

On Loving the Gay Sinner: *An Evangelical Shunning by Stealth*

Stephen Thomas Berg (April, 2005)

The year I stopped going to church was the year a crack opened up in my ignorance regarding gay people. It would be another twenty years before I thought to consider myself a recovered bigot, or at least a bigot, as they say in AA, "in recovery". It started with a phone call from Carl, my gay brother-in-law. My marriage to his sister had fallen apart and my life was unravelling. Carl called and asked if I wouldn't mind if he came to see me—maybe just hang out for a while. I still remember the call. It was a Saturday and I was sitting in a brown arm chair in a half empty house and when I hung up the phone my attitude toward Carl had shifted. His concern for me, coupled with the silenced messages of my church, opened me up to receive him in a way I had not been able to do. I no longer find it surprising that Carl overcame his felt ostracism and reached out to me. Who better to understand an unravelling life than someone who experienced rejection in so many of the relationships in which he should have felt safe? In the years following, I got better, went back to church, remarried, and never really followed up with Carl. Twelve years after the phone call, Carl died of a single self-inflicted bullet to his brain.

There are good-hearted evangelicals—I believe I was one—who cannot accept homosexuality as a lifestyle but feel they are able to accept gays and lesbians as persons. In my church this position is understood as, "loving the sinner but hating the sin". The theory is you should be able to love the gay man while hating his same-sex acts. The fact that there are scarcely any known gay and lesbian people in evangelical churches shows how this Christian aphorism is pretty much confined to theory. But then, perhaps it deserves to be. Regarding homosexuality, isn't it possible that the acts and the *person* come as a package? Certainly my own heterosexual desire came to me as part of a larger way of interpreting my world. Should it be so difficult to believe then, as theologian James Alison understands it, that the homosexual inclination is not a subsection of a distorted heterosexuality but its own sort of concupiscent desire? That is, just like heterosexual desire, homosexual desire can be disordered, but then, just like heterosexual desire, homosexual desire can also lead to something good in itself (13-14).

That a same-sex union could lead to something good in and of itself, is however, something that evangelicals are still compelled to disbelieve. This is because, even if it was empirically proven that the homosexual inclination, "is just present" in some people, there must remain, for the homosexual, a real choice to be heterosexual. And failing this, there must remain a real choice to be celibate. This is held to be true because if there wasn't a choice in the matter there could be no culpability and this would contradict various scriptural references that apparently view, *a priori*, all same-sex behaviour as sinful.

For evangelicals, an appeal to scripture is the highest form of argument. Anyone growing up in evangelicalism knows that a declaration of, “The bible is quite clear!” on this or that issue, serves as something like a clarion call, the power of which can hardly be over estimated. Though many evangelicals acknowledge the possibility of a congenital same-sex orientation, scripture will always precede evidence. That this intellectual pattern hasn’t always worked has done little to make us more circumspect. I recall with some horror, evangelistic tracts I was given to distribute that proclaimed the discovery of dinosaur bones a hoax and argued for a literal six days of creation in 4004 BC. But further to the point, the Inquisition, the burning of witches, the sanctioning of slavery, have all been supported by a constricted reading of scripture. We believe we are past these grievous errors. But our linking of statehood with Divinity, our continued subjugation of women, and our passive-aggressive approach toward homosexuals, is the result of current specialized evangelical appeals to scripture.

I do not propose to discard the bible; I desire its liberation. It is possible to hold a high view of scripture, to see it as an ultimately reliable guide. But it is not an encyclopaedia addressing all the contingencies of life. We are required to muddle through these, guided by Jesus’ words, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice (Matthew 9:13).” Far from making the bible less authoritative, this approach unbinds it and safeguards it from specialized and harmful interpretations, allowing it to be, as the Psalmist says, “...a light to my path (Psalms 119:105).”

Of the passages of scripture used by evangelicals to support a blanket condemnation of homosexuality, the most popular is in the first chapter of Romans. James Alison however has shown that if we allow ourselves to be inhabited by this scripture instead of importing our contemporary definitions into it, we come much closer to the spirit of the text. In his essay, “But the Bible Says...?”, Alison shows how the Romans text has nothing to do with what we call “homosexuality” and nothing whatever to do with a monogamous and committed same-sex relationship. Instead the passage has to do with the futile and debased things that people get up to when there is an idolatrous grasping onto anything other than God, and the dangerous place we put ourselves in when we presume to judge the state of another.

With Alison’s reading, it should at least be clear that the bible is not as unequivocal regarding homosexuality as evangelicals believe it to be. Admittedly, for those of us raised within the fold, stepping into the margins to consider a different reading requires a renewed capacity for self-critique. But it also requires a conscious remembering—Galileo comes to mind—that truth is not independent of experience.

Mel White’s experience might be helpful here. White, a prominent Christian writer, was deep within evangelical clerisy. He wrote speeches, biographies and co-authored books for Christian conservatives like Francis Schaeffer, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson. His book, Stranger at the Gate, is an impassioned autobiography about, how,

after more than twenty five years of prayer, Christian counselling, medication, even electric shock therapy, he came to accept his homosexual orientation as, “a gift from God (199)”. For Mel White, his same-sex desire was just there, whether by nature or nurture or a complexity of the two, before there was any possibility of a conscious choice. He has been in a loving same-sex relationship for twelve years. For many years he was a minister and spokesperson for the Metropolitan Community churches that serve thousands of Christian same-sex couples. As evangelicals, can we reject as aberrations, the experiences of people who are flourishing within same-sex relationships?

I don’t believe that most evangelicals want to shun or exclude gay folk. But genuinely receiving gay and lesbian people may only come as we understand that homosexual desire is something that can lead to something good in and of itself. And this understanding will only come when we free ourselves from what we think is an *obvious* reading of scripture while listening to the stories of gay folk in our communities, our work places, and our families.

My brother-in-law kept a journal of the last three months of his life. In one reflection he writes, “Steve thinks he’s a Christian, I suppose he might be, but I wonder.” His wondering is on the mark, of course. I was a decent evangelical but I was not Christian. A crack had opened for me but my willing retrenchment into my church’s *position* closed it. Believing I “loved the sinner and hated the sin” translated into something like a smiling intolerance, a shunning by stealth, and was anything but receptive and caring, anything but Christ-like.

I know that ultimately I am responsible for the lost opportunity—not the church. I know that I am, in measure, culpable in Carl’s suicide. But I know as well that the way I once approached homosexuality is still approved by the church. And so I have come to this conclusion: Until we are able to suspend judgement and accept the possibility that being gay is just another way of being in the world, it may be better to not attempt to receive gay people into our evangelical enclaves. The reception would always be false, which is worse than an up front shunning.

Works Cited

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