says, 'I'm not gay, but I did have some homosexual experiences as a student', they're saying, 'Don't mix up what I do with who I am.'

Which view is right? What I want to highlight is why this question is so hard to answer in contemporary Western culture. In a democratic consumer society all the cultural signals are oriented around choice and identity is translated into image. Thus everything becomes done and willed, rather than been and discovered. Sexuality is commodified and made the subject of technological fulfilment and consumer choice like everything else; think for example about the message the phrase 'sexual preference' is giving: it's the language of choice – and a somewhat arbitrary and unaccountable choice, at that. In this context it's hard to articulate statements about identity-as-being without seeming obscurantist or simply 'not with the programme'.

If we want to advocate view of sexuality as what we are then I suggest, in the light of my earlier discussion of the five-act play, that we do so based less on what we believe about Act 1 (creation) than on what we understand about Act 5 (consummation). This is where I think the terms of the debate need to change. If you see heaven as an embodied interaction between God, humanity and the renewed creation, then embodiment is essential to human identity, because it is part of our eternal nature. The human body is not a ladder we kick away when we enter heaven. Sometimes Christianity is presented as asking, 'What is the rule book that was given in Act 1 and how can we stay close enough to it to qualify for Act 5?' But living in Act 4 is more about asking the question, 'What kind of life in Act 4 reflects the joyful heritage of Acts 1–3 (often called 'grace') and the breathtaking destiny of Act 5?' The answer can't be that we substitute all our desires into detachable and commendable choices. It must be that we discover all our desires are a sublimated desire for God, and a poor token of God's fundamental desire for us, on which the whole five-act play is predicated. What I'm talking about is shifting the conversation from creation, which happened once, to heaven, which lasts forever.

Let's move to the second of the three related judgements I believe we need to make. What is the relationship between LGBT people and the largely heterosexual society at large? Now an immediate response might be, what a silly question: most relationships are ad hoc and not centred on sexuality, so why try to generalize



about something so extraordinarily diverse and varied? But just notice how this answer presupposes a view of sexuality that assumes sexuality is something one picks up and puts down at will, affecting how you party on a Friday night but not how you buy your groceries on a Saturday afternoon or travel to work on a Monday morning. If you've taken the view that sexuality is integral to human identity, you don't get to say this is a silly question. Instead there are broadly three answers to the question.

Answer one is to say LGBT people are the same as everyone else; their sexuality isn't significant to any public judgements and is simply a private matter. This is the route liberal democratic societies inevitably take, and it's one that members of minorities at risk of discrimination almost inevitably welcome, because it portrays discrimination as bigoted, irrational and unjustifiable. But notice again that it presupposes a view of sexuality as something one does, and, like all liberal democratic configurations, assumes the language of rational choice and consumer preference. In this perspective there's no common good to aspire to or look together towards; public life is simply a way of maximizing private fulfilment, and there are next to no substantial criteria by which to evaluate what might be worthy or unworthy forms of personal fulfilment. LGBT people have generally gone along with this perspective because it dismantles any plausibility for discrimination. But it's not a view that's fundamentally compatible with a view of sexuality as what we are, because, from such a viewpoint, LGBT people are not just circumstantially, but fundamentally, *different*, albeit reluctant to say so loudly for fear of attracting sometimes-violent antagonism.

Answer two recognizes and accepts that fundamental difference, and sees the antagonism as inevitable and endemic. Answer two says because LGBT people are different, they need to set up their own institutions, networks and processes, because the majority population will never accept, comprehend, include and cherish their presence and contribution. This is a view most commonly found in lesbian feminist circles. There are analogies here in matters of race – for example there've been times when sections of the African-American community have believed they needed to disengage from mainstream American life and run their own society. It's by definition a minority view, and I'm not endorsing it, but I want to note two features that will become significant as my argument unfolds. The first is that this breaks the fantasy that to flourish you have to be the same. It's hard to exaggerate the hold this fantasy has on our imaginations. When you've been persecuted for being different, it's understandable that you plead to be regarded as the same; but in truth liberation comes when you break the assumption that we must all be the same. The second is that it opens up the idea that LGBT people, in being different, may not be somehow less than the majority population; they may in fact be more. The question is not what can LGBT people take away from being Christian and still get away with it; the question becomes what does being LGBT *add* to being Christian.

Answer three accepts the essential difference presented by LGBT people but sees that difference as complementary to the majority population. Rather like a football team or newspaper editorial process, there are many different roles to perform, and different kinds of people are needed to do all that needs to be done. A narrow binary gender distinction between male and female impoverishes human life by assuming there are a very limited number of key activities and roles, focused around reproduction, security of shelter, food and clothing, and nurture of children. But in most of the world today the understanding of human flourishing goes beyond those narrow Darwinian contours of personal and species survival.

The gift of LGBT people to the majority heterosexual population in this perspective is to banish for good the assumption of constricting gender roles, while still resisting the push toward turning every human venture into an expression of consumer choice. In other words we are embodied beings, and our sexual desire is intrinsic to our identity; but we are not simply animals, and our respective roles in reproduction and survival are not the epicentre of our embodied identity. We should have known this since the early church discovered that baptism, rather than childbirth, was the way the Holy Spirit reproduced disciples; but it seems to have taken us a lot longer to realize what God in Christ has been telling us all along. This means that sex isn't wholly or even



primarily for reproduction, but for the channelling, fulfilling and renewing of desire in the context of being wholly desired. And desire isn't wholly or even primarily directed at issuing in sex, but is for discovering and cherishing one another as we are each desired and cherished by God.

To return to the five-act play, while we earlier discovered sexuality was more about heavenly harmony than created univocity, and thus more about Act 5 than about Act 1, here we see that the lifestyle we adopt is less about the outworking of a script determined in Act 1 than about the discovery of a vocation intimated in Act 2. Because it's in Act 2 that we first encounter the notion of vocation. God has a particular role for Israel to perform, and that role is to be a nation through whom all the peoples of the world will find a blessing. That's the recurring theme to which God returns in reproach and encouragement: I did not want you to be like other nations, I called you to be holy because I had a special job for you to do. And that defining theme in Act 2 is a crucial strand in our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. To be baptized, and thus to receive the gift of finding yourself in Act 4 of God's great drama, is simultaneously to be given a vocation as to how to realize the heritage of the first three acts in view of the destiny of the fifth.

It's no accident that narratives of calling play such a major role in the Old Testament. Consider Noah, Sarah, Abraham, Jacob, Miriam, Moses, Gideon, Ruth, Hannah, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah and many more. Each individual vocation mimics the original vocation of Israel not to be like other nations but to shape its life for the particular job God calls it to do. Baptism means being stripped of your failed attempts to be someone else, and others' foolish attempts to make you someone else, and being called to be the person you are uniquely called to be, the person whom God seeks to perform a role that perfectly blends God's eternal nature, your temporal nature, and the transitory circumstances of this world. Discernment of vocation is the identification of that form of service through which you will find perfect freedom.

In passing I might note two implications of this understanding of vocation. The first is that it presupposes diversity: if we were all wired up the same way it wouldn't make a lot of sense for God to give us different jobs to do. The more diverse the skills of the team, the more adaptable that team is to new circumstances and challenges. The second is that it explains why the distinction that accepts LGBT orientation but denies LGBT sexual expression is unsustainable. Celibacy is a vocation, just as marriage is; suggesting that all LGBT people are called to be celibate is a misuse of the term vocation; it would be like suggesting all men are called to be fathers, or all women are called to be priests. By definition vocation is a role to which some are called but not all. Something to which all are called is not a vocation, it's a command. Commands, from Sinai onwards, are the way God equips people to keep their freedom. And there's no command in the Bible for universal celibacy.

And this theme of vocation brings us to our third judgement call. How significant is sexuality for the whole of our lives before God? Think for a moment about the widespread sense that by dwelling on issues of sexuality the church makes itself ridiculous before the sophisticated contemporary world. Does this remarkably oft-heard claim not presuppose a view that sexuality is something one invokes, at will, at designated moments of the day, week, or month, that is wholly private, and though (one would hope) indescribably pleasurable and ecstatic, is nonetheless completely under control and can be dismissed or airbrushed out of settings where it doesn't belong – in other words that sex is the perfect consumer commodity? Show me this perfectly-adjusted sexual society, at peace with its body and everyone else's, free from jealousy, longing, betrayal, passion, self-deception, greed, anxiety, shame, rejection, hunger, failure, regret, fear and loss. Bring it on.

There are twin paradoxes in our contemporary culture. One paradox is that we speak of sex as something utterly private, tremendously personal and terribly intimate, and thus outside the realm of public discourse to such an extent that anyone who dares to make normative claims in public seems absurd to the point of ridicule; yet at the same time perhaps no subject is the cause of more grief, heartache and hurt, and thus crying out for sensitive discussion and gentle wisdom. The other paradox is that because our plural society finds it so



hard to name, let alone consider, overall goals that might define and shape human life as a collective project, energy is devoted instead to fulfilling proximate dreams and maximizing personal pleasure and sexuality thus becomes not the most irrelevant subject, but the most urgent one.

In this paradoxical context, it's challenging but vital to renew an understanding of sexuality that sees our lives as located between Act 3 and Act 5 of the five-act play. This location offers us hope, that's to say an overarching framework within which to perceive the failures, frustrations, setbacks and mundanities of our lives. Act 5 is not something we build or hasten or determine – it's something God brings. If we want to know what Act 5 looks like we do best to look back to Act 3 and see the kingdom as portrayed in and by Jesus. It's a kingdom in which exiles are restored, the oppressed find release, the rejected belong, debtors are forgiven and the excluded become companions, on an interpersonal, social, international and cosmic scale. Disciples in Act 4 are called to imitate the ways of the kingdom they see practised in Act 3 in the light of the full disclosure and fulfilment of the kingdom promised in Act 4. It's a vocation that requires the whole of one's identity, and thus one's sexuality must be integral to the way that vocation is fulfilled; but it's not a vocation that is wholly or primarily about sexuality, so sexual needs, desires, frustrations and longings must to some degree be set aside for a greater purpose.

Without such an overarching purpose within which to discern an individual vocation, questions of sexual ethics are almost impossible to resolve. The question the church asks itself is, what kind of a people do we need to be to be part of God's mission in which exiles are restored, the oppressed find release, the rejected belong, debtors are forgiven and the excluded become companions? And the answer has to include things like realizing the extent to which one is oneself an oppressor as well as denouncing oppressors, seeking forgiveness as well as brokering reconciliation, coming out of exile oneself as well as being a shepherd who seeks out the lost, living with infectious freedom as well as seeking to liberate others. The lesson of the Old Testament is that Israel discovered that freedom is harder to keep than to find, so rules and guidelines exist, not because the alternative is impurity and shame, but because without them the community disintegrates and can't do the job God has called it to do.

Thus the question for each disciple is, what kind of a life do I need to live if I am going to support such a community and in its service find perfect freedom? It probably means focusing one's energies on one aspect of the kingdom, or more likely one subset of one aspect of the kingdom, and ordering one's life to be able to embody and advance and enrich that aspect as well as one possibly can. It means asking oneself questions like, will others look at my life and my relationships and see in them love, joy and peace? Will they look at my care of the young and the old, the needy and the infirm, the troubled and the stricken, and see patience, kindness, goodness? Will they look at my confrontation with the forces of hatred and cruelty, the powers of manipulation and deceit, the principalities of greed and humiliation, and see faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?

And now perhaps we're ready to focus on that little word, 'add'. What does the identity of being LGBT add to the identity of being Christian? By this stage in my argument it should be clear that questions of sexuality are almost impossible to resolve without a renewal of the whole church in its understanding of itself and its mission, and that part of the gift of LGBT people to the church in the current era is that considering these questions may lead to that very same renewal of the church.

Let me at this stage consider three notions of what our calling as Christians is to be before God, and the respective place of LGBT people within that calling, as a way of synthesizing the first and second sections of my argument.

One is to keep ourselves pure. In this view the world is full of snares and seductions, and the goal of the Christian life is to navigate around and between them without falling into or being entrapped by any, and eventually presenting oneself spotless and blameless before God at the throne of glory on judgement day.



However much of a caricature of piety this might be, it's hard to deny how widely influential it's been among believers and critics alike. It's important to note it has little or nothing to say about forgiveness and scarcely any notion of the devotional or social role of the church, and is thus a more or less Pelagian model, devoid of grace. As to a place for sexuality, marriage exists to contain inflammable lusts; it's hard to imagine a positive rendering for LGBT people in such a model.

Another similar view of Christian calling is to facilitate a healthy society. This means being a good citizen, fighting the government's wars, keeping the king's rules, working hard to make an honest living and pay fair taxes, and claiming a decent share in the profits of industry, labour, prosperity and peace. It's hard to deny that between them, this and the first notion cover the majority of popular perceptions about the basic foundations of discipleship. Again, this model lacks the drama of repentance and forgiveness, and has a benign view of the congruence of gospel and culture. The role of sexuality is simple and direct: it is to bring into the world children, who are to be reared as good, upright Christian citizens. Again, it's hard to see an authentic place for a positive understanding of LGBT people here.

And this is why I say that receiving the gift of LGBT people is inextricable from a renewal of the church's understanding of itself and its mission. For these two models, in which there is practically no place for LGBT people, are as impoverished as they are influential. Let me suggest a third model and see what difference it makes.

What if Christians were called to bear in their bodies the truth of God's sharing their life in the incarnate Christ, the goodness of Christ's laying-down of his life for their sake, and the beauty of the Holy Spirit's raising Christ to life for evermore? What if Christianity were to mean the recognition of one's own participation in deceit and cruelty and the calling of all people to name complicity in oppression and falsehood? What if discipleship meant individually and corporately letting one's life be transformed into a parable of faith, a poem of hope, a paean of love, that exchanges the world's habits of scarcity for the kingdom's assumptions of abundance? What if piety meant leaving aside the things the world offers a tantalizing shortage of and embracing the things God gives in plenty? And the moment that starts to sound too ambitious is the very moment of renewal, because that's when the church, perhaps for the first time ever, realizes it doesn't have the luxury of prejudice, it doesn't get to include just one kind of person, it really and truly needs everyone who is willing to be part of this great adventure, and is at last surrounded by all the kinds of people who thronged round Jesus and whom the church should have regarded as its best friends all along.

And is there a place for LGBT people in this model? Absolutely. They're in the front seat of the van. Why? I'll give you three reasons. One, because a terrifying, murderous and persecuted history, which has left LGBT people so marginalized, scapegoated and diminished in the church it's astonishing they're still here, makes LGBT people almost uniquely qualified to identify with those people closest to Jesus' heart, Jesus' company and Jesus' ministry. After hundreds of years of seeing LGBT people as living in Babylon, in an exile of their own making, the church is finally beginning to realize that they're not in Babylon – they're in Egypt, in a captivity imposed upon them by others. Of course LGBT people are sinners – everyone is; but at last the church is beginning to recognize that this is a people incalculably more sinned against than sinning, with an inexhaustible store of wisdom and grace to teach their brothers and sisters.

Two, because LGBT people by their very nature break the assumption that human existence is indelibly tied to reproduction. Having children is a longing for many people, a foiled or delayed hope for some, a joy to others, and a grief to yet more. But it's not a necessity, for either biological or missiological reasons. Instead it's a vocation, for some to carry and all to support. Some LGBT people themselves sense a call to carry this vocation. But for the most part, LGBT people are a witness that God reproduces the church by baptism and the kingdom by grace, and this is a proclamation of inestimable significance for Christian witness in the world.



And three, LGBT people are ahead of the majority population in exploring the longevity and sustainability of desire and tenderness that is neither upheld by the sanction of social endorsement nor cemented by the responsibility of offspring and nurture. Two hundred years ago what held marriages together was female economic dependence, short lifespans, low expectations of emotional fulfilment, and the social stigma of or legal impossibility of divorce. Now all these have been rolled away, we are discovering whether there's any glue left. LGBT people have never had any of these buttresses: perhaps the question in our generation should not be 'Have LGBT people any right to be married?', but rather 'Can the church begin to redefine marriage for a very different era without the wisdom and experience LGBT people can bring?'

It may seem like I've thrown out such a whole battery of proposals that it's high time I took a reprise of the whole argument by way of summing up. So here goes. I'm going to do the five-act play in reverse.

Starting in Act 5, one of the flaws in the way the whole debate about LGBT people and the church is usually set up is the mistaken assumption that creation is a self-authenticating decree. On the contrary, creation only makes sense when read backwards from the point of view of the end of the story. Act 5 is a depiction of where the story is going: perfect communion of God, humanity and all things where diversity is exponential and difference is coded not as violent tension but as playful peace. Only with such a picture does creation make sense. We needn't think of God starting things off like a cosmic train-builder whispering in our ear, 'Stay on these tracks or you'll ruin it.' Instead in creation God implants imagination, humour, creativity and desire, and crafts them all as routes back to God should we ever get lost.

Moving to Act 4, our fundamental identity as Christians is derived from our baptism, and in our baptism we set aside the one-act play and inherit the heritage and destiny of God's five-act drama. That's what it means to be holy – to be set apart and called by God for a special role in anticipating the kingdom, and to be one through whom others find a blessing. In Act 4 our vocation is not to look to a template of spotless purity or obedient citizenry but to allow ourselves to be swept up in the adventure of the kingdom, inaugurated in Jesus and completed on the last day; and our relationships are evaluated not by looking them up in the owner's manual but by communal discernment as to whether they strengthen the community in its daunting challenges to embody God's glorious future in an often hostile present.

As to Act 3, we don't have any insight whatsoever into Jesus' sexuality; we only know that it must have existed if, as we believe, he was fully human as well as fully divine, and that it seems to have been among the least interesting aspects of his life and saving work. Jesus' singleness, and lack of descendants, more than any other facts, dismantle any privilege for exclusive intimate partnerships, let alone nuclear families, as a definitive model of Christian discipleship.

Moving back to Act 2, the Old Testament gives us two complementary stories. The first is of liberation and covenant. Here we see that God not only gives us freedom but also guides us on how to keep it. On the other hand, we also see that discipline that does not bring liberation is not holiness, but imprisonment. The second story is of exile and yet mysterious disclosure of God. The discovery that God is as close or closer in Babylon as in Jerusalem is the grounds on which Christians today look to the oppressed and marginalized to be their teachers in the ways of the Spirit.

And last of all Act 1, and the biggest question: Are LGBT people made this way because God wanted ones like them to do a job no one else could do – or has it all been a ghastly mistake? I've left this question to the end, because I don't want to suggest every desire of our hearts is ordained to be so, and because until I'd begun to outline the job God wanted LGBT people to do the question as framed wouldn't make any sense. But now that we've explored how the church may think of LGBT identity as a blessing not a burden, and now that we've worked backwards through God's story to name some of the ways we might say LGBT people have a particular role in that story, then we can address that biggest question. And the answer to the biggest question is yes, LGBT people are made this way because God wanted ones like them to do a job no one else could do;



and if the church is somewhat slow in affirming specific vocations and attending to long-hidden gifts it's because it has hundreds of years of unlearning to do in breaking the habits of oppression and letting the Holy Spirit speak through an exiled people.

What needs to happen now is repentance for the church's ignorance and cruelty, a renewal of the church's mission, and a reappraisal of the resources at the church's disposal. And to lead the church as it discovers what it means to be a minority, to be misunderstood, mistrusted, and seen with contempt, who better to be its leaders and teachers than those who have been in that place all along. I wonder who those people might be.