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CULTURE SHOCK

Q&A WITH CHIP INGRAM

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Q. The world's tolerance of transgender seems to be the new topic, from little kids to famous athletes. How should believers respond to this issue?

First of all, let's define what it means to be transgender. Transgender is a man who believes that he is a female in a man's body. Or it's a woman, vice versa, who identifies herself as a man even though she is biologically a woman. Often, a transgender person will also be a transvestite who will dress up in clothes of their opposite sex.

In our culture, the whole issue of transgender is about redefining sexuality based on what we think, feel, and perceive about ourselves. But what I want to go on record to say is: Our sexuality is a biological reality. Men have certain component parts that women do not. Women have certain component parts that men do not.

One of the most interesting things I found in my research came from the observations of one of the earliest doctors who did transgender reassignment surgeries. And, by the way, you wouldn't believe what people go through during these surgeries and hormone replacement therapy. This doctor was a proponent for these surgeries, but after about fifteen or twenty years of doing operations to help people have their physical features match the gender they believed themselves to be, he said: "Not one single time did it solve the sexual confusion in their life."

The transgender issue is not about body parts. It's about our view of our sexuality and what is going on mentally inside your head.

Finally, I wanted to address something that Bruce Jenner recently said after he publically announced that he is a transgendered woman. He said that he really believes in God and really loves God, and he thinks his mission from God is to help bring transgenderism to light. Many people have wondered if this means that God is approving Jenner's transgender identification.

In response to this, I'd like remind us that there are a lot of people in and outside the Bible who have said they really do believe God is leading them to do things, even if it completely violates Scripture and doesn't make any sense. People are deluded. And people are deceived.

We can be clear that our sexuality is fundamentally biological and there are very clear distinctions between males and females.

Q: As Christians, how can we stand our ground as our society, government, media, law enforcement all accept the homosexual lifestyle and practice of gay marriage across the United States?

As Christians today, we actually share many similarities with the Christians in the first century. During the time of the early church, the Roman government was very hostile toward Christians. In fact, it was even illegal to be a Christian. Everyone had to worship Caesar otherwise they were labeled "atheist."

Today, despite the changes in our government, i.e., the legalization of same-sex marriage, as Christians, we can find comfort in knowing that this doesn't change what we believe and how we live out our faith. Our government may change but we are still called to stand our ground for our beliefs and do this in a loving, kind and firm way.

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We also need to love people, care for people, live a righteous life, and realize that as Christians we're going to be the minority. America is not the America that most of us grew up in. We need to understand that we may take steps toward righteousness in our jobs that will cost us our jobs. And we may take steps in our families that cause divisions in our families. So my appeal is this: Let's remember to take these steps lovingly, kindly, gently, intelligently.

In 1 Peter 2:20-21 it says, "But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

At the end of the day, if they persecuted Jesus then they will also persecute us. We are living in a world where our opinions are going to be viewed as illegal. What I am preaching and saying right now may be illegal in five years in America. It's already illegal in Canada – it's called "hate speech."

So how do we take our stand? Are we willing to be like the Christians in Ethiopia when asked whether they would recant their faith or get their heads cut off and they chose the latter? Where is our alignment?

The reality is, we are not living in a world where following Jesus means everything is going to go our way economically or job-wise. We living in a world where our faith will be tested and demonstrated, it may be unpopular and there may be social and economic ramifications.

Why would 1 Peter be in the Bible if we weren't going to be persecuted for our faith? Jesus also said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:10) We may not excited be about that, but I think we've got to be willing to accept that.

Q. Where I teach school, we have an elementary, lesbian gym teacher who had a baby with her partner. Sometimes I think that if I'm really sweet and nice to her then she might think I agree with her lifestyle. And she knows I am a Christian. So when or how do I kindly let her know that I differ?

What you're really asking is: how do we relate to people who say, "I am a lesbian," or, "I am in the gay lifestyle?" I'd like to answer that question by asking another question: How do we relate to people who are living together, or to people who are alcoholics? There's not a big distinction. Regardless of someone's lifestyle, if they make no claim to know Christ, then they are lost. Therefore, we're to relate to gay people in the same way we relate to other people who are lost and in sin – with compassion and love.

Here's what this might look like: Invite your gay friend out to lunch. Invite her over to dinner with your family. Serve her; demonstrate that you honestly care. And then when she finds out you're a follower of Jesus, she'll scratch her head. She'll be wondering, "Where are you coming from?"

As you are building a relationship, imagine that you are building bridge. Here you are, and you have a set of truth and beliefs that are biblical. And here is this person really, really far from God who totally disagrees with you. The stronger the bridge of the relationship is, the more truth can go over that bridge. If you don't have any relationship, you can only send about two pounds of truth over the bridge. But if you build a real relationship and they know you really care, two hundred pounds of truth can go over that bridge!

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When that happens, with tears streaming down your face you can sincerely say, "I care about you and I am concerned about you and I think this is going to bring great pain." And if your friend knows that you care, you will get great freedom in sharing.

A similar question I've heard was: "When our neighbors came over to meet us we found out they were gay. When we took dinner over to them they were just shocked because they knew we were Christians. Should we keep bringing dinner to them? Should we even be doing this at all?"

I would say, yes! They don't have cooties, right? In fact, here's the deal. You have to get comfortable with engaging people in the homosexual lifestyle, and loving them. Period. It's the world you live in. That's not condoning.

The other issue is how do we approach people who are in the gay lifestyle but also say, "I am a born again Christian, it's my Christianity, and who are you to judge me?" This is a different issue that requires a different response that we'll address separately.

Q. Christians who are judgmental of others often drives people away from Jesus. In light of this, how can I address someone's sin without perpetuating this problem? Do you have suggestions for starting that conversation in a loving manner? Sometimes it feels like a "Catch-22," a no-win situation.

Before having a conversation about sin, you should take a genuine interest in them as people. Ask them questions like, "Where did you grow up? Do you have any brothers or sisters? What was your family life like? What did your dad do for a living? Where did you go to school? What hobbies do you have?"

Get the idea?

I travel a lot so I am on planes with all kinds of different people. And sometimes I spend an hour and fifteen minutes doing nothing but getting an education about the person sitting next to me. I do this by asking normal, legitimate questions. And most of the time, they ask me questions in return.

This opens the door for me to tell a little about myself. "Well, this is how I grew up and my dad was in the Marines and this is how it was growing up. And, actually, I had a dramatic experience that changed my life..." They ask, "What was it?" And then I can share my faith.

My point is that we need to just ask questions and focus on building a relationship. Don't make God's view of homosexuality "the thing" you have to share. Make it a real relationship.

Now some of you might be saying, "Well, Chip, you make it sound really easy to talk to people. When I get in the situation, it doesn't feel nearly as easy as when you do it."

I realize that this is difficult for most people. Part of why it's easier for me is that it has to do with my gifting as a teacher, but the other part is that I've had to do a lot of learning on this topic since I've been pastoring in Santa Cruz.

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I've given a lot of messages on this topic. And I'd get questions from people who said, "I came out of a homosexual lifestyle... All my friends are homosexuals... What do I tell them?" As a result, I felt that I had to create some resources that presented the truth about this issue in a non-threatening way.

So if you're struggling with talking to your friends, family or even co-workers about this issue, one way you can handle this is to focus on building the relationship and let me be the "bad guy." And I mean that in a good sense: "The bad guy," as someone who might bring a little bit of truth, which might be uncomfortable. You can do this by offering them some of the materials I've already created about this subject. Then, all you have to do is say something like, "You know what, I listened to this guy and part of it kind of made sense. Why don't you either listen to this or read the chapter of this book. I'd love to know what you think about it. Then maybe we can grab coffee?"

Q. What do you do if you're uncomfortable confronting a family member who is in the homosexual lifestyle, but at the same time you don't want to subtly communicate that you agree with their lifestyle?

I've read a lot of letters from people who are struggling with talking about the issue of homosexuality in their families. The tendency is to hold back and not say anything at all. They say things like, "There's someone in my family that I'm concerned about, but I've never really said anything about their lifestyle. I'm nice to them, but when I nod my head and don't say anything, does that mean that I am just communicating that I agree? How do I address the "elephant in the room" that everyone sees but doesn't want to talk about?"

My answer is this: If we are silent and don't say anything, then we won't be bring the truth. For many Christians, the absence of conflict is mistaken for peace. There are two common responses to this issue. The first is silence, brought on by the mentality: "I don't want to make waves." The second is anger and confrontation. The alternative is to speak God's truth in love.

So what might this look like? First, you get prayed up, and then you say something like, "I just sense there is an elephant in the room that we're not talking about. You know how much I love you and you know where I'm coming from. I think a lot of Christians have a certain views of people who are in the homosexual lifestyle and I think there are a lot of gay people who have a certain views of Christians. But I heard this guy speak and he was comparing the two, and it was really helpful to me. Would you be willing to listen to this talk (or read this book) and then maybe we can grab a cup of coffee so we can talk about it?"

And if they say, "No," that's okay! You're not God and you're not in control of outcomes. But it's OK to bring up the subject.

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Q. Our once tight-knit family is now a house divided between my brother and my parents. My parents call him “sensitive,” and “sexually confused.” And no one will say the “H” word. When my siblings and I try to talk to our parents, they just get combative and shut down the conversation. We have been praying for years. We love our brother but [our] parents just don’t know how. Do you think that this is spiritual warfare?

I would say that a lot of this is spiritual warfare. Many people are blinded with lies and the enemy is always behind the lies. To guard ourselves, the Bible instructs us to put on the “full armor of God.” (Ephesians 6:8-10) In this passage, the Apostle Paul gives us a picture of a Roman soldier. He begins his description by talking about putting on the belt of truth – which is God’s Word. I believe this is significant in our understanding of how to combat Satan’s lies.

A lot of satanic warfare and demonic activity is not moving objects and visual manifestations and weird stuff. It is just lies, lies that are subtle. And they are always lies about who God is, who you are, and about what is true in the world. The enemy loves to trick people into buying lies about their sexual identity and to believe that God hates them or God isn’t good. This is why it’s so important that we know what God says about our sexual identity and who we really are.

Inevitably, there is going to be some conflict with your parents and your brother. But I’d encourage you to gently and kindly ask your parents to have a discussion about this issue. Their answer might be no and they might refuse your loving opportunities to open a dialogue, but you can still continue to love them. And at some point, you may come to the conclusion that, Okay, I’ve done all that I can.

Q. Please discuss homosexuality as it relates to persons who may be given the gift of celibacy. In this context, can a gay person who has chosen to be celibate serve God?

I’ve got a friend who was at a conference recently where there was a well-known Christian who identifies himself as a gay person. Yet, he also understands that homosexuality is not biblical. He believes all that the Bible says and he doesn’t act out his homosexual desires. Instead, he’s chosen to be celibate. He says that he identifies himself as a gay man, and also does ministry for God.

I think there’s some confusion here. When people identify themselves as “gay,” they are saying something about their identity. In effect, they are saying, “This is who I am.” That is much different than saying: “I am so and so and I am sexually attracted to people of the same sex, so I am tempted by that.”

Remember that old phrase, “I’m just a sinner saved by grace?” Part of that is really true, even though, theologically, it’s flawed. I’m not a sinner saved by grace. I am a saint who continues to struggle, at times, with former and present temptation and sin. I am a son. I am adopted. I have an inheritance. I have been justified. Justification means God sees me just as He sees His Son, Jesus. When the Father looks at me after I have accepted Christ, all He sees is the righteousness of Christ.

All of us who are in Christ can still sin, but our sin is not our identity. We are God’s sons and daughters, we’re adopted, we have an inheritance, we have spiritual gifts, and we’ve been sealed by the Holy Spirit. God loves us. Therefore, we are saints who happen to sin. We are not just “sinners, saved by grace.”

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I think the one downside of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) movement is the fact that the AA members identify themselves as alcoholics. At their meetings, members introduce themselves with: "Hello, I'm so and so, and I am an alcoholic."

In my case, I don't struggle with overusing alcohol but with overworking. For years I had to deal with that and it was my drug of choice. At one point, I worked ninety plus hours a week and I said yes to everybody in order to produce, produce, produce, and work, work, work, because that's where I got affirmation and that's where I filled that "hole" in my soul.

Some people fill that "hole" with drugs; some people do it with sex or food, while others do it with shopping. Some of those ways are healthier than others, but it's still basically trying to fill the same hole – which is our attempt to meet our own needs for affirmation, acceptance and love in unhealthy and even destructive ways.

Yet, even though I used to struggle with overworking, to this day I don't introduce myself as: "Hi, I'm Chip. I'm a former workaholic." Instead, I see myself as God's son and I know that the power of finding my value in my work has been broken. Under pressure, I might default and drift toward some former patterns, but I want my identity -- and God wants my identity -- to be as a beloved son.

Q. I am more confused now than ever. Homosexual marriage is coming to churches now and in the future. I can love gay people, but how can I attend a church that marries gays? Do I stay in a church where my denomination is now supporting gay marriage?"

A similar another question from someone in the military was: "I am a chaplain and I am told by my commanding officer that if two women or two men want to be married, I have to marry them. What do I do?"

I do want to preface what I'm about to say with that fact that this is easier said than done. But at some point, you are going to have to decide what it means to be a man or a woman of integrity and what it means for you to hold biblical values in the face of genuine consequences.

If you heard me say, "You should attend churches that marry gays," you didn't hear right. There are times to draw boundaries. If you are in a church and they decide that this is the position of their church and they are going to violate Scripture on this issue, then you should lovingly confront, question, and appeal. And if they push back and disagree with then realize that you have not left the church, but they have already left you.

One of our board members faced a similar issue. His lesbian daughter recently adopted two kids with her partner. As a father, he got a lot of criticism from his family because he wouldn't go to the adoption ceremony and celebrate. But he kindly and lovingly said to his daughter, "You know how much I love you, you know I'm for you, you know the door is always open. But you would not want me to violate the integrity of my heart. I know that you respect me as a Christian father. And as such, I can't endorse what you're doing. I'm also concerned about what might happen if this doesn't work out with you all. What about the implications for the babies?"

He was very kind, but he held his ground and didn't go to the ceremony, even though his family accused him of not being loving. They said spiteful things like, "How do you call yourself a Christian?"

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But here's the truth. You're either going to please God or please people. Paul said in Galatians 1:10, "If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." And Jesus said in Luke 16:15, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts."

When people come out and announce that they are in the homosexual lifestyle, suddenly they believe that they get to set all the rules. They say things like, "If you really love me... then you'll accept my lifestyle." But it's also appropriate for us as believers to set some boundaries as well. For instance, we can choose to not agree with their decisions and stand by our own convictions as a Christian.

I received another letter from a family whose daughter recently came out as a lesbian. She wanted to visit with her parents for a couple of days, but she wanted to stay overnight at her parent's house with her partner in the same bedroom. Her parents didn't know how to respond. They were torn. They wanted to spend time with their daughter, but they didn't approve of her lifestyle. What would you do?

To answer that question, I would ask those same parents another question: When your daughter was a kid was a teenager, was it OK for her to bring home a boyfriend and use the back bedroom in your house? No! Well, why not? You had values. So, what has changed? Now that your daughter is gay, does this mean you're an unloving person? No, it means that in this pluralistic country where everyone has different views, you can unapologetically say, "These are my views." And then stick to them.

You can confidently let your response be: "I love you, I am for you, but in the integrity of my heart, I set certain boundaries about behavior. You can make those choices, but I can't go along with that behavior."

The next challenge is how do you go out of your way to keep up communication and demonstrate concern and love after you have set the boundary – whether it's with a friend or a family member? The temptation is that you'll get treated so badly that you'll feel rejected and want to withdraw. This is a time when you want to pray and ask God to give you the grace to act in ways that are so counter-intuitive and demonstrate acts of love when you don't feel like it.

I heard another story recently about someone who was invited to be involved in their friend's wedding and, somewhere along the line, they found out that it was two women getting married. How should they respond?

Again, these types of situations can become quite difficult, and there has to be either a tear coming down your cheek or sensitivity in your voice as you say, "I just became aware of this and you know I am for you as a person one hundred percent. But you need to know that I have a personal conviction about this. How could you respect me if I didn't hold to the conscience and the character that God has given me? I just can't be involved in this or that."

Keep in mind, though, that no matter how nicely you say it this may not go down very well. Yet saying something kindly is better than saying nothing at all, even if it invites conflict. Jesus said, "You think I came to bring peace? I came to bring a sword." What does the sword represent? Truth! And it divides sometimes. Even I don't always like it.

Down deep, most people want to know that you are who you say you are. So if you waffle in your convictions, then they may act as if they like you, but in reality, you have lost their respect. For example, most of us have had a boss that we don't like very much, but that we respect. We can work for a person we respect. But we can't work for a person when we realize that they are saying one thing, and actually doing another thing.

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Q. Help me understand how I am to accept married gays in our church.

I think that the issue of gay people outside of Christ coming to the church is one thing – and as believers, we need to accept and love them. But if you have married gays in your church who have accepted Christ then I think your church leadership needs to address this to be biblical.

Q. What would you say to someone who is living in a sexually immoral lifestyle, attending church, and wants to serve?

What I would say to someone living a sexually immoral lifestyle is what I said to my friend who was engaged in sexual immoral behavior. I said, “Do you understand that when people meet you and you’re a pretty outspoken Christian, that you’re misrepresenting the gospel? You text people Bible verses and you give them a Bible and you invite them to church. But what happens when they find out that you are living with your girlfriend? I am concerned about you. But I am also concerned about the name of God.”

If the person that you want to confront happens to be a real friend, then I’d sit down with him/her and say, “I’d like to share something with you that’s going to be hard for me to say because I am concerned that bringing this up could do damage to our relationship. Would you give me permission to go to a place with you that is going to be uncomfortable?”

Those two sentences will make all the difference in whether that person listens or not. The key is to show that person that you really care about them and then to ask permission, versus getting all worked up. Also, pay close attention to your body language, eye contact, and tone of voice.

So instead of saying (in a harsh tone), “I know you’re living with that guy and you’re logging onto the Internet to look at pornography. You know what God says about this!” You could say sincerely, “I’m really concerned about you.”

One caveat: if you are not really concerned about them, then don’t bring it up. If their lifestyle choices just make you mad and you can’t wait to straighten them out, then don’t bring it up this conversation because it’s not going to bring about any change.

Remember that it’s the kindness of God that leads to repentance. People you confront with this issue need to feel that your concern is legitimate. You must feel that not only is their current, immoral behavior is doing damage to them, but also to the other person.

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Q. Regarding the story you shared about your unmarried friend and your conversation with conveying the truth in love, what guidelines or resources can you share that I might learn this conversational practice of truth in love?

I did a series called Love One Another. In it, I examine what I thought were the top ten “one another” passages in the Bible (e.g., confront one another, admonish one another, honor one another, etc.). I go through on each one of them and ask: If we are to honor one another or confront one another, how do you do it? I walk through a very systematic process and explain how we can love each other while still conveying God’s truth.

Q. Those who are homosexual advocates of the “I was born this way” premise – do they rationalize the reasons for those who came out of the lifestyle? In other words, do they advocate that those who came out of the lifestyle were never really homosexual to begin with?

It’s interesting that this position is used as one of the most vicious attacks when someone tries to come out of the homosexual lifestyle. When people leave the lifestyle, it demonstrates that it’s possible, even though our culture promotes the view that gay people cannot change. In California, it’s actually illegal for a counselor to counsel homosexuals to help them come out of their sexual identity confusion, even if the client comes in and says that he/she has a sexual confusion.

I actually think there are lots and lots of people that have come out of the lifestyle. So one of the things I did, after I got done teaching about this, was to invite people to come and share their stories with our church so that more people could come to realize that this is reality.

One guy came up with his wife and shared how he had same-sex attraction as early as ten or eleven years old. For over eight years he hid this from others in his Bible-teaching church. “All I heard was fire and brimstone against homosexuals,” he said. “I had all this guilt.

“Then, when I turned eighteen, I was exploding inside because I still had this same-sex attraction. I dated girls, I did this and that, but I still struggled. So at eighteen, until I was about twenty-eight, I went ten years full-blown in the homosexual lifestyle. Then, God got a hold of my life, I repented, and I realized it’s an attraction, it’s not who I really am.”

God changed this man’s life and he became a missionary. Eventually, he got married and was in Brazil doing ministry for over 20 years. During this time, he watched what was happening in the Church in America over this issue, but he never shared any of this with his kids. Then one day, he felt compelled to address this issue within the Church because he realized that he wanted to create a safe place for little boys and girls who have same-sex struggles to talk about it.

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Q. After several bad relationships and a bad marriage and a divorce, my daughter began to be a part of a same-sex relationship and is now getting married. How do I help them? There are children involved from ages five to eighteen who are affected. How do I help them turn from this lifestyle?

And I read this question, my first thought was, "Where do you begin?" This is heartbreaking. Here's a woman who has been really been damaged, and really hurt. She's tried having a relationship in one way and in a vulnerable state she found someone who would accept and love her. And now here's her mom who's wondering what she should do.

These are very real scenarios that we can all relate to in some way or another. Most of us can remember back to when we were young adults and we got deeply and emotionally connected and attracted to someone. Our IQ must have dropped about fifty points. Most of us have also been in a relationship where our best friends and our family said: "He/she is no good for you. He/she treats you terribly." But we didn't listen because we were just head over heels in love.

So, in this kind of situation, you have to remember that the emotions and experience are real. You should also take into consideration where this woman has been and where she is at now. She is finding the lifeline of hope from anyone who really cares, and it happens to be the emotional connection with another woman.

Keep in mind that telling your daughter your reason for her to leave her relationship is going to be a pretty hard sell. But it's not impossible. Although she is blinded, please do not underestimate the power of intercessory prayer, the power of fasting, the power of coming before God and crying out on behalf of those that you love because their eyes are blinded.

Q. How do you keep the "heat" out of your discussions? You've mentioned talking about grace first, then truth. But in the end, people do what they want to do until they question it. Do you have questions that keep the heat out, but also provoke the truth?

Since we've already talked about questions that explore, I only have one more thing I would add. Sometimes I call it the "Dr. Phil Question." This is when you you're engaged in a conversation with someone and they really know that you care. And at some point in time you say, "I sincerely don't mean to be offensive, but how is this really working for you?"

The average person with a God consciousness is also a genuinely born again person who can also do really sinful things. Just because the Spirit of God lives, we can still sear our conscience and we can get to really bad places. According to I Corinthians, we can actually be in a sexual relationship with our mother-in-law and still be born again. Paul didn't label that person as carnal. Instead he invited this person to repent. And repentance occurred.

As someone on the outside looking in, sometimes we wonder how do we bring these people back? The truth is, we can't. Only God can change someone's heart. But here's what we can do! We open the door by asking the question, "How is it (the homosexual lifestyle) working for you? What are the implications?" By asking them this question, we can help them see their situation more clearly.

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Most people who have come out of the lifestyle are fearful. They may not feel like it's safe to come to church. And they're probably fearful of leaving their partner because then they're just out there on their own. That's why it's so important to begin by building a relationship with them first.

We need to listen to people's behavior, not their words. Realistically, after we talk to them they're probably not going to say, "I have been wrong all my life. I listened to one CD about homosexuality and I am going to change my whole worldview." But they probably will tell you what is happening in their life and how God is working.

I believe the next big explosion in America is going to be the divorces and the breakups of same-sex couples, and the fallout that is going to occur. That's because relationships are hard. And relationships out of God's design are even harder.

