Openness Unhindered
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Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ

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For Ken and Floy Smith, faithful pastor and pastor’s wife
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The book of Acts is a majestic tour de force when read in one sitting. It is one of my favorite books to gobble down all at once. By the time I finish the last two verses, I sigh with undaunted love for my Lord, dependence on the Holy Spirit for all insight and comfort, a renewed sense of God’s righteousness, and a deeper yearning to understand my Bible, this book that unfolds the character of God and the unsearchable depths of his wisdom.

These are the lines that crown the book of Acts: “And [Paul] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered” (Acts 28:30–31; italics added).

Beaten, shipwrecked, maligned, and betrayed, the apostle Paul arrived at an intense place of union with Christ where he was open and unhindered in all aspects of his life: struggles, identity, purity, evangelism, and hospitality. He was open and unhindered, even as he was hurt, misunderstood, abused, and lonely. In Paul’s words, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8–9). In spite of the “but nots” the matter still stands: committing your life to Christ is dangerous business. The unbearable trials did not thwart Paul because, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he applied faith to his pain. By so doing, he drew close to the Lord, who knows our pain better than we do.
The book you hold in your hands, *Openness Unhindered*, takes its impetus from the last two words of the book of Acts. The Lord has used those two words in my life (and the vast world of the Bible, the God-won creation, and the redemption it unpacks) to redeem struggles, renew hope, remake purity, re-plot purpose, and recreate community. I have come to understand “openness, unhindered” as tidings that, in their biblical context, outline Christ’s posture for the forgiveness of sexual sin and the renewal that he gives to the body and the mind. My prayer is that this book will serve as a bridge to Christ for those of us whose sin (sexual and otherwise) has clobbered us more times than we can count, and for our churches and Christian friends who want to help but don’t know where to begin or what to say.

**Hold nothing back from God.**

*Openness* implies that we hold nothing back from the God who made us and will take care of us. We give him our heart, our desires, our hopes, our dreams, our struggles, our doubts, our fears, and our identity. We are open to God. Wide open. This kind of intimacy and trust is unsettling to us in our natural or unconverted self, especially as post-Freudian thinkers who have become both jaded and seduced by the authorizing discourses of personal experience, believing, as we all tend to do, that our feelings (especially the fixed ones) are themselves vestiges of truth.

*Unhindered* means that we are unencumbered by our failures; that is, we do not keep record of the countless times that we have failed God in sin, failed our friends in carelessness, and failed our own conscience by willfully disobeying the God who loves us. Instead of recordkeeping, we pray for the gift to repent of our sin at its foundation. We pray for the gift of God that redeems our mind, allowing us to see not through eyes of flesh, but rather through eyes remade by the Holy Spirit. Instead of remembering our already and often-repented sin, we remember God’s covenant with us in Christ, and Christ’s faithfulness.

If we are in Christ, then Christ lives in our place. He took our
place on the cross and he fulfills our place today. He breathes life, purity, and redemption into our relationships, our communities, and our futures. Less of me. More of him. In Christ, I am no longer a slave to self, sin, and selfishness. In Christ, I am no longer alone. This does not, however, mean that I call sin by any other name. The law of God is my tutor, because it shows me God’s will, prohibits sin, exposes my failings, and enlists me in the school of Christ.

“Redeem” is a verb of empowerment. Think about how much depth and grace is packed into this little word! Roll these promises over in your heart. This is the sweet gift of Christ to his redeemed people, to those who have been both rescued from captivity and to whom the promise is performed. Christ alone does this. We violate those we love when we try to supplant Christ by trying to fill his role, or by removing ourselves from this lavish outpouring of love by refusing to take God’s point of view on the matter of sin—its nature, origin, and consequences. Christ loves his people best. We cannot love as he did. We cannot suffer as he did. We cannot redeem our lives, our worlds, or our relationships.

This implies some important things. First, God’s story as captured in the Bible is not a myth. It is an organizing, true narrative of who God is, what he has done, and what he will accomplish. God’s story is about God. God’s story precedes me. It came before me. Because it precedes my consciousness, it explains me. Because Christ redeemed me, I can apply faith in Christ to the facts of my life without violating the integrity of the one or the other. In Christ, faith does not erase facts, but it does illuminate them. In Christ, God’s story helps me to tell you where I hurt. God’s story is our ontology: it explains our nature, our essence, our beginnings and our endings, our qualities, and our attributes. When we daily read our Bibles, in large chunks of whole books at a time, we daily learn that our own story
began globally and ontologically. God has known us longer than anyone else has. The Bible declares that he knew us from before the foundations of the world. One of my favorite writers, William Gurnall, says that God carried us “long into the womb of His eternal purpose.” So God carries us, yes. But God also calls us to act and to serve.

Why is sexual sin so hard to deal with? Because often sexual sin becomes a sin of identity. One goal of this book is to help you face your sin in Christ, know your status in Christ if you have committed your life to him, and reject any identity that Christ has not prepared for you.

“We are all sexual sinners.”

While this book is not exclusively about sexual sin, because sexual sin has been for me a snare whose consequences I bear, I offer many examples in the pages that follow. Sin and sexuality are not unrelated. Sam Allberry put it best: “We need to be clear, not just that we are all sinners, but that we are all sexual sinners.” Indeed, sin and sexuality go together like peanut butter and chocolate. They always have. But the growing disregard for and rejection of biblical norms for law and life have created a vortex of sexual sin.

As I have traveled to different churches and colleges to speak about biblical sexuality, I have met countless people for whom every vital relationship has been marred by sexual sin. I have met wives whose husbands have pornography addictions, whose teenage children engage in forwarding sexually explicit pictures on text messages, whose best friends frequent explicit cyber-sex sites and engage in cutting and mutilation. I have met husbands whose Bible-believing wives have left them for lesbian lovers. I have met teenagers who are in sexual relationships with their biological cousins and who believe that they have GSA (genetic sexual attraction). I have met preteen girls, homeschooled and protected their whole lives, who found violent pornography on their moms’ cell phones and who cannot go back to any place of safety and peace. I met one woman who had had seven
abortions, who goes to church weekly, and who lives a double life. For each of these people, the sense of being out of control is overwhelming. For the parents and loved ones (the secondary victims), the shame, guilt, and secret-keeping is unbearable.

Where do we go with problems of this magnitude? Is the Bible relevant, or is it a quaint and archaic moral code only useful in yesterday’s world? How do we discern the brokenness of our sexuality, and how do we use the Bible to diagnose the problem and outline the solution? Do I accept the verdict of my sin at the cross? How can this be sin if it feels so good? What do I do when I am trapped like prey by the predatory nature of my own sexual sin? These are many of the questions that I address here.

This book is meant to help you peer through the keyhole of faith to see what a glorious future God promises to those in Christ, and to see that it is never too late for you or anyone else. Christ redeems. Even our struggles, our failures, and our suffering are redemptive in Christ. But there is blood involved. There is a cutting off and a cutting away that redemption demands. Stepping into God’s story means abandoning a deeply held desire to make meaning of our own lives on our own terms based on the preciousness of our own feelings. We leave and we cleave. Or we never really understand what it means that Christ died in our place. We can only take this leap if Christ jumps for us. While we can beg him with a contrite heart, we cannot accomplish salvation, repentance, or sanctification at our will.

In addition to the people for whom every relationship has been hijacked by sexual sin, I also have spent a bulk of my time talking with people who are struggling with unwanted homosexual desire. It has been hard for my friends in this group to get their churches to recognize that they did not choose this desire. It has been hard for my friends to be torn between the church (itself confused and divided) and the world (similarly vexed).

There seem to be three lenses through which to examine today’s sexual landscape. The first views gender and sexuality as cultural artifices, not ontological, God-ordained categories. Folks with this lens reject the idea that the Bible is an inerrant (without
error) and inspired-by-God text, even though some claim a deep love for many parts of the Bible, and a self-identified high view of Scripture. It is not unusual to have a high but also flawed view of something. People can have a high view of something that they don’t understand. I may have a high view of Shakespeare’s sonnets, but if I cannot scan for iambic pentameter, I will only be able to appreciate them in a surface or “vulgar” way. Faithful readers of any text may have differing levels of literacy in discerning the meaning of those texts.

The same is true for Scripture. A high view does not guard against low literacy. To unbelievers and to those who hold to a revisionist hermeneutic,5 this is the case. But the Bible unfolds its own hermeneutic, as God himself determines how we should approach him. Of course you can read the Bible through a lens other than that which God asks, but you will never know the God of Scripture through his written Word if you do.

God’s created order includes norms, boundaries, definitions, and limits for sexuality and gender, some of which may be difficult to embrace, especially if your personal experience puts you at odds with people you love and care about. Bible-believing Christians are gender and sexuality essentialists, believing that there is an essence to maleness and femaleness, and that God’s created order mandates sexual union exclusively between one man and one woman in the covenant of biblical marriage. To the rest of the world, such essentialist understandings of sexuality, gender, and selfhood are reactionary, backward, and dangerous.6 To the rest of the world, the Bible-believing Christian’s rejection of the wisdom of the world in favor of the fear of God and allegiance to the thousands-of-years-old Bible is foolish and hate-mongering. I completely understand how these folks feel and interpret this. And my shift from postmodern intellectual, unbelieving professor, and lesbian activist to repentant Bible-believing Christian has tagged me a dangerous idiot. I love the

Revisionist hermeneutic—a reading practice that questions and reconceives the Bible’s plain meaning and the shared testimony of the church.
folks in the former group. This group holds my former family of choice, and the learning community they cherish and inhabit is the one I helped build. Unbelievers tend to be pragmatists about morality. If consenting adults are hurting no one and cherishing what they have together, they are deemed to have a good relationship. I believed this for many years and I understand where they are coming from.

The second lens through which to read sexuality is with an inerrant, inspired, and dependable Bible. But even when we use the right lens, we also use the eyes of flesh, so we won’t get good results. In this group we find Christians who uphold what we call the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture, but have never struggled with homoerotic desires themselves, looked deeply enough into Scripture, or listened well enough to their friends who do struggle. These folks unbiblically believe that the struggle is the sin. They do not know how to approach their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) neighbors because deep down they truly believe that if gay people would just come to Jesus, they would all be straight.

Recently someone in my extended church community asked if the lesbian daughter of a mutual friend of ours was going to commit her life to Jesus and “go straight.” I reminded the churchy lady (I live in the South, so indulge me here) that the young woman she mentioned had made a profession of faith, and I had no more knowledge of whether she would develop heterosexual attractions than I did if she was going to buy a puppy at the state fair this year.

Homoerotic desire, these folks believe, is rooted in willful sin, bad choice-making, full-blown lust, and/or lack of knowledge of or real faith in Jesus. Without intending it, they endorse a prosperity gospel about sexuality, one that falsely believes that Christ died on a cross and rose again to make you happy and prosperous on earth. We all make choices along the path of our life journeys, but if sin is only about bad choice-making, we
don’t need a savior. Sin is bigger and deeper and longer than bad choice-making. All sin is a vestige of the fall and a transgression against God, but that doesn’t mean that patterns of temptation are themselves proof that we are actively sinning. While it is true that in conversion we are new creatures in Christ, it is also true that on this side of the resurrection we will struggle with all manner of sin, including, if God permits, homoerotic desire. That is the kicker, and I hear this all the time: “God would never make someone with a homosexual baseline.” Really? Original Sin means that we are born in fallenness—both moral (which requires the sanctifying power of God through saving faith) and natural (which requires medical or supernatural healing, but not necessarily saving or sanctifying faith). Sexuality can straddle this line, as sometimes sexual dysfunction results from natural fallenness (such as intersexuality, being born with reproductive or sexual anatomy of both sexes). So yes, we are all “born this way.” And even after we are born again, we will all struggle with sin until we die and enter Glory or Jesus returns.

It is not the absence of sin that makes you a believer.

Whether the pain you face now is the consequence of your sin or the sin of others, in God’s providence and in saving faith, Romans 8:28 still reigns: “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” It is not the absence of sin that makes you a believer. It is the presence of Christ in the midst of your struggle that commends the believer and sets you apart in the world. Real conversion gives you Christ’s company as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Indeed, the fall made everything—including my deepest desires—fall. And this happened under God’s providential eye, not behind his back.

The third lens is used by those who believe they have Christ’s saving grace, but do not believe that God calls them to repent of all sin, in part because they use the wrong biblical lens. They believe that there are holes in the biblical story, holes that can only be filled by the “moral logic” of personal experience or
the culture in which we live. These people believe in Jesus, but extract him from the Word of God by suggesting that we have new and improved ways of understanding the human condition.

While the Bible is not a science book and will not tell me how to fix my computer or build a telescope, it is spot-on when it comes to the moral condition of humanity. When folks in this group claim Christ’s confidence, but uphold a hermeneutic that unwittingly but wholeheartedly erases Jesus’ brutal sacrifice for sin, they often do so on the grounds of new evidence about morality that changes what the Bible means. Every generation seems to arrive at new evidence to explain away a biblical truth. Part of loving your sister or brother involves holding the mirror of Scripture up to the reflection of personal testimony. If personal testimony does not reflect the Bible’s account of a life of faith and repentance, then for the sake of your friend and for the sake of Christ’s witness, bring the Word of life to bear upon the claim of conversion.

My hope is that Openness Unhindered may help in this humble quest. Jesus cannot be separated from the whole Bible; and the Old Testament is not dispensable, or with it the moral law of God. For my friends in this group, I want to say thank you for hanging in there with me. Being born in Adam means that we cannot escape Original Sin: we are born with a primary desire to do evil, and a primal propensity to enjoy in the flesh what God calls sin. Original Sin makes us not just bad, but blind. This fact—that Original Sin distorts us at the deepest level—can be an overwhelming idea. But that is not its intent. Original Sin is not meant to shame anyone. Rather, the doctrine of Original Sin is the most democratizing idea in all of human history. It means that we are all in the same boat. And if we are in Christ, no pattern or sin or brokenness defines us. Christ’s virgin birth represents, in spite of all the hoopla around Christmas, his humiliation, not his exaltation.

We who are broken by sin cling to and identify with Christ’s humiliation, a key Christian virtue and posture. But Christ is no
longer humiliated. He sits at God’s right hand, interceding for us as we run the race set before us. Repentance unto life means that we must repent of sin, even sins of identity. There is no shame in this. I know this sounds counterintuitive. As you enter into the section of Openness Unhindered that addresses identity, some of this material may be dense and foreign. Bear with me, please. You can take the professor out of the university classroom, but sometimes you can’t take the university classroom out of the professor!

Take my hand and join me on this journey, please. If you are a Christian and you are struggling with sexual sin, this book is meant to equip and encourage you in your daily walk of faith with Jesus. If you are not yet a Christian, my hope is that I can reach through the pages of this book, take your hand, and put it in the hand of our Savior.

If you call yourself a Christian, but you do not believe that you need to repent of the sin that claims your identity, heart, and perhaps body, my prayer is that this book sounds a serious alarm to you. Your soul is at stake, and I will take the risk of offending you to help. Salvation is a gift, offered to all who have a broken and contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). God promises tenderness to the brokenhearted: “I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick,” but judgment for those who defend the right to their sin: “but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with judgment” (Ezek. 34:16). A humble and a broken heart is a gift from God. Pray for a heart that breaks on the rock of Christ. Pray for a tender conscience about sin, even your deepest, most primal sin.

Salvation is a gift.

Salvation is a gift, and it is a good gift to pray for! What do you do with a gift? You receive it, and then you act on all the bounty that it offers. If you are the parent or spouse of someone trapped in a sexual sin that seems to have stolen your loved one from you, my hope is that you find comfort and insight in the pages that follow. Read on, please.