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UNDERSTANDING THE THING ITSELF

One of the first realities in dealing intelligently with an issue is to be able to separate the truth undergirding that issue from the fiction and assumption that swirls so speciously around it.

If one doesn't know the truth concerning the basic issues, you can't really know the larger issues. For instance, some otherwise intelligent people hold some ideas about Christianity, and particularly evangelicals, that are simply false. Therefore, they begin from the wrong starting place in their interactions with evangelical Christians, regardless of how confidently they might assert or believe those ideas. Some militant atheists will do this, building a straw-man god and then explaining how unreasonable it is to believe in such a god. It creates the kind of situation that compelled Richard John Neuhaus to respond to one of the more famous atheist gadflies, "The God that you don't believe in is not the God I believe in." We don't want to be that guy.

When I speak on secular campuses on issues like the politics of gender, one of my favorite things is to go out to dinner afterward with the event's hosts, usually the campus's LGBT groups. I like this time because it allows us the opportunity to be able to mix and chat without the official "professionalism" required for the event itself. We can let our

hair down a bit. I usually start by breaking the ice, inviting them to ask me any questions they are curious about regarding evangelical faith and practice. After all, I tell them, “When will you ever get a chance to grill someone from the evil empire of the religious right?” And I tell them there’s no question that I’ve not been asked before or will offend me, so have at it. This openness and self-deprecation helps put them at ease and opens things up.

In these exchanges over chicken wings or quesadillas at the local Applebee’s, I often hear some variation of this setup to a question: “So as someone who takes the Bible literally . . .” I stop them and inform them that, in fact, I do not take the Bible literally. They look surprised, as if I had said some vegetarians love a good all-beef hot dog now and then. And then I add, “Actually, no Christian group has ever taken the Bible literally.” They look even more flabbergasted and wonder if I am playing some kind of clever mind game with them. I explain to them that I

We can’t talk thoughtfully and productively about what we don’t understand.

assume what they actually mean is “As someone who takes the Bible seriously, as trustworthy and authoritative . . .” and they explain that is precisely what they meant.

I then explain to them that even the most hyperconservative of Christians realize that the Bible includes statements of literal fact—“no one comes to the Father but by me”—but also allegory and allusion such as another of Jesus’ statement that “you must be born again.” He is not talking about literally going back into one’s mother’s womb, and no Christian has ever taken it as such. He uses it as illustration of a larger truth. And then I get to explain what Jesus meant by it.

It is a good and meaningful opportunity to set such misunderstandings aright. And we should not settle for the same kinds of popularly held but false notions about others. We should seek to understand them correctly.

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In fact, one day on one of our many road trips to a debate at some college, I asked my regular debate partner to help me understand the different subcommunities of the larger gay male community, the leather boys, the western rodeo guys, the interior design/fashion chaps. We talked about that for some while and then I asked him what kind of community there was among African-Americans. He asked if he had ever told me about the time he had gone to a Black gay bar. I would have remembered such a story, as my friend going to such a place would be like Mr. Rogers going to a monster truck rally—a fish-out-of-water kind of thing. It promised to be a great story, and he told it with relish.

This particular bar, all the way over on “the other side of town,” had a large, muscular man watching the door, and all had to pass by him to get in. As my buddy approached, this large fellow looked at him and then reached out his arms to each side, just above his waist. My friend thought, “Wow, they are friendlier here than most bars I go to,” thinking the man wanted to welcome him with a warm inviting hug. Of course, he went to return the kindness and hugged him. His guide that night, a local, informed him that the guard was trying to pat him down for firearms, not welcoming him with physical tenderness. So, as was the moral of my friend’s story, sometimes the different parts of the gay community are not so easy to figure out, just as in any community. And now I know and you do too: gun safety is paramount at Black gay bars.

We need to understand some things about the community we are interested in reaching out to, as no one can have an intelligent and accurate conversation or disagreement if it’s based on misunderstanding and stereotype, right? To do so is to “dance on Vaseline,” as one of David Byrne’s songs would have it. You can never make any real connection with the stability of the floor. We can’t talk thoughtfully and productively about what we don’t understand. And the fault is not in not knowing the facts and truth about something, for not one of us can understand everything accurately. The fault lies in assuming and acting like we do.

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Like any complex issue, this one is loaded with nuance and legitimate differences of interpretation and opinion. Take for instance an example from our own community: the issue of infant baptism. On which side of this topic does the truth reside? To which conviction do most Christians adhere? We might each *think* we know, for it probably corresponds with the position we hold. But there is no black-and-white answer. Faithful, biblical Christians line up on both sides of this issue. And so it is with the complexities of LGBT identity. As we unpack these issues, I will try to be sensitive to nuance and I will as best I can seek to separate falsity from fact. And I will strive to do so based on generally agreed upon understandings from serious leaders on various sides of this topic.

These are very important ground markers to be mindful of as we start our journey through the natural thickets of this issue. Bottom line: *We can't get right what we don't understand.*

What's LGBT, Anyway?

It is the rare person who has not heard these four letters as a social and political representation in society today. But what do they mean and how do they relate to one another, or not? First, the letters themselves and their popular meaning:

L—*Lesbian*, women who are sexually attracted to other women.

G—*Gay*, men who are sexually attracted to other men. However, “gay” can also be used as a general term to denote same-sex attraction as in “gay rights” or “gay pride.”

B—*Bisexual*, one who is sexually attracted to and interested in both male and female. (It is curious that while the foundational truth of queer and gender theory is that the “binary” understanding of gender—there is only male and female—is

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completely false, the “B” here assumes a binary understanding of gender, does it not?)

T—*Transgendered*, a person who was physically born male or female, but is either starting the transition to or currently lives according to the gender that they feel they really are inside. (Here as well, we tend to see the binary essence of gender at work as nearly all transgendered people are described and understood within the community as either “MTF” [male-to-female] or “FTM” [female-to-male] transgendered.)

But while it is typical that these four letters are used, often a few other designations are assumed and sometimes added to this string of four letters, such as . . .

Q or QQ—for either *queer* or/and *questioning*. “Queer” is an imprecise term that can be a political, attitudinal, or generally philosophical term. It generally identifies one as challenging the moral value and hierarchy of most sexual expressions and identities; kind of a sexual anarchism, if you will. But it can mean different things to different people, even within the LGBT community.

During a debate at Otterbein University in Ohio some years ago, our faculty moderator for the event introduced herself officially to the audience as “Queer Straight.” Afterward I asked my opponent, who is a noted leader in the LGBT movement (i.e., he knows his stuff), what “queer straight” meant. His answer? “Beats me!” he said. And it wasn’t because he hadn’t been paying attention in class. It’s that many use these terms in very fluid ways. So there are no hard-and-fast rules, black-and-white, dictionary-type understandings about what some terms used in this community actually mean. And “queer” is one of them for the most part.

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“Questioning” is simply that. It denotes someone who is still trying to figure themselves out sexually and gender-wise. (Closely related, a “C” can also be added to this train of letters denoting one being “curious” about other kinds of sexual natures and behaviors.)

But there are other letters added to these more often used ones. They are:

I—*Intersexed* is a newer term for hermaphrodite, one who was born with ambiguous genitalia or chromosomal issues that don’t distinguish one clearly as either male or female. The intersexed are much less likely to be politically or socially active about their condition compared with those who identify with the first five letters. They will nearly always come to identify exclusively as either male or female. It is also the most medically objective, measurable, and observable of any of these other identities. Except for the chromosomal abnormality, it nearly always reveals itself remarkably early, usually right at birth. It is more a physiological issue than a perception of one’s self.

A—*Asexual* is simply that: one who has no sexual attraction to others or interest in sexual activity at all. Curiously, they are seldom active in or a part of this community of which everyone else is identified by their sexuality. It’s like being in a boat club and neither having a boat or being interested in boats. Most, like the intersexed, tend to live privately with their secret, and they prefer it this way.

A—*Ally* is typically a heterosexual who is down with the cause, actively standing alongside all the other letters. This is what I first thought the “queer straight” Otterbein professor was describing herself as. Perhaps she was.

“LGBT” is not
just one thing.

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So, there you have it. To be as inclusive as you can be today, you want to use the full LGBTQQIAA initials train like they do at Amherst College and many other places.¹

P for polygamous, however, does not seem to be included in anyone's alphabet soup list. Why it isn't is a good question. Serious people are making serious cases for the acceptance of such people. The same goes for another P—*polygamy*. Or you could include others who genuinely advocate for inclusion: pansexual, omnisexual, tri-sexual, agender, bi-gender, third gender, transvestite, polyamorous, undecided, and then the catch-all category: *other*. As I write this, Facebook just added new gender/sexual orientation categories to their binary male/female options in one's personal profile. How many did they add? Over fifty! And users are still complaining their kind has been left out. It's crazy out there, folks, and in using such terms genuine inclusion is literally impossible. It's worth noting that the LGBT community itself includes no small number of those who poke fun at the ever-increasing string of letters that strive for absolute inclusion of every possibility. They prefer it simple: *just be who you are*.

All this is important to know because the "LGBT" initializing does not just mean one is gay or lesbian or even that you are a particular, concise *something*. It does not and cannot refer to who a person is. As my friend John Corvino—one of my longest-standing and dearest friends in the LGBT community—explains in the *New York Times*, "I'm amused whenever I hear someone say 'as an LGBT person . . .' *Nobody* is an LGBT person. You can have two, maybe three letters maximum at any moment (three could be a bisexual trans man in a gay relationship). It's a little better to say, 'As a member of the LGBT community . . .'"²

1. A helpful article on this growing string of letters and in using such terms is: Michael Schulman, "Generation LGBTQIA," *New York Times*, January 9, 2013.

2. John Corvino, "The Two Variables Don't Always Intersect," *New York Times*, December 17, 2013.

One Big Happy Family?

LGBT is not just one thing. It is not a personal descriptor. It is not a manner of being but a social and political identity. It communicates identification with a broad range of alternative sexual and gender norms, a shorthand for a large group of generally similar people who are different. It is much like the term “evangelical,” which is not a specific, objective thing. It is a sense of being and an identifier.

So to say that one is supportive of LGBT rights requires some clarification. Would they be for the rights of *all* alternative sexual/gender forms or just a few of those included in the ever-growing letters that make up this expanding community? It is not an academic point, as it would be a minority in the LGBT community who would advocate for the specific “rights” of all the various sexual identities in this ever-expanding alphabet soup. Equal rights for asexuals, the questioning or the curious—What does that even mean? So, to the question of whether you support or oppose LGBT rights, the honest answer for even those within the LGBT community is “it depends.”

This is also because the LGBT community itself struggles with this. They are not one big happy family. The “Ls” and the “Gs” have their serious issues with each other and they both have their issues with the “Ts.” One very blunt leader in the LGBT movement observes the inherent inequity that can exist there: “The gay establishment has always taken ‘L.G.B.T.’ to mean gay, with lesbian in parentheses, throw out the bisexuals, and put trans on for a little bit of window dressing.”³

There are disagreements about who should and should not be permitted to participate in gay-pride parades.⁴ Lesbians, self-identified “dykes,” and the transgendered will often take their ball and go form

3. Matilda Bernstein Sycamore, “A Movement That’s a Little More Radical,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2013.

4. See Chelsea Kilpack, “The Invisible LBT in Gay Pride,” June 1, 2013 at slcfeminist.com; Rev. Dr. Jerry S. Maneker, “The Counterproductive Nature of Parades,” n.d. at whosoever.org.

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their own events, knowing they are often not welcome.

One significant instance of deliberate internal exclusion regards some policies of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), arguably the most powerful and influential LGBT advocacy organization in the world. Mainstream gay publications have reported on their controversial history up to the present of questioning whether, ironically, transgendered citizens should even be included in certain federal bills favoring LGBT citizens or whether they should be permitted to protest as “Ts” at important political LGBT rallies. They get excluded because their presence makes for bad TV footage on the evening news.

Full inclusion of transgendered issues in the LGBT movement’s efforts have also been either questioned or rejected by majorities in the larger LGBT community in the recent past.⁵ So the “T” in LGBT should more accurately be referred to as “Y” as in the vowels: “LGB . . . and sometimes T.”⁶ As well, the “Bs” are sometimes chided with encouragement from the “Ls” and “Gs” to, for crying out loud, “make a decision and pick a side!”

All this is not presented as a criticism of this movement, for very few movements walk in lockstep with its various constituencies. But knowing that the LGBT community is not one monolithic bloc does help us understand it more honestly. It is truly not *one* thing. In like manner, many outside the evangelical community see us as all happily walking along in total agreement on every important topic, but we know all too well that is not true. The charismatics are nutty, the Reformed think they know everything, the nondenominationalists have serious commitment issues, and what’s up with those Wesleyans?

Talking with my gay and lesbian friends about these internal dis-

5. See Sunnivic Brydum, “Will Trans Folk Become an ENDA Bargaining Chip?” *The Advocate*, November 8, 2013 at advocate.com; Sunnivic Brydum, “HRC and Coalition Apologize for Silencing Undocumented, Trans Activists at Supreme Court,” April 1, 2013, at advocate.com and “More Details Obtained about HRC’s ENDA Poll,” November 10, 2007, at advocate.com.

6. “Are ‘Trans Rights’ and ‘Gay Rights’ Still Allies?” *New York Times*, October 15, 2013.

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agreements and differences has made for many revealing, long-into-the-night conversations. It has surprised both of us to learn who gets along swimmingly with whom in our communities, and who would never want to be stuck in an elevator with whom and why. But as we consider loving our LGBT neighbors, it is actually the first step in being loving to honestly understand who they are and what they are about. Holding on to unfounded assumptions and misunderstandings can be disrespectful. This is an important point that leads us in to our next topic of understanding.

Homosexuality: What It Is and Isn't

To ask what homosexuality is seems like a silly question, right? *Uh, Glenn, can we move on to the advanced class?*

Bottom line, it is sexual attraction to someone of the same sex. But there are important distinctions that need to be made here in order for us to fully understand what it is and what it isn't, both today and in the recent past. Homosexuality, as we understand it, has undergone a profound evolution over the ages.

Homosexuality existed in relatively widespread ways in the ancient world. But it was much, much different in its social practice and understanding than today. One leading scholar of Greco-Roman sexual mores explains:

In the ancient world, sanctionable homosexual acts were usually based on inequity: you are not supposed to desire somebody of the same age and status category as yourself. Therefore, young men and slaves are fair game, particularly your own slaves, who are your passive human property.⁷

7. Dominic Montserrat, *Sex and Society in Greco-Roman Egypt* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 137–38.

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These “sanctionable” relationships are about power and objectification, not caring, respect, and mutual love.

Michel Foucault, in his three-volume *History of Sexuality*, explains that “homosexuality” as a physiological or psychological category was not even present in the minds or language of the ancient or even pre-modern worlds. It was not how one was but an action, something one did. He explains,

The enjoyment of boys and of women did not constitute two classificatory categories between which individuals could be distributed [gay or straight]; a man who preferred *paidika* [sex with boys, which was the most common form of same-sex sex apart from with slaves] did not think of himself as being different from those who pursued women.⁸

David Halperin, noted for his groundbreaking work in the area of sexuality in antiquity, agrees, holding that “homosexuality” as a category for understanding or identifying oneself is just about a century old.⁹ In fact, the word only came into use in the later 1800s. Prior to that, it went by different terms, even by those who were deeply favorable to sexual experimentation.

The leading, earliest, and most liberal sexologist of that time—Henry Havelock Ellis, writing at the turn of the last century—referred to same-sex sexual activity as “sexual inversion.” The German radical Magnus Hirschfeld, around the same time, referred to men who had sex with other men as “intermediates.” The term “homosexual” only came into general use and understanding through the early decades of the 1900s.

But at that time, it was largely understood as an act someone did

8. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 190.

9. David M. Halperin et al., *Before Sexuality: Construction of the Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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to or with another. Later it came to be understood as a psychological disorder for which one needed treatment. Only recently, since the mid-1970s, was it ever referred to as an “orientation” rather than a mere act or a mental condition.

And since the mid-80s to early 90s, it came to be known as one’s identifying characteristic, if they so wished. So homosexuality’s social evolution has been to date:

- An act
- To a thing in itself, classified as a disorder to be healed of
- To an orientation and thus, a political movement
- To an identity, and thus, a right

All this happened within the last hundred years or so and make up what has ultimately become gay culture. It has become so distinct and prominent that it is not hard for most people to miss identifying it, and intentionally so.

Attraction, Orientation, and Identity

Two of the smartest, most balanced scholars studying the nature of homosexuality in the evangelical community are Stanton Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse. But they are also widely respected by their peers outside evangelicalism. They explain an important distinction between three things we typically see as one and the same: sexual attraction, sexual orientation, and sexual identity. What would you say the difference is, if anything?

They explain that according to the best available research on sexuality in America, conducted at the University of Chicago, individuals who report having same-sex *attraction* make up 4 to 6 percent of the total US population, females and males respectively. This can mean various levels or consistency of such attraction from “rarely” to “some-

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times” to “usually” to “always.” It would be those who “always” experience same-sex attraction who would be said to have a same-sex sexual *orientation*, what their consistent or strongly dominant sexual desire or preference is. Regarding *identity*, Jones and Yarhouse explain, “Among these [who are oriented as same-sex-attracted], an even smaller percentage self identifies as gay or lesbian, that is, they take on the sociocultural identity as ‘gay.’”¹⁰

Same-sex *identity* is a subset of *orientation* is a subset of *attraction* like nesting dolls, with the first being a smaller part of the next, or three larger-to-smaller parts of a pyramid.



One who is same-sex-attracted might not necessarily consider himself homosexual. Or they might. But he or she who has an orientation or even identity are very likely to consider themselves homosexual. But not all who have an attraction in that way necessarily have identity per se. It is also important to recognize that “orientation” is a less precise term than either “attraction” or “identity.”

What Is “Orientation”?

“Sexual orientation” as a category of understanding one’s sexuality is both very new and very imprecise. There is no scientific model, consistent

10. Stanton Jones and Mark A. Yarhouse, *Ex-Gays: A Longitudinal Study of Religiously Mediated Change in Sexual Orientation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2007), 32.

academic understanding or agreement on what it is and is not. Jones and Yarhouse explain: “We often use the terms *heterosexual*, *homosexual*, and *bisexual* to communicate information about a person’s sexual orientation. Interestingly, there remains much debate among human sexuality experts as to what sexual orientation actually *is*.”¹¹

“Orientation” is generally and narrowly defined as what gender one is sexually attracted to. But some argue that it should include how *many* one is attracted to as well as how that attraction is demonstrated sexually.

Is bisexuality really an orientation or merely a lack of having one’s feet planted squarely in the hetero- or homosexual camp? Is asexuality an orientation or the absence of one? People disagree on whether it is or not. Is polyamory (having many lovers simultaneously) an orientation? Few in the LGBT community would say so, but the polyamorists believe it most certainly is. Is polygamy an orientation, nonmonogamy, or pedophilia? How about S&M? There are those who intelligently argue that each of these are all orientations, even if they disagree with their ethical value. Others are more exclusive in what is and is not an orientation.

The answer, however, is that no one can say for sure, because there are no distinct lines or scientific criteria for what makes one sexual preference or attraction an “orientation” and another not.

It is not a useless term but an imprecise one. And the question of whether one’s orientation is innate or a natural part of who they are is another important question that we will address in chapter 3.

Are All Homosexuals Gay?

This question is not as obvious as you may think. Nor is it a trick question.

11. *Ibid.*, 29.