



the fellowship message

"Proclaiming freedom for the captives." ISAIAH 61

January / February volume 23 number 1

The Power of Speaking Truth to Yourself by Jesse Merkel

I was fortunate to grow up in a Christian family. I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior and was baptized when I was in fifth grade. From a very early age, I had a secret that I didn't want anyone to know, not even my family—I was dealing with unwanted same-sex attractions.

I knew what the Bible said about homosexuality, but I was also captive to my own feelings. As a teenager, I knew God's Word was true and active in my life, but somehow my feelings seemed to hold more power over me than God's Word.

One of my favorite scriptures is Psalm 119:29—"Keep me from lying to myself; give me the privilege of knowing your instructions." When we are children, people teach us to never tell lies to one another, but no one teaches us to not lie to ourselves. I would lie to myself, trying to convince myself that I didn't struggle with SSA. I lived in denial for two whole years before I told someone about my struggle. I felt this knot in my stomach, like I had a bad burrito for lunch. I had a stomachache, and it wasn't from lunch. Finally, I mustered up some courage to tell my parents. They helped me seek out Christian counseling, and I continued going to counseling throughout high school.

In high school, I went on a mission trip in Mexico, and I felt the Lord calling me to pursue youth ministry in college. In 2011, I felt the Lord leading me to study Bible/Theology and Youth Ministry at Multnomah University in Portland, Oregon. At Multnomah, I began to fall in love with the Word of God and tried to "forget" about my struggle. I was able to be vulnerable with a few friends, but I was looking for my friends to save me from my struggle. My parents found out about Portland Fellowship, and after a year of denying I needed further help in this area, I joined Taking Back Ground in the fall of 2012.

Coming to PF, I was ready to admit that I needed to change, but I didn't understand what had to happen in order for God to truly change my life. I was spiraling down in a depression and entertained thoughts of suicide. Thankfully, by the grace of God, I had the right people in my life to walk with me through those dark times. Still, I had my own plan for the healing process, apart from God's plan, and consequently, I missed the whole point of the program. In my twenty-something-



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year-old mind, I was going to complete the two years of Taking Back Ground, meet the woman of my dreams and get married. I didn't understand yet that the point of the program is not heterosexual marriage, nor is it having the tools to become attracted to the opposite sex—the point of TBG is to become whole with the Lord. This process involves a heart transformation that only the Lord can change.

When I graduated from Taking Back Ground, I was still struggling in who I was in Christ and how I was to relate to my peers. Unfortunately, after TBG, I discovered pornography, which set me up for a new struggle with relating to men in unhealthy ways. I never acted on this with anyone, but I did entertain ideas about it.

At this point, I became more aware of the unfortunate situation in the Church concerning homosexuality and youth. It's a common misunderstanding that if you struggle with unwanted same-sex attraction and work in youth ministry, you may prey on teenagers. Unfortunately, there are some people who have done this, but it's simply not true of all same-sex strugglers working in youth ministry. This mischaracterization has been a big part of why I have struggled to be real with other Christians, because I know I may be judged for something others have done. I have had people who didn't know my heart (or my struggles) tell me I shouldn't work with youth because of my SSA, and being misjudged like that has been very painful.

After college, I was a Youth Ministry Resident for a church. At that point, I was struggling with this secret pornography addiction, and once again, I felt that I couldn't be real about it. I did all the "right" Christian things: I began to seek out counseling and a sexual purity group. I had my own ideas about my healing process—I thought that if I did all the "right" things, God would somehow honor that and heal me. I wanted to advance in my career and become a youth pastor.

But God was calling me out from my filthy hiding place into the light. It was like the Lord was saying, "Jesse,

we have to deal with your character." Ezekiel 36:26 says, "I will put a new heart and a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." God wanted to give me a new heart, and I kept asking Him to remove the stone from my heart.

I knew that I could not stay where I was. I once heard a pastor say, "In order to heal, you have to get real." Admitting where I was on a heart level was probably the hardest thing I've done this year. In order to heal, I had to get real! I had to get real with myself and be honest about where I was, how I felt and what was really going on inside me. And, I needed a space to be real. The door to the Upper Room Community here at Portland Fellowship had always been open to me, and I was in the perfect season of life to walk through it. When I was a youth ministry resident, I was praying Ezekiel 36:26 daily, and in a way, He has answered that prayer by bringing me to the Upper Room, where He can work on my heart. He has brought me to place where I can be real!



Jesus was brutally honest with the Pharisees, the religious professors and lawyers of the day: "Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisees! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too."—Matthew 23:25-26. They were guilty of saying one thing and doing another—what was really in their hearts. This is our invitation from Jesus to be real, and the journey starts from the inside out, not from the outside in.

My hope for this year is to become whole in the Lord. My goal is to start becoming the man who God intended me to be. I want to seek the Lord's direction for the career He wants for me, and to learn how to be content in every circumstance. The Lord has been reminding me that, like the Pharisees, I must first look at my heart and confess the ugly parts of my heart, even when it's hard. He is reminding me that if I truly want to change my life, I must allow Him to work in my life, and to be patient with this process.

If I'd Only Known by Jason Thompson

I was thirteen when the confusion and fear began. It was obvious that something about me was different than other guys. As they were experiencing and expressing a desire for getting close to girls, I was inwardly desiring the closeness of a guy. This was the start of my struggle with same-sex attraction.

I say “struggle” because I never wanted to embrace it. Instead, I was on a desperate pursuit for answers. I wanted to know what was going on with me. I wanted to know where these feelings were coming from, but more importantly, I wanted to know how to resolve them in my heart. The church in which I was raised was in the process of embracing and celebrating gay-identified people. Other churches were preaching condemnation and damnation, and still other churches just remained silent. Nowhere I looked (and believe me, I looked!) provided any answers, hope, healing or freedom.

At eighteen, the Lord led me to the ministry of Portland Fellowship. It was here that the Lord taught and corrected me with His truth that brought about healing and transformation. Thirty-five years later, I rejoice in genuine and ongoing freedom from same-sex confusion.

As I reflect back on my thirteen-year-old self, I wonder what my teen years would have been like if I'd known what led me to have those struggles, and how I was trying to meet real relational needs in counterfeit ways. Instead of isolation, confusion, and suicidal ideation, I could have been filled with truth, hope, purpose, and a clear path toward God's design for healthy relationships.

All these years later, the church continues to struggle with this issue. Sadly, the message of hope, healing, and transformation still remains elusive because many pastoral caregivers don't understand the relational wounds and deficits that contribute to homosexuality, nor how to respond relationally and redemptively. Biblically-based pastors generally communicate effectively on our sin nature, spiritual influences to sexual struggles, and our need to die to the flesh, but what tends to be missing is how the original Fall affected our relationship with one another, and still contributes to the lies, confusion and relational dysfunction that we experience.

When I was thirteen, I wasn't ready to share my confusion, but I still needed to know some very important messages. I needed to know that God loved me in the midst of this particular struggle. I needed to know that others struggle with these issues, and that I was not alone. I needed the Church to let me know that I had genuine relational needs that God could meet through healthy relationships. I needed to know that I could trust God and His Word, and that His design for me was not for me to embrace a gay label, but rather to find my identity in Him. I needed to know there was real hope for a renewed mind and heart. I needed to know that God could and would put things in the right order, and that I could live a victorious life, free from the hunger and deception of desires for the counterfeit. And finally, I needed to know that He actually changes those desires.

Can we change the course of the Church's response to this issue? I believe we can. No more condemnation, no more making compromising space for sin and deception, and no more ignoring those in need of truth and hope. Instead, let us offer the life-giving truth that God still transforms and heals people who struggle with same-sex attraction, and then let us live out this amazing truth.



january - february calendar & services

january 1 office closed

We will be closed New Year's Day on January 1st, and there will be no TBG program that night. We will resume TBG on January 8th.

january 5
annual planning meeting
PF Board and Staff gather to pray, plan and prepare for the new year.

january 11 & february 8
the hope group
For friends and family of gay or trans-identifying loved ones. Join us for a time of prayer, support, encouragement and a great meal. 6:30 p.m.

tuesdays in january & february
taking back ground
PF's intensive discipleship program for men and women struggling with unwanted same-sex attraction. Group for wives and fiancées also. 7-9:30 p.m.

thursdays in january & february
upper room community
Teaching, discussion, processing and prayer.

follow us on facebook!
Stay connected for updates, prayer requests and inspirational resources. Like and follow our page at: www.facebook.com/portlandfellowship/

additional updates
www.portlandfellowship.com
Please take advantage of your online profile. If you don't have a username, please email or call.

speakers, counseling and support for youth
can be set up through the office.

New Hope Group Online Projects



Over the last several years, we have produced two encouraging video series through Hope Group Online, supporting friends and family who have gay or trans-identified loved ones. This year, we are looking to add two new Hope Group Online projects: one for wives and another for Christian educators.

Wives Group leaders Heidi and Amy are creating a video teaching series that will offer testimonies, hope and encouragement to wives and fiancées of men struggling with SSA. This will be an incredibly valuable resource for wives who can't physically come to PF, but still need practical advice and support.



Our Christian Educators video series is still in the brainstorming stages. We covet your prayers as we talk to people on the front lines who could potentially teach on responding to gender and sexuality issues in our schools.

Online Discipleship Resources

In addition to Hope Group Online, we want to remind you that we offer two other online discipleship programs for Christians struggling with unwanted same-



sex attraction: Reach Truth and Taking Back Ground Online. Reach Truth (www.reachtruth.com) is our 20-lesson program designed for youth/young adults, while TBG Online (www.takingbackground.com) is our full 42-lesson series for adults. Both programs require participants to sign up with a mentor.



PORTLAND
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The Fellowship Message is a monthly publication of Portland Fellowship, a ministry proclaiming freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.

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