

MEDIA

John Dickson (studio)

That's entertainer and comedian Stephen Glover - AKA Steve-O of the hit TV show *Jackass*, speaking there about his experience in rehab.

Steve-O has a long documented history of substance abuse, but he's also opened up recently about his past struggles with sex addiction, for which he eventually sought treatment.

One of the recommendations for Steve was ... celibacy ... which didn't go down too well. Surely, that's the opposite of "sex positive" - which we're all meant to be today. It is literally "sex-negative".

Celibacy is a controversial topic.

On the one hand, periods of self-imposed celibacy are increasingly seen as healthy (we'll put a link in the show notes). On the other hand, celibacy - even the traditional celibacy of no sex before marriage - is sometimes seen as repressive (again, see the show notes - researcher AI has been busy on this topic!).

The Bible is pretty clear that sex is a gift of the Creator to be enjoyed *only in* the context of a permanent union between a man and a woman (what we call marriage). The logic used to be clear to most cultures - even pagan ones. Given that sex is (a) pleasurable, (b) binds a couple together emotionally, and (c) - perhaps most obviously - creates babies, sex is only for the human relationship where all three of those purposes cohere: the enduring bond of a man to a woman.

I know there are people who dispute that's what the Bible teaches - mainly warm-hearted theologians - but the analytic historian in me just can't make the historical text say anything other than what it says. The Bible might be wrong - tons of people think that - but you can't change the meaning of ancient words in their ancient context.

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So ... what do people do if they agree with those ancient words and yet find themselves same-sex attracted? There are quite a few of them.

Often this group calls itself 'Side B'. 'Side A' affirms same-sex relationships; 'Side B' pursues a life of celibacy.

People in 'Side B' know they've only ever felt attracted to people of the same sex, just as I have always known I am attracted to people of the opposite sex. This doesn't mean these folks generally 'lust' for people of the same sex, any more than my heterosexuality means that I generally lust for women. It's just that they are aware that their enduring disposition finds people of the same sex more attractive than people of the opposite sex. But because they believe in the Bible, they seek to redirect their natural disposition in ways that (they feel) are pleasing to their Creator.

My friend Dr David Bennet has a remarkable story.

David was a gay man happily going about his life when, at 19, a very unexpected thing happened - in a pub on Oxford Street - a central hub for Sydney's gay culture - he was suddenly confronted by the love of God.

David became a Christian and eventually made the huge decision to pursue a life of celibacy.

He now works at the University of Oxford as a postdoctoral research fellow in the Faculty of Theology and Religion, and he specialises - among other things - in ... ready ... queer theology and ... holy virginity! I would never have imagined we'd name an Undeceptions episode 'holy virginity'!

David isn't what you might call a 'progressive' Christian - he is firmly Side B (it's even in his X bio). But his reflections on the "queerness" and "celibacy" are compelling.

I caught up with him in his home in Oxford, and we had a wonderful conversation. Here's just a part of it – Plus Subscribers will eventually get the whole thing.

David Bennet: Well, the way I came to value God, I think really came in with the issue or problem or question of desire because, you know, I was surrounded by this secular world that was very about desire, get your desires fulfilled, do what you're, you know, What, where your desires lead you is your true personhood, you know, you're gay, therefore, you know, this is a, this huge part of your identity that will define your life, get ready for it.

And I think as I, you know, went down that rabbit hole of desire, I kind of hit up against what I'd call ultimate reality or. And I think we all have these experiences as human beings where you're -

JD: Is this sort of university age?

David Bennet: Yeah, university age, about 19 years of age. And I remember writing the question, what is love in a journal with a Charlie Chaplin pen on Oxford Street, you know, like club, kind of Oxford Art Factory. I wrote like, "what is love?" and handed out to the group, you know, the, the kind of party scene there. And a lot of the people there were like political leaders, intellectual leaders. And so I thought, well, I might get an interesting answer. And I just, I didn't ...all the answers were like really, really, really underwhelming and even less than underwhelming, kind of broke me into a crisis.

So that whole kind of secular ideal of love and erotics just broke for me and I was like "there has to be more to life".

I remember saying to myself, I'm going to be single or celibate for a year. I'm just gonna give it a break and stop looking for this like untouched, like this thing I couldn't quite touch which was called love that wasn't really fitting with my romantic experiences, my friendships, you know, just generally I like didn't really know what love was. And so I think it was the question, I wasn't

really looking for God, but I was looking for love. It just happened to be the fact that God is love. And that's what I ended up discovering in a pub in the same quarter of Sydney, you know, months on from that experience.

JD: What, some Christian opened their mouth and made sense, or something else?

David Bennet: so, a Christian who's quite eccentric, who's a filmmaker. And actually, Baz Luhrmann was, you know, their mentor, and they were at university. And I call this person Madeline in my book. And she told me that basically, God had inspired her career to be a filmmaker for disabled people. And I was very, I found that very compelling.

Because I had a disabled uncle, and also being queer or gay there's a strong overlap there in terms of the existential realities of those things. And so, I was just compelled by her, and I trusted her because of that work. And I saw something different about the fact she wasn't just into the artifice of film, she was actually into this kind of, social, prophetic messaging about inclusion, which is super important to me as a kind of pretentious gay activist at the time.

You know, a precocious gay activist at the time being 19. You're not really a gay activist, I suppose. But yeah, that was really, that really touched me. And then she prayed for me and I had a powerful encounter with God, um, in those prayers that kind of totally changed my life. Flipped my life 180, uh, so I kind of came out of the pub with a Christian heart and an atheist gay activist mind.

And so the journey from there to now has really been how do those two things come together.

JD: Indeed. Um, You've not just committed your life to Christ, to celibacy, um, you, you've gone and studied holy virginity in the ancient church. We are whacked.

But before we get to that, can we, can you set the scene for us in sort of ancient, ancient patterns of thought between what you've called stoical repression and the kind of libertine expressionism that were both options and everything in between in the Roman world.

What do you mean by stoical repression?

David Bennet: I think I'll come to an experience I had recently. I was at Christchurch College and Tom Holland came, you know, he's written the book *Dominion* about his, His own journey of looking at the ancient world and the kind of erotic, erotic cultures, um, ethical cultures that were, you know, made up the Roman world.

And what I found fascinating about his inquiry into that was that he realized very quickly that he was actually ethically Christian. And that there were these, this kind, there was this kind of libertine expressionism. You know, I just have my desires as I want them. I get power. You know, I build this patria.

That means I can have this culture of free expression that, that is limitless. Um, and you see this in the Roman emperors, you see this in the kind of cults of the emperor. There's this -

JD: And all the HBO series about Rome

David Bennet: All the series about Rome. But then you have this other side of it, which is a very strong classical idea of the stoical tradition.

Uh, which is trying to perfect the self through your own inner powers, you know, and through nature. And, you know, being celibate might be seen as something you could do to show off that virtue of self-perfection.

JD: And it's negation, isn't it? It isn't, it isn't the redirecting of love.

David Bennet: It's the negation of the self, absolutely.

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JD: And of, and of passion and eros -

David Bennet: And desire, uh, and so you have, in modern scholarship, Martha Nussbaum has talked a lot about this problem and sees Christianity Very much is almost like a stoical religion

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Martha Nussbaum is a celebrated American Philosopher and author, with a particular interest in Greek and Roman thought.

She's spoken extensively about stoicism and explored its similarities - and differences - with Christianity.

In particular, she notes Christians saw emotions - or "passions" - as good things (within reason).

Stoics, on the other hand, saw them as things to be overcome.

Back to David.

JD: This is what I wanted to ask you about, because as people hear you talking about the stoical repression, people are going to go, oh yeah, that's just Christianity.

David Bennet: Absolutely

JD: So there was a tradition in Christianity that was like that.

David Bennet: I think there's always been an inflection. The church can't live in a cultural vacuum. It's always going to be inflection and affected by what's around it.

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I've studied Augustine and you see inflections of all the different, you know, philosophies of the time in his work.

But really what Augustine is doing is subverting those philosophies. So, the Christian view of love and actually a loving, self giving, or the word, fancy word we use is asceticism, but a fancy, you know, fancy way of saying that, but really this self giving of Christianity where you give yourself either in marriage or celibacy is about a much more profound and beautiful, enchanting reality than just showing your virtue, trying to perfect yourself repressively, or Expressing a self without any boundary line for morality or for goodness.

So I think Christianity provides this third way through that problem. That our culture is built on in some way and I love how Tom Holland has just found that innately in himself and not necessarily claiming to be a believer. So I think we need to trace the origins of our own desire culture and our own morality and we will hit up against what I hit up against in that club.

That really Christianity provides the best theology of desire, the best philosophy of love. I think that's what I found in my research.

JD: What's the analogy you see between holy virginity and your personal commitment To gay celibacy?

David Bennet: I think the kind of holy virginity that Augustine describes, I think it's important here that I'm not saying all holy virginity of the time, because there were forms of holy virginity that betray this, but Holy virginity that's coming out of that motivation of being like Jesus and witnessing to this culture of a different way, a different form of love. For me, that's a highly strange and odd thing in Rome. It doesn't fit. And so I think, similarly, not just a gay, celibate Christian that's saying, "well I have to obey this moral code, otherwise people won't like me, and the evangelical world won't like me, so

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I'd better do this, or I won't be included, and so I'll repress myself and live a miserable existence on the side while, whatever”.

You know, that kind of like self repressive picture, but rather a kind of I'm going to use this word, erotic celibacy, like that holy virgin I'm talking about in Rome, who loves God, is coming out of a love based motivation, a grace-oriented motivation. That kind of gay celibacy, I think is a highly queer thing, in a similar way to how the holy virgin was truly Christian at the time (BUT) was queer.

So I think there's this overlap, and it's also we're in two moments of crisis. Like, there's a crisis over gay marriage, there was a crisis over virginity in a very similar way. It's tearing the church apart. So it seems at the base of crises like these, there seems to be these queer subjectivities like the gay celibate Christian or the holy virgin. So I think that's how I see the overlap.

JD: You just put your finger on a, what is a central theme of your research and the message you want to get across. So I want to just pause on it and get you to. Put it, put it in more words, and that is that it, that it isn't for you about denial per se. It's about the redirecting of love. And so it is, it's not passion repressed, but passion directed.

David Bennet: Yeah. And a figure that's been really, has inspired this for me, well, obviously it's the whole patristic world. I mean, I was obsessed with this idea, so, but a modern theologian, Sarah Coakley has written about this in her book, *New Asceticism*.

Where really, she says, a healthy asceticism is never a total denial of something. Like the dualism we were talking about, the body's bad, the spirit's good, whatever. But it's this re-channeling of desire towards another goal. And it's a healthy meeting of that desire, recognizing that desire itself was originally a gift.

It's not originally a curse.

JD: You also say that, um Your approach, now in the personal, you know, present, um, actually testifies to the good of marriage. Yes. And some people are going to go, like when I first read that sentence, I was going, “oh yeah, how's he going to pull this off?” And you did. So how on earth are you testifying to the goodness of marriage?

David Bennet: I think that marriage without celibacy falls apart, and celibacy without marriage falls apart. So they're actually, codependent, or interdependence, probably a better word. There's this interdependence between the two. So I like to think about Christians, or human life actually, just generally as a pilgrimage. It's not a static Um, existence. We're always dynamically moving towards something and desire is part of that movement.

You can never stop desiring that otherwise you're dead. And even if you try to stop desiring, then you end up repressing yourself and it comes out some other way, you know? So for me, marriage and marriage is the created order, you know, being represented in humanity and sexual difference and celibacy, at least of the kind I'm talking about, is trying to witness to that good by being excluded from it, which is really quite a -

JD: Because you're not pursuing the desire that is open to you as a gay man, you're not walking that path, and so that's the idea, and therefore you're pointing back to this other thing.

David Bennet That's it. So it's actually an exclusion for the sake of a more radical inclusion in the transformation of the created good. So it's both upholding the vindication of the created good of marriage, whilst also being from it for the sake of its transformation, being included in its transformation.

And I don't think we've really understood that in the Christian ethic. And then for people who aren't Christians to understand, Christians aren't there trying to beat themselves up over the self-flagellate. They're living for a greater vision.

JD: This, this was my next question. I can imagine someone listening to our conversation now and going, come David, you, you just, you've just found this nerdy Oxford Augustinian rationalization for the tragedy of suppressing your romantic sexual urges.

David Bennet: Well, I look at Jesus and how he loved us and Jesus gave up all of his desires his whole created, you know, future like the goodness of it, to save us. So for me to participate in that one that aspect of his life through my sexuality, that's me just expressing my Christian faith. It's not It's me being like Jesus, and it's not me repressing myself or thinking being gay is necessarily this horrible dualistic curse, you know.

I think what's really interesting about this is being gay has become a gift that has linked me to Jesus even more profoundly. Because He was excluded from the created good in order to witness And order to give us access to its radical transformation in the resurrection. So I'm in a way moving in the ways of Jesus with my own desires through this asceticism.

It's not a rationalization, it's just a reality, You know, that I live. And it's a really beautiful life, but it's queer. It can't be seen easily. It's something that's covered over by normative discourses. It's something that progressive, AND conservative doesn't want to see. Because it's radically threatening to those certainties.

JD: It's interesting you use that word queer, you've used it quite a bit, so let's drill down on that. Great. You see your model. Well, firstly, let me ask two questions, and you answer them how you like, but first wind back and tell us the significance of queer theory, um, and then why you would dare to say that your gay celibate path is a queerness, if not an extreme queerness.

David Bennet: So what I see in the Bible is the character of the eunuch, and this is something that might be a weird place to take the conversation, but we're talking about queerness, so it should be weird. Um, in the Bible, there's this idea of this person called the eunuch. We don't quite know what a eunuch is.

It's not a stable entity, like it could be sexual minorities of all kinds. You know, gender ambiguity, something like being transgender today or being gay, we, you know, it could just be that physically you can't procreate. So this kind of category is unique. And scripture basically likens Jesus to a eunuch. When in Isaiah 53, it says, you know, "where is his generation? Who's heard of his generation?" It means where are his kids? Where's his family? Like he hasn't sexually reproduced and paradoxically, through the cross and resurrection, he actually reproduces. He actually has children. There's this idea of kind of fecundity.

It's not sexual, but it's become spiritual. And that's queer. That's strange. That's odd. That's not how a Jewish worldview or a Roman worldview would ever think of procreation, fecundity, self, like fruition, fruition of the self, you know. Self-actualization today, like all of that philosophy would never embrace that reality.

And so it's queer. I think what queerness means for me is something that's simply covered over that can't be seen by normative discourses that have power to control our society. Queerness is something that's always bubbling up, breaking open, and that's what Jesus did in his own society constantly, without betraying the created order or the law, which I think is the tension we're called to live in.

So I'm passionate about a queerness that lives towards holiness rather than a queerness that lives towards destruction, um, or the violence towards created structures

JD: So your existence as a gay, celibate Oxford theologian isn't sad and gloomy? I'm pressing this a bit because, you know, I'm just conscious that there'll be some listeners who just, you know, Oh, scratch beneath, he must be a tortured soul really. That cheerful laugh that we hear, you know, it can't be real. Speak to that person.

David Bennet: I think there's a difference between, between grief and Between sadness for me, I'm definitely not a sad person. I'm very filled with

joy and I don't really believe in happiness. I really don't. In fact, I had a debate with a friend of mine who wrote a book about being happy in a kind of Christian way, and I can't stand it. The thesis, I read it, it's a very good book, but I just totally disagree that we're supposed to be happy. I think we're meant to be joyful and joyful comes through suffering and pain. I think what's different for me is that I don't believe in staying in grief. I believe about, I believe we need to pass through grief into the good. You know, into, for me it's expressing worship to God or living in the presence of God.

So for me, I don't really feel like I'm There's a part of me that's depressed, or, but I do feel like I've gone through extreme grief, um, in the last three years. Especially in how the church has been dealing with sexuality and gender. I think that's been one of my biggest griefs, is just seeing how badly both ends of the spectrum are doing it.

And just constantly feeling like it's missing the mark. And it's like watching your family be incredibly dysfunctional, you know. And you just feel the pain of that. But when I'd actually go to me living as a celibate gay Christian before Jesus in the way that I've found it to be, that's not what generates most of my pain or grief at all really.

I think if I'm in a world where there's a pressure socially to cover up the space to be that, and yes, is a quite torturous thing, but that's not actually coming from the thing itself, they're outside pressures, and so I want to fight for the space for that to actually happen, you know, for future generations of people who say, "I want to follow Jesus. I want to do that biblically, but not, um, conservatively. Or liberally but in this deeper way". I want that space to be there for them. And so some of the pain I go through I think is a sacrifice for a future generation of Christian. And actually a kind of Christian that's always existed throughout the church but maybe could never articulate their existence before because of the same political realities.

JD: Finally for the, for the listener, uh, to this conversation who doesn't know the love of God, what, what do you mean, what do you mean, what is so special about God's love?

David Bennet: I think that the love of God is what we are fashioned for. So when you find the love of God, it's like you've discovered the thing you were made for. So everything else exists in and around it. If you, if you try to enjoy any part of the world and it's good, in and of itself, it ends up becoming a hell. Because you worship it, and then it becomes an idol, and then it breaks apart. And we see this in modern reality all the time. Celebrity culture, it's in the church, celebrity culture, you know. That's all trying to fight for the good in creation and enjoy it in and of itself, and then it breaks. Because that's not what it's made for.

But the love of God is the thing at the centre that you need to enjoy everything through.

It releases everything in the world to be what it truly is. And so Jesus, on the cross, lays down his life for us, showing us what love is, and he says, the greatest love you can have is not marriage or sex, but to lay down your life for your friend. And really, he's the only human in existence who could do that perfectly and purely, because he wasn't threatened by that same disorder. He could really lay that life down and then that love, that first act of complete self-giving sets off a chain reaction through the world that releases us from our fallenness, our idolatry, our brokenness of fighting power, and domination over each other.

And the love of God just transforms everything, you know. So for me, it's in that act of Jesus laying down his life on the cross, we see the explosion of life into the resurrection, and that's what the love of God is. It's that expression and revelation of who God really is as this perfect friend. Who really does love you with everything.

And you can't find that in any human being on earth. Every human being's love will always be compromised on some level. They can't provide that. Only God can provide that. So to me, that's why the love of God is so amazing. There is nothing else like it. And it's kind of ineffably good. And it is the centre of everything we're supposed to be as humans.

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And I think without it, we can't be truly human.