

# The True Freedom Trust

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Date: 10 March 2013

Preacher: Stefan

[ 0 : 00 ] As Philip said, I'm normally more at home writing than I am speaking, so I hope that doesn't bode ill for our session this evening.

I just want to begin with a question about who am I? Because Philip's introduced me very briefly, but there's still a question going around in your mind, who am I?

I mean, there's a bit of a question going around in my mind about who are you, but this question of identity and who we are, and particularly this sense of who am I, has been something that's been with me and preoccupied me at different times in life.

And it may be a question you ask yourself in a quiet moment. Who am I? What makes me, me? What's my true identity? Well, what conclusions have you drawn about me so far from Philip's introduction and from what I've said and from what you've seen?

Well, at first sight, I'm a somewhat balding, early 50s man, reasonably well-spoken and slightly overweight. That's how I choose to describe myself.

[ 1 : 08 ] I live in Guildford, so you can locate me in a physical place. I work at a university as a lecturer in something called organisational behaviour, which is basically how do people work with one another in organisations.

That's my area of interest. And as Philip was saying, I've spent time in management consultancy. I also worked... Sorry, is this... Shall I put it a bit higher?

Okay. Okay. Hopefully there's less booming there. Yeah, that's fine. Great.

So you could say, I've worked in the NHS, quite senior roles, and you could say, well, Stefan's identity, he's a career man. That's what he does. Actually, Philip introduced me as a bit of a career man, so that's what I do.

But that's not my true identity, really. It's an identity. Some might say, those who know me well at the church I'm a member of would say, well, Stefan, you're a perpetual student.

[ 2 : 17 ] I'm forever doing another qualification. I know those of you who may be students and find doing qualifications somewhat of a burden. Actually, I find it a really fantastic thing to do, so I'm always doing qualifications.

And currently, I'm in the middle of a doctoral programme, so I'm already thinking about what the next one might be after this finishes. So that's a bit of an obsession. You might say, well, Stefan, you're a perpetual student. That's your identity.

Well, no, it's not really. It's something I do, isn't it? Some folk might say, well, your name, Stefan, that's a bit foreign. Maybe you think I look a bit foreign in my face, a bit Italian, perhaps, a bit continental.

Well, yes, you could identify me with that. You could say, oh, well, that's your identity. That's where you've come from. You've got a particular background. You're not completely English, but then who is completely English, actually?

And yet, my mother's German, and she met my father, who comes from Italy, in Bournemouth, of all places. And they fell in love and got married and stayed in this country.

[ 3 : 23 ] So a real mixture there. I was brought up in a place called Penge in South London. And Ben knows Penge as well, which is great that someone knows where Penge is.

Not everyone does. So you could say, well, that's where you come from. That's your family background. That's your identity. Well, is it? No, I don't think it is.

Because I think my true identity is the identity I have in Christ as a Christian. I would argue that's where my identity is. Just as a bit of background, I was brought up as a Roman Catholic.

I was very diligent and really enjoyed being involved in church activities, in religious activities. My mother tells me that I was always interested in God from a very young age.

But I was always asking questions. And I was always wondering, well, how do I know God? Yes, I could go through all this ritual and go through all this sort of religious activity.

[ 4 : 25 ] But how might I know God? And I came to know God through the witness of a school teacher who said to me one day, would you like to come to my church, which was a small Baptist church?

And as I was there sitting in the chair, God spoke to me through the preaching. And there weren't many more people than there are here this evening.

I was quite upset at the end of about the third service in, because each time I went, there was a different person preaching. And I became convinced that my teacher friends had been briefing these people on my life.

Because the preaching was such that I was sitting there hearing my life story being told to me. And I sort of thought, well, actually, God, you are speaking with me. You do know me.

Just as we read in John 4, Jesus knew the woman. And Jesus knew me as I sat there in that small chapel. So I became a Christian in 1977.

[ 5 : 25 ] And it was at that time, obviously, that it became clear to me that Jesus was the person, the one I was to follow.

He was God. And he is God. And I am to follow him. And I discovered that through repentance and faith in him, I had a new identity. I was really clear. I wasn't the religious youngster.

I wasn't the student. I wasn't, those were things I did or things perhaps people ascribed to me. But my identity was in Christ. And I was a new creation.

And that's one of the identities that he gives us in 2 Corinthians. And there's a list. If you do an internet search, you'll come up with a list of 50, 50 identities we have in Christ.

Just a few. I am God's child. If you're a believer here this evening, you're God's child. John 1, 12. I'm Christ's friend. John 15, 5.

[ 6 : 25 ] I'm united with the Lord. 1 Corinthians 6, 17. I'm bought with a price. I'm a saint set apart for God. I'm a personal witness of Christ.

I'm the salt and light of the earth. I'm free from any charge against me. I'm seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. I cannot be separated from the love of God.

I'm assured all things work together for good. I may approach God with freedom and confidence. I'm adopted. I'm the branch of the true vine, a channel of his life.

So, I mean, there's just a few tasters there. But that gives you a flavor for the identity that I have in Christ. And if you're a believer here this evening, this is the identity that you have in Christ.

Your first name is Christian, follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. All the rest of what you may have done in this life, where you may have come from, follows on after that.

[ 7 : 25 ] It's Christian first if you're a believer in him and a follower of Jesus. There's another part of my life that I speak less about. And it's quite personal. People sometimes say to me, Stefan, well, it's all well and good, but actually what you really need to own up to is the fact that you're a gay man.

And that's your real identity. Accept that. Find a male partner. Settle down together. And you will be happy. That's quite a hard thing to say to someone.

But people will say that. They'll say, oh, that's all well and good, Stefan. But the main identity you have, this world wants to give me, is the identity of being a gay man.

And it's true that throughout my life, I felt emotional and physical attraction to certain men. And it's true that I find little, if any, sexual attraction to women.

And my story, and I'll share some of it now, is it goes back to my early childhood. And I can think way back into nursery school times when actually I felt strong attractions to other boys.

[ 8 : 37 ] I can remember a degree of upsetness when my mother left me at the nursery school. And I can find, remember, a degree of peace and calm when I obsessed about my fellow boys in this nursery school.

So it goes back way, way back when. And I think a difficult relationship with my father sort of compounded this feeling. A feeling of, well, how do I get to know men?

I don't really know my father. I find him difficult. And so the focus of my life, if you like, was this hunger for affirmation, for male affirmation, for sense of belonging.

And there was a considerable amount of distress associated with that, both as a young child but also as I grew up. Things didn't get any easier. Things became, if you like, more and more difficult.

More and more attractions came. In those days, I really didn't, I don't think the word gay was actually there. I know some of you are fairly young, but there was a time when gay wasn't a word that was used other than to say joyful.

[ 9 : 49 ] So I didn't really see that there was an identity for me in that. But Jesus' arrival in my life at the age of 17 really changed everything because it made me desire to follow him.

And these feelings and these thoughts, whilst they were there, I knew they weren't what God wanted for me. And I couldn't quite work out what he did want for me, but I knew that actually marriage and sex was for men and women.

And that outside of that, there was to be no sex. And actually, I was to follow Jesus and to do my best with his help, by his spirit.

And I won't say that's been easy. It's not been easy. There's been ups and downs. There's been some very, very difficult times. There's been times of incredible isolation and loneliness with those feelings.

I think being in church sometimes hasn't been easy at all. And many folk I've spoken to in the subsequent years have had similar experiences. I think there's a lot of reasons for that.

[ 11 : 07 ] I don't think it's straightforward in terms of saying, well, church is anti-gay, you know, in some sort of cliched way. That's not the case at all. But there's something about the condition that you experience as an individual combined with the church culture and perhaps something about our British culture around these sort of issues as well.

When you add them all together, it made life really difficult at times. But at the same time, what I sort of have become aware of over the years and what's sort of really dumbfounded me is that that part of my life which I found most difficult, and those feelings and those behaviours were the most difficult, God somehow has chosen to take those experiences and use them for his blessing and his benefit through the work I've been able to do.

I believe through the relationships I've been able to have with people, both in terms of providing support one-to-one, but I've been involved in leading groups of men who struggle with the same issue.

I'm chair of the trustees of True Freedom Trust, which is a ministry established to hold the biblical position on this issue, but at the same time offers support and care to men and women who are struggling with their attraction towards the same sex, but also supporting and educating churches and church leaders in the area as well.

So I can't believe... It astounds me that I'm standing here in front of you this evening because I'm thinking, well, actually just a few years ago I wouldn't be saying anything to anyone because it was a matter of shame and a matter of, oh, we can't talk about this and all this is difficult.

[ 12 : 50 ] But God, in his grace, has taken those issues in my life and I think used them in extraordinary ways. So if you told me when I first became a Christian, that sort of nervous, sort of concerned, anxious 17-year-old, that I'd be taking those things and God would be taking those things that were most shameful in my life and using them, I'd have said, I'm going to get out of here.

There is no way I'm going to carry on with this. But his grace is such that he takes our life situations, he takes perhaps the identities we once had and transforms them and uses us in new ways to witness to the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that's my story. I hope that's been helpful. Do we want to do questions now, Chris? I've talked for far too long with my students in the university.

Firstly, the sort of parallel I want to draw in John 4 is that the Samaritan woman perhaps typifies the gay man or woman in our society.

So, and I hesitate to use the term gay. I don't like it because it's a very general term and it's not...

One of the issues about the discourse going on in our society at the moment is that we're reducing complexity to gay, straight, bisexual, and that's unhelpful.

[ 14 : 27 ] And the use of labels is really unhelpful. But I'll use the term gay for the sake of brevity. What we see here, I think, is that Jesus specifically goes to where she is.

And I think that's really interesting. He doesn't expect her to come to him. He goes to where she is. And I think that's something about what we need to do and think about in our work with folk, that we go to where they are rather than expecting them to come to us.

So practically, I think, well, what choices do you have about where you go for coffee in town? Are there sort of gay cafes that are known to be gay? Do you sort of walk past them quickly and make

your way to Costa or Starbucks or wherever you go?

Or might you stop off in a gay cafe and sit there and have a coffee and be there with people? Might you have a Bible study with a friend in a cafe like that?

Might you think about running a Christianity Explored course in a cafe like that? Might you think about how you could sort of place yourself where people are at so that you can hear what's going on for them rather than thinking about, well, how can we invite them in?

[ 15 : 38 ] I'm not saying don't invite them in, but actually just following Jesus' pattern might be helpful in this instance. He also was very honest with her. He expressed a need.

I'm thirsty. He was very human. I think there's a danger. We sometimes can sort of have a gospel message locked in our head that we want to share and we're waiting for that opportunity to share that good news.

He was very honest. He said, I'm thirsty. I'm a human being like you are. I just want to connect. I just want to ask you for something. I need your help, actually. He's very human.

He took the initiative. He didn't wait for her to talk to him. So there's something there about Jesus making contact, building that bridge. And interestingly enough, the Samaritan's woman's reaction is really interesting.

She starts off on this issue of identity. A Jew. A Samaritan. Christian. Gay. You know, it's quite interesting there, the parallels for me, that she begins saying, well, you're a Jew.

[ 16 : 43 ] I'm a Samaritan. How can you talk to me? You know, that sort of sense of a breach of relationship that's already there. And her holding on to her identity.

I'm a Samaritan. I just want you to know that. You know that, don't you? I'm a Samaritan. And we really need it. That's why I sort of, in my sort of testimony, really try to sort of emphasize that what we call ourselves, how we describe ourselves, is really critical to, I think, who we are.

But then how we reach out to people and how we perceive them and what identities we give to them. There is no such person in the Bible as a homosexual.

There's no person in the Bible described as a heterosexual. There's no such thing as homosexuality in the Bible. And there's no such thing as heterosexuality in the Bible.

That might be a surprise to some of you. But those terms and those constructs come from the mid-19th century, from the land of psychotherapy and early psychology.

[ 17 : 51 ] That's where those labels came from. Yes, in the Bible you hear descriptions of homosexual behavior, but they are people committing sort of homosexual acts.

They're not homosexuals. And I think it's really important to think about how we think about people and how we think about identity in terms of our relationships with one another, but in our reaching out to people who have, perhaps, orientations that are towards the same sex, who have behaviors that are towards the same sex, and perhaps who themselves have taken on identities, that takes on those behaviors and makes them core to who they are.

Whereas, in fact, God sees them as men and women made in his image. There's something here in this passage about the thirstiness of people.

And Jesus really taps into that, pardon the pun, but he does really sort of connect in with that, that people are thirsty. You're thirsty and I'm thirsty. And men and women from a gay background are thirsty.

They're craving acceptance. They have a desire to be known and to be loved, which, after all, is why they're in a gay community, because they feel excluded and they're looking for a place where they can find security and love and affirmation.

[ 19 : 27 ] It's the wrong place. God would say that this is the place where we find that, in his community, his church. So there's a challenge to all churches to reflect something of the community God intends for us to have, of love and affirmation, of support and encouragement, of praying with one another.

All sorts of things that actually gay men and women, if they knew that it was there for them, I'm sure would love to be part of, actually. And it's an amazing thing to be part of.

But yeah, so gay men and women, they're wanting to live shame-free as well. They've got a thirst for being seen as accepted and their lives being normal.

I think one of the issues, long-standing issue for the churches, is that they can feel quite shaming places for people to be. And historically, there's been an issue, I think, amongst evangelical churches of preaching about sin.

But in terms of picking which sin to preach about, it's been the sin of homosexuality that has been often landed upon as the first sin that comes to mind. That might be, with respect to the preachers present, that might be very convenient.

[ 20 : 49 ] It might be very obvious. But actually, there are many other sins. And we need to think about what we preach about from pulpits or what we preach about, as it were, in our relationships with people we meet on the streets or in the cafes and what we actually talk about.

Jesus, interestingly here, identifies the area of her life she struggles with, having lots of husbands. But he doesn't make a big deal of it.

He's not interested particularly in talking about husbands and adultery. And when I meet men and women who come from a gay community, I sort of tend to say to them, well, I'm not really interested in your sex life or what you do.

I think, because that's not really controversial. What's really controversial is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, because he's much more controversial than what I might think about your life.

Actually, the issue is, who do you make of Jesus? That is really much more controversial. We're not called to make controversy out of people's private lives, as it were.

[ 22 : 02 ] I mean, if you're sort of meeting someone and you know they're unmarried, for example, do you launch into a discussion about their unmarried state, although they're in a relationship?

Is that what you do? No. Do you get all stressed about it? Nowadays, you can't afford to get stressed about it, because there's so many people who are in unmarried relationships.

You just say, well, actually, let's witness as best we can the love of Jesus to them. And that is what Jesus does here. He doesn't single out the sin.

He does so with a purpose, to make himself and who he is unconscious to that lady, that woman.

So she goes, and what does she do?

She knows that she's been sussed, that Jesus understands who she is, what she's done in her life, and she changes the topic of conversation. Which is, how usual is that?

[ 22 : 59 ] Actually, what I think in today's world, there'd be a change into, oh, well, you Christians don't believe in same-sex marriage. I think that's the conversation that will go on. I think that'd be quite a similar sort of, you know, oh, yes, I'm living a gay life.

You Christians, you don't believe in same-sex marriage. You don't agree with that, do you? And no, we don't, for very good reasons.

And in fact, many people from a gay background don't agree with it, for very good reasons, I think. But yet, making a meal of it also communicates something to people, oh, well, Christians are anti-gay.

I mean, that's one of the big themes that have been there for many years. Christians, you're anti-gay. You're homophobic. Which is a big term. Usually misapplied.

But it's not, you know, it's, but it's that sense of, well, Christians, you're really anti-gay. You really don't understand us. So, I think the woman here sort of enters into a religious discussion.

[ 24 : 02 ] But as the discussion goes on, she becomes aware who Jesus actually is. And she comes to faith. She sees that he is the Christ.

He's revealed himself to her. And God is revealing Jesus to gay men and women throughout the world. Today, that work continues. he saves people from all nationalities, all races, all types of people he's saving.

And interestingly here, she then acts as the evangelist immediately, doesn't she? She goes back to her community. Jesus, you know, and she does bring them people along.

So, as we reach out to people from different backgrounds, so they go and speak to their communities. So, we don't have to reach the whole of their community. We see God work and convert people and then use his people to witness.

And then there's a change of identity, just finishing on this particular one, that we see that actually the Samaritans came to him and because of his words many more became believers.

[ 25 : 11 ] There's a move towards a new identity. There's a believers gathering. Not Samaritans, not Jews, but believers. A shift going on in identity is already indicated here in these verses.

So, there's just a few thoughts about evangelism. That's not the last thought. That's much more that I think could be said, but time doesn't permit that. People create their identities.

They create multiple identities nowadays as well. It's quite an interesting one to work out, particularly in the world of social media and in multiple identities that are created virtually. So,

people want to, including Christians, fall into the temptation to create the identity of the beautiful, pure, fabulously interesting person, which is the basic Facebook identity.

It is. I have no problems in my life apart from what I'm going to have for breakfast. I'm going to tell you about the challenge I have in choosing what I'm going to have for breakfast.

You know, like, like, that identity that we want to present to the world. So, people are creating virtual identities. I think they struggle with being, being honest and finding environments that are shame-free and where they can be really known and where they can admit their vulnerabilities.

[ 26 : 40 ] I think that's quite a, there's not many safe spaces around for people to, to be honest. And that's perhaps where we have an advantage.

We have nothing to lose by being honest. We have no, you know, we only have our lives to lose. Really, we only have our lives to lose. We have the potential to be honest and create spaces where people can be honest about their lives and that's important in reaching out to whichever community we're talking about, whether it's gay or...

I can ask one more question. What's that? What's going to be? There's 12 verses in scripture which specifically mention homosexual behavior.

Most of them are in the Old Testament. Some refer there to cult practices using male prostitutes.

And there are three verses specifically in the New Testament that refer to homosexuality.

None of it is, if you like, favorable. There's no commending any gay relationship. People like to read into particular passages of scripture to say, oh, that's an indication that God is sort of pro-gay relationships.

[ 27 : 56 ] David and Jonathan being a classic example of that. But aside from that, those are the verses. There are many, many more verses on adultery. So, you know, actually homosexuality doesn't get much of a look in, or homosexual behavior rather, doesn't get much of a look in in scripture in that sense compared to many other sort of issues around sexual behavior.

Do you think historically we've kind of shot ourselves in the foot and alluded to that in the way that we create this hierarchy of sins? Well, when the hierarchy has been created we've been unbiblical, haven't we?

Because actually there is no hierarchy of sins that are given to us. we're not told to discriminate one from another. The Romans passage contains a range of sins that are referred to, not just homosexuality.

So we have perhaps in the past chosen homosexuality for a range of reasons. One is that because we're fearful, perhaps there's fear and anxiety about the topic.

Perhaps there's, you know, as it's becoming apparent, there's a sort of a reverse issue. There are actually quite a few men and women who struggle with homosexual feelings in different ways in church environments because it's sort of an attractive environment to be in actually in many ways.

[ 29 : 18 ] So we've also, yeah, we tended to think that homosexuality happens out there and not in the church. That's also another convenient thing about homosexuality as a sin. But that's, that's a, that's a complete myth because, you know, in every congregation of, say, a hundred people, it's likely to be at least one or two people, if not more, who've struggled with it as a, as a core part of their life and perhaps a number of others who struggle with it in other ways and perhaps have overcome by getting married.

True Freedom Trust, just to mention True Freedom Trust has, has 1,500 members. We operate across the country. We provide support groups for people and also some one-to-one opportunities to share, for people to share their stories.

We have an annual conference and if you went to the conference, the annual conference, we have about 120 people there. You'd go there and you'd think, well, this looks like an ordinary church because actually there's single men, there's single women, there's married folk.

Sometimes in those marriages, the man has same-sex attraction issues, sometimes a woman. there's older folk who are parents who come along and actually we just look like an ordinary bunch of Christians with all the diversity that we have.

So yes, we can't say that homosexuality is out there. I think it's part of the current experience of many men and women in many different ways within church environments.

[ 30 : 55 ] I'm not sure that answered your question but I think it's general care that we ought to have with one another generally. So for example, thinking before we speak, which is something I'm not terribly good at myself.

I've been asked in the past, well, how many children do you have? And all sorts of questions that actually, or when it comes to arranging wedding receptions, I've been sat next to various people. Whilst people have known, they've also wanted to do something like that, which has been particularly unhelpful, but I think that sort of confronts most single men or women, I think, in church environments, I would say.

I think that the issue is that we ought to all be sensitive to one another because we don't know one another's backstories necessarily. And those people you think you know, you may not really know at all.

And there's something about listening to people and allowing people to speak and creating that safe place where they can trust you. So I think aside from that, I don't know that I've got much to add really.

[ 32 : 10 ] Thank you.