

A number of years ago I was presented with a book entitled “Desires in Conflict”. The premise of the book is that Christian people who experience same-sex attraction can be transformed by God so that they no longer have the desire to be in sexual relationships with individuals of the same gender. The underlying assumption in the book was, of course, that the Christian faith and same-sex attraction were inherently incompatible. Therefore, individuals who find themselves in this predicament are internally conflicted and must choose between their faith and their physical desires.

For those whose faith is foundational to their life, this is not a particularly difficult choice: nothing is more

important than the way of Jesus. The inevitable result of this is a lifetime of internal conflict as they go to war against an essential element of their nature determined by their biology.

I was about 16 years old the first time I became aware of the intensity of this conflict. At a Pentecostal summer camp one evening I had a deeply meaningful spiritual experience; something that is not uncommon in the Pentecostal tradition. It was a feeling of deep connection and intimacy with the source of all Creation. In Pentecostal terms it is called the Moving of the Holy Spirit and has been a mainstay of Pentecostalism since the time of its inception at Azusa, California. To a 16 year old, this transcendent, mystical experience was a demonstration

not only of the existence of God but of God's favour in line with the scriptures where it states that many are called but few are chosen. To me, for reasons unknown, I was one of the chosen.

But later that evening as I laid awake in my cabin staring out the window at the moon and the stars, I became acutely aware of my desires in conflict. The magic of the evening's transcendent experience waned as my deepest secret was laid out before me.

In that moment I reached out to God and confessed to Him what I had previously not even acknowledged to myself. Nothin was hidden from God. He knew every part of me. And He knew that I was willing to surrender every

aspect of my life to Him even this affliction that I had not chosen, did not want, and willing offered up to Him for resolution. Then, in a moment of deep desperation I even offered up my life just as Abraham was willing to offer up his own son Isaac in obedience to the command of an uncompromising God. If there was nothing that could be done about my same-sex orientation then I asked that God would take me from this earth so that I would not sin against Him.

This experience set the tone for the next decade of my life.

The next two years were a time of intense struggle. To an outside observer, I appeared to be a normal, if not overly

zealous teenager. I was President of my church's youth group, an active member of the Reform Party of Canada, and a High School Honours student. If anyone were to offer constructive criticism to me at this time in my life it would be to tone down my often violently anti-gay rhetoric.

After graduation, I felt that God was calling me in to the ministry. Whether that was to serve as a pastor, a Bible teacher, or a travelling evangelical minister I did not know. But I did feel as though I was being divinely guided to make a difference in the world by spreading the good news of the Gospel to whomever would listen. I entered a Bible Institute in St.Catharines, Ontario. The founder of the institution was a prominent Canadian televangelist

and from the moment I entered the doors of this facility I knew that this was where God wanted me to be.

My first year went relatively smoothly. My critical thinking skills improved, my knowledge of the Bible grew considerably, and I was challenged to rethink some aspects of my faith especially in the area of “loving the sinner”.

In charismatic, evangelical Christianity a great deal of emphasis is placed on redemption; the idea that no matter how bad a person is, they can be redeemed by the transformative power of Jesus Christ. One example of this at this institution was a young man named Aaron who had, in the words of the church leaders, “been delivered

from homosexuality” and was in fact engaged to a young woman. However, not everyone at the Bible Institute was buying this. A good friend of mine, a tell-like-it-is American from New Jersey, who I spent a considerable amount of time with once remarked, “There is no way he’s not still gay. He says a woman is pretty in the same that he would say she makes great eggplant.”

Not surprisingly, we learned less than a year later that this young man had broken off his engagement and had, in the words of the church leaders, “gone back into homosexuality”. I had the chance to meet with Aaron a number of years ago and I am happy to report that at that time he was in a committed, monogamous relationship with the love of his life although, sadly, he no longer is a

member of a faith community nor does he consider himself a follower of Jesus.

My second year of study started off well. Over the summer I had discovered an author by the name of Wayne Dyer whose open approach to spirituality strengthened my faith and gave me a new perspective on what it means to be a follower of Jesus. In fact, the dean of the Bible Institute remarked that I seemed much more stable and at peace than I had in my first year and that this was a good indication that the Holy Spirit was at work in my life.

A month into my second year I met a young man who was not a member of the college but did attend church



regularly. As we spent more time together our friendship grew and we developed a close emotional relationship. It was at this point that I decided to approach the senior pastor and confess my deepest secret. From my perspective, if I was going to enter the ministry I needed to be pure before God. I needed to be free from same-sex attraction; and I needed this to happen quickly. I entered a form of therapy called “Conversion Therapy” and, more specifically, the Living Waters program from Exodus International.

What this program teaches is that homosexuality is incompatible with scripture and therefore a sin against God. It posits a number of now discredited psychological theories about how this perversion originates; specifically,

a difficult relationship with a domineering father, a greater identification with one's mother, and difficult social relationships in early childhood with same-gender peers whereby at puberty the subject of your social curiosity becomes the subject of your sexual curiosity. So far, in my mind, the program was batting 3 for 3.

Then things take a darker turn. In order to be free of homosexual temptation it is first necessary to see this temptation as God sees it: as a sin against His creation.

You must feel deep shame for these desires; this is considered to be the conviction of the Holy Spirit. The Bible says that over time, if one does not repent of sin that the Holy Spirit convicts you of then it is possible for one's heart to become hardened. When that happens you

are truly lost and unless your heart becomes tender again to prompting of the Holy Spirit it is likely that you will be given over to the devil for the destruction of your flesh as it states in Romans. Some even suggest that the AIDS epidemic may in fact be part of this divine punishment.

It is not difficult to imagine the psychological damage that these ideas could do to a young mind. The idea that the only appropriate emotion to feel toward one's biologically compelled sexual attraction is shame and that if you ever stopped feeling this sense of shame it meant that God was withdrawing from you and in fact giving you over to the devil is something that stays with a True Believer for a long time.

Spoiler alert: the Living Waters program did not cure me of same-sex attraction. What did happen is that my relationship with the young man at church continued to develop and eventually we became much closer. It was at this point that the spell was broken.

One afternoon I looked at myself in the mirror and said, "I'm gay". There was a wave of emotion that flooded over me. It was as if the heaviest of burdens was lifted from my shoulders. As I continued to look at my reflection it was as if I saw myself for the first time. And I didn't see an unrepentant reprobate. I saw somebody who wanted to make a difference in the world, who loved other people deeply, and who maybe wasn't cut out for Christian

ministry but who had talents and abilities that could be developed into skills that might be useful in the world.

I left the Bible Institute a few weeks later. The next few years were a time of intense struggle as I tried and failed to reconcile my faith with who I was. Eventually, I developed a deep disdain for religion and became an atheist and applied the same zeal and intellectual rigour to this ideology as I had to my religion. I became enchanted with the writings of Ayn Rand, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins. Over time, atheism became as obvious to me as my faith had been.

Atheism did not demand that I be something that I was not. It replaced faith with the scientific method and

empirical evidence. It provided evidence based explanations of how I came to be a person with same-sex attractions and that this was not at all at odds with nature but was in fact prevalent throughout the world and even evolutionarily advantageous in some instances. Atheism was logical, it was moral, and most importantly it provided me with a way to free myself from the shame-based theology of my childhood faith that almost destroyed me.

But it was not who I was. The fact of the matter is, the aesthetic beauty of faith still intrigued me. When you take away the poorly thought through theology, the authoritarian culture, and the anti-intellectualism of religion what remains is an enchanting aesthetic that

inspires some of the world's most beautiful architecture, and paintings, and music, and literature. When you see past the rigidity of a tradition that is poorly understood even by the most faithful adherents you find a moral code that has guided our liberal Western Civilization for centuries. When you start taking seriously the way of Jesus and applying it to your life, not as an ideology, but as an aesthetic that adds beauty and purpose and meaning to your life then you discover the power of faith to transform your life.

This is what happened to me in 2010 when I discovered the writings of Brian McLaren. Brian McLaren was a leading voice in what briefly was known as the Emergent Church movement and has now become more of a train

of thought. His books, for me, formed a new starting point in my faith journey allowing me to deconstruct what I knew of Christianity, to deeply examine and critique what some would consider essential doctrines, and then form from this experience a living faith that was not derived from the minds of other people but was instead deeply personal and experiential.

Had not my Pentecostal and Evangelical upbringing taught me that I could experience God personally? Did it not speak about a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Did it not emphasize grace over rules? Was there not so much conflict over what the Bible actually means that the Christian world had broken itself into hundreds if



not thousands of different faith communities in order to accommodate the diversity of opinion?

In Abbotsford, British Columbia there is a faith community called Nexus Church. At one time they published a podcast of their church services which I would listen to.

During one service two of their ministers were having a discussion about the concept of the Kingdom of Heaven and the conversation turned to the question: “Who gets to decide who is in and who is out?” They spoke about how Jesus consistently reached out to those in his community who the most faithful religious adherents would shun.

They discussed how so often the church overreaches into areas that are reserved for God Himself and decide, in their own wisdom - often very specifically - who is going

to heaven and who is going to hell. One of the ministers then took this a step further and his words changed my life. He said, “No matter who you are, the Kingdom of Heaven is open to you. That was the entire point of Jesus ministry. It was not to exclude but to include. The love of God is never withheld from you. You’re in.”

It was then that I came to the realization of a new kind of Christianity that I was not excluded from. God did not abandon me. And I did not abandon God. There was simply a misunderstanding.

My faith journey since that time has not been linear. Like most things, our individual journeys are messy, complicated, self-contradictory, and do not fit neatly into

structures of disposable ideas that often become obsolete well before we abandon them.

And so today I am happy to say that I take up the cross as a follower of the way of Jesus. I also take up the symbol of the rainbow as a proud member of the LGBTQIA community. And I do not believe that these two symbols conflict with each other. In fact, I believe they are complimentary. Maybe they even bring out the best in each other.

