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A battle I face

An interview with Vaughan Roberts, Rector of St. Ebbes Church, Oxford, by Julian Hardyman, Senior Pastor of Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge about same-sex attraction

Julian: Vaughan, earlier this year your book *Battles Christians Face* was republished in a fifth anniversary edition. You added a new preface which included these words: This 'is the most personal of my books, partly ... because I wrote out of my own experience. We all face battles in the Christian life, some of which are common to each of us, while others are shared only by a few. Of the many battles I could have written about, I chose to focus on eight which, to a greater or lesser degree, I face myself'.

What responses have you had?

Vaughan: The fact that a pastor struggles with image, lust, guilt, doubt, pride and keeping spiritually fresh is not exactly a revelation to anyone who knows their own heart and understands that Christian leaders are weak and sinful too; and the admission of an occasional struggle with depression causes no surprise these days. The fact that the other chapter is on homosexuality, however, has caused a small ripple of reaction and led some to ask why I wrote those words and what I meant by them.

Defining yourself?

Julian: Does the disclosure that same sex attraction is one of your personal battles mean you are defining yourself as a homosexual?

Vaughan: No, it doesn't. It's important to reiterate that I have acknowledged a struggle in all eight of the areas the book covers and not just in one. The brokenness of the fallen world afflicts us all in various ways. We will be conscious of different battles to

varying degrees at different moments of a day and in different seasons of our lives. No one battle, of the many we face, however strongly, defines us, but our identity as Christians flows rather from our relationship with Christ.

All of us are sinners, and sexual sinners. But, if we have



Vaughan Roberts

turned to Christ, we are new creations, redeemed from slavery to sin through our union with Christ in his death and raised with him by the Spirit to a new life of holiness, while we wait for a glorious future in his presence when he returns. These awesome realities define me and direct me to the kind of life I should live. In acknowledging that I know something of all eight battles covered in my book, therefore, I'm not making a revelation about my fundamental identity, other than that, like all Christians, I am a sinner saved by grace, called to live in the brokenness of a fallen world

until Christ returns and brings all our battles to an end.

Gay clergy

Julian: Evangelical Anglicans are widely reported as saying there shouldn't be gay clergy. What does that mean for you?

likely to label you accordingly. Would it not have been better to have kept silent?

Vaughan: I have been very grateful for the friendship and wisdom of my Advisory Group (Peter Comont, Jonathan Lamb, Will Stileman and Pete Wilkinson), who keep me accountable and provide much needed counsel. They, along with close family and friends, have known for a considerable time that I experience same-sex attraction. We have thought through these issues together and, although the words in the preface are very low key, I didn't take the decision to write them lightly.

In fact, I included some personal references when I first wrote the chapter on homosexuality six years ago, but I removed them before it was published because we were all conscious of the potential dangers of unhelpful labelling and of the pressure for me to engage increasingly in a single issue ministry — something I'm very keen to avoid. I felt it right to include the new preface, however, with their support, because of an increasing conviction that there does need to be more openness in this area among evangelical Christians, given the rapidly changing culture we live in — and the resulting increased pressure on believers who face this battle.

Pastoral concern

Julian: As a pastor, you must have had folk who have confided in you pastorally about their same-sex attractions — has that affected your decision to be more open?

Vaughan: Certainly. I pray for them every Monday from a list

Vaughan: The press is often very misleading here. There is no objection to people being church leaders because of a homosexual orientation. The focus of the argument is over teaching and practice. Evangelicals say that clergy should uphold the Bible's teaching that sex is only for heterosexual marriage in teaching and lifestyle, both of which I do.

Julian: You might not be meaning to say anything fundamental about your identity by acknowledging that homosexuality is a personal issue for you, but there are many who will hear you in that way and are

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that is divided in two: those who continue to seek to be faithful to the Bible's teaching that the only right context for sexual intercourse is in a marriage between a man and a woman and those who have moved away from that view. Sadly the second group is growing.

Julian: Why do you think that is?

Vaughan: I've often wondered whether more might have persevered if they had felt there was another way open to them other than the affirmation of a gay identity and lifestyle advocated by the world and the isolation they experienced in the evangelical church with their largely private battle.

The world stresses freedom and authenticity and says: 'Everyone is born straight, gay or bi. You need to be true to yourself and accept who you are'. Same-sex attraction is seen as being entirely natural for some, who are therefore encouraged to embrace their identity as gay people and live it out in whatever way they choose. This message is supported by the individual stories of many whose openly gay lives offer a model of a particular way of living. By contrast, however, we in the church are too often heard to be presenting only a negative message which can leave them feeling deep shame and discourage them from emerging from the isolation of a lonely and private battle, which creates a fertile soil where temptation increases and compromise becomes more likely.

Julian: How do you think churches communicate that negative message?

Vaughan: The problem is largely caused by the fact that most of our comments on homosexuality are prompted, not primarily by a pastoral concern for struggling Christians, but by political debates in the world and the church. We do need to engage in these debates, but it's

vital that we're alert to the messages that some of our brothers and sisters may be hearing.

Media reporting often doesn't help and can give the impression that we think this particular sin is especially heinous. Also, in countering the simplistic binary model of the world that people are either born gay or straight (or, occasionally, bi), we are prone to make overly dogmatic comments ourselves about causation and cure. These can be heard to imply that homosexual attraction is just a matter of personal choice. This only increases the sense of shame already felt by



Julian Hardyman

those who experience unwanted same-sex attraction and can leave them with the impression that this is a battle that is not safe to share with others in the church. I have become convinced, therefore, that we need not only a greater openness in discussing issues of sexuality, but also a more positive vision and presentation of the nature of faithful discipleship for those who struggle in this area.

Biblical teaching

Julian: Let's come back to the biblical teaching on homosexuality. What does the Bible say?

Vaughan: The Bible is very

clear that God loves everyone, and welcomes all into his family, the church, through faith in Christ, whatever our gender, class or race and, we might add, sexuality. We do need to keep stressing that. But we also need to recognise the fact that the Bible is consistently negative about homosexual sex, and, indeed, about any sex outside heterosexual marriage.

Julian: Some people say, 'That's the ideal but Christians can't always live up to ideals'. They argue that homosexual sex within loving, committed relationships may be a lesser evil

Sin & circumstances

Julian: So the message to Christians with same-sex attraction sounds pretty tough: 'stay single, stay pure'.

Vaughan: That's not all there is to say. It's important to distinguish between sin, which can only be seen as negative, and circumstances, which, even when hard, may still be viewed positively.

While homosexual sin must always be resisted, the circumstances which often accompany same-sex attraction should be accepted as a context in which God can work. There is, without doubt, a difficult aspect to those circumstances, such as, for example, the frustration of not being able to experience the intimacy of a sexual relationship or a feeling of isolation because of the sense of being different. They can nonetheless be viewed in some senses positively, because of a recognition that God is sovereign over them and can work in and through them for his glory, the good of others and our own growth into the likeness of Christ.

This perspective should transform how we view all the difficult circumstances in our lives. We're not called to a super-spiritual positivity which denies the frustration and pain; nor are we to embrace a passivity which spurns any opportunity to change our situation. But we are to recognise the loving hand of God in all we experience and see it as an opportunity for service, growth and fruitfulness.

Julian: That's a very different perspective from just 'grimace and stay pure': how does it work out in practice?

Vaughan: I have found that those I've learnt most from have invariably been believers who have grown in Christian maturity by persevering through significant difficulties. The experience of blindness, depres-

than loneliness or promiscuity. Is what you are saying heading in that direction?

Vaughan: No, I'm certainly not saying that. The Bible presents only two alternatives: heterosexual marriage or celibacy. Celibacy, whether deliberately chosen as a vocation or reluctantly accepted as a circumstance, is hard. But when tempted to self-pity, I remind myself that that's true, not just for those attracted to the same sex, but for all who remain single despite longing to be married or those who, for whatever reason, are denied sex in their marriages.

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sion, alcoholism, a difficult marriage, or whatever the struggle may have been, is certainly not good in and of itself and yet God has worked good through it, both in the good he has refined in their lives and the blessings he has ministered through them. I have seen the same dynamic at work in some godly believers who have experienced a seemingly intractable attraction to the same sex. By learning, no doubt through many difficult times, to look to Christ for the ultimate fulfilment of their relational longings, they have grown into a deep and joyful relationship with him. Their own experience of suffering has also made them sensitive and equipped to help others who struggle in various ways. Those who have not married have embraced the Bible's very positive teaching about singleness as a gift (see 1 Corinthians 7.32-35), whether chosen or not, which, I imagine, alongside loneliness and sexual frustration, has afforded them wonderful opportunities for the loving service of God and others. I know that I myself would not have had nearly as much time for writing and speaking at missions or conferences if I had been married. I've also had more time for friendships, which have been a huge blessing to me and, I trust, to others as well.

Death & resurrection

Julian: That's encouraging. But what about the pain, surely that's very real? What do you do with that?

Vaughan: Yes, the pain is real — I can't deny that. The world, the flesh and the devil all conspire to make sin appear very attractive, so it will be hard for believers to remain godly in this area for the sake of the kingdom of God. To do that you need a clear understanding of the call to self denial in the kingdom — and the dynamic of resurrection life proceeding out of sacrificial death. Christ does call us all to a life of costly

suffering as we take up our crosses for him, but, just as it was in his experience, that way of the cross is the path to life: 'Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it' (Mark 8.35).

Julian: Surely that promise is fulfilled in the new creation?

Vaughan: Ultimately, yes. But, we should recognise that the blessings that flow from costly service of Christ are not only received in the future, but are also promised in the present. Jesus taught that those who lost out relationally or materially because of their commitment to him and the gospel could not only look forward to eternal life in the future, but would also receive 'a hundred times as much' as they had lost 'in this present age': 'homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields — and with them, persecutions' (Mark 10.29-30).

Julian: What does that look like in practice? And what does it mean for churches?

Vaughan: Those words of Jesus bring both great encouragement and profound challenge. Are our churches providing a spiritual family for those who are missing out on other contexts of relational satisfaction and support for the sake of the kingdom? Undoubtedly many, like myself, do experience a profound sense of loving community within the church, but there will always be room for improvement. We must face the uncomfortable fact that a significant reason why some Christians leave evangelical churches and choose to enter the gay community instead is because they perceive the alternative to be one of unsustainable isolation and loneliness.

Caring churches

Julian: What sort of things can churches do?

Vaughan: While being careful not to put any pressure on those who don't want to be more open, we could be looking for appropriate ways of enabling greater openness from some. I heard recently about a church where a young believer spoke honestly in a public testimony about his ongoing experience of same sex attraction. That was a real encouragement to some in the church who struggled in the same way and made it easier for them to speak with others. Another church has begun an occasional meeting for members in this situation. It has been a spur to some to speak about their struggles for the first time, knowing that they are not alone and that there is support available. Other Christians have found Wesley Hill's book *Washed and Waiting* really helpful. His refreshing honesty about his own experience and his godly approach have provided an excellent model to many, as well as giving supportive church members a deeper insight into the similar struggles of others. Alex Tylee's *Walking with Gay Friends*, written from a woman's perspective, has similar strengths.

Julian: What advice would you give to those who have not felt able to share their experience of same-sex attraction with other Christians?

Vaughan: I would strongly urge them to take a first step and think of at least one mature believer they could trust and be open with. We haven't been called to live as isolated Christians, but rather as members of God's family in local churches. Churches are imperfect, just as we all are as individuals, but they are the context in which God means us to grow together as disciples. Many of us have found that honesty about our struggles with trusted brothers and sisters has not only been an encouragement to us, but has also made it easier for others to open up to us about their own

battles. Parachurch organisations can also be a useful resource. The True Freedom Trust (www.truefreedomtrust.co.uk), for example, has been a great help to many.

Looking for change

Julian: And is change possible? Can these attractions be redirected or altered?

Vaughan: The development of sexuality is complex and is, I think, best understood as being on a spectrum, along which individuals can move, especially in the years soon after puberty, but also later. A small proportion of people, including Christians, find that they remain exclusively attracted to the same sex as they grow into mature adulthood. God has the power to change their orientation, but he hasn't promised to and that has not been my experience. Research suggests that complete change from exclusively homosexual desires to exclusively heterosexual ones is very rare. While supporting the right of anyone to seek help to change if they wish, our emphasis needs to be on encouragement to be godly and content in current circumstances.

Julian: So how does that happen?

Vaughan: It's important to recognise that very often God's power is seen, not by him removing our temptations and difficult circumstances, but by giving us the strength to persevere and live for him in the midst of them. Understanding this profound principle of God's power being seen in weakness will transform our attitude towards all our battles as believers. We will then be able to see our struggles, including the experience of living with same-sex attraction, not just negatively, but also positively.

Julian: Thank you, Vaughan, for your openness and wisdom **en**