



# FACE . . .

## Homosexual Conversion? Finding Freedom as a Gay Man

PAUL E. CAPETZ

**W**HY, AS A GAY MAN, DO I NOT BELIEVE IN “CONVERSION THERAPY” THAT would seek to change me into a straight or heterosexual person? That my brief reflections on this question have been invited at all occasion in me feelings of tremendous sadness, growing out of a lifetime’s experience, but also modest hope that my words might make a difference to some readers’ perceptions of what is involved in this seemingly innocent question.

When I first began to realize that my sexual orientation was homosexual, my initial reaction was to look to psychotherapeutic cures that might make me “normal.” This was during my high school years in the early 1970s before the movement of gay liberation had come to my attention. Since I knew instinctively that it was not safe to confide in anyone (whether parents, teachers, clergy, or friends), my refuge was found in books. I furtively searched the shelves of the public library for any information that might be found on my own “pathology” in order to learn what failures in emotional development had been responsible for my predicament. The outcome of all this reading was my conclusion that I was mentally ill. As a result, I waited for the time when, no longer living under my parents’ roof, I would be free to seek out the assistance of a therapist capable of effecting the cure from homosexuality to heterosexuality, from mental illness to normalcy.

As I recollect this formative period in my young life more than 25 years later, the sadness I feel for that teenager who was once me is enormous. In the meantime I have undergone a different sort of conversion in relation to my sexual orientation than the one originally envisioned so long ago. That conversion can be summarized in the following terms: from an unquestioned assumption that I am a flawed person, whether morally or psychologically, to a passionate conviction that the society in which I was raised and still have to live is fundamentally wrong in its attitudes regarding homosexuality; from a belief that heterosexuality is normal and normative for all persons to believing that “heterosexism” is a product of a corrupted rationality akin to racism and sexism. As a result of this conversion, I have committed myself to fighting this society and its institutions (including the church in which I was once an ordained minister) with every fiber of my being on behalf of that sad little boy who could talk to no one about his shameful secret and who often

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# TO FACE

## Homosexual Conversion? Finding Freedom from Homosexuality

BOB RAGAN

I DID NOT BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH THE WORD “HOMOSEXUAL” UNTIL I WAS in high school. I knew, however, that it described feelings that I had experienced throughout childhood.

Same-sex attractions had been around since I could remember. I assumed that this was how I was born and that these feelings defined who I was as a person. I heard no discussions about homosexuality as a child, and I chose not to discuss these feelings with anyone. This was the beginning of a sense of isolation and aloneness that would plague me for years to come.

As a sophomore in high school I was exposed to homosexual pornography. My body ached to be touched, held, to be bonded somehow with the men in those pictures. I could not take my eyes off of those images and that event seared one thought into my mind: *You are a homosexual.*

I knew *about* God, but I didn’t know God in a personal way. I remember as a 15-year-old, at a point of anguish and desperation, crying out to God for help with my addiction to masturbation and pornography. He heard my cry. A Franciscan priest took me to a Full Gospel Business Men’s dinner where I was introduced to Jesus. My heart soared as his life and spirit came into me; yet, though I asked Jesus to be my savior, I did not truly make him Lord of my life at that time.

For the next several years I was involved in the “Jesus movement” of the early ’70s. I remember the precious fellowship, praise and worship, and wonderful teaching. I became familiar then with passages in Scripture that condemn sexual behaviors outside the context of heterosexual marriage. In my conscience I agreed with God’s truth regarding homosexual behavior. However, in order to cope with my strong feelings, I shut down my heart. Knowing of no one who was walking in freedom from homosexuality, my feelings of aloneness and isolation deepened.

Because I had yet not made Jesus Lord of my life, willing to follow him no matter what the cost, I walked away from him. In 1976 I began dating a man that I knew. Having found my “Mr. Right,” I was ready to settle down into a lifelong relationship. But that “lifelong” relationship lasted only six years.

Since I couldn’t have what I thought I wanted, I compromised. Now I was willing to become involved with men who did not want a committed relationship. I

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thought in earnest that suicide might be a better alternative to the despair of continuing to live.

Given this 180-degree turn in my own interpretation of myself, the question of so-called “conversion therapy” is one that I cannot take seriously anymore. Even if I believed that a change in sexual orientation were possible (and I do not), it would never be an option to consider. As far as I am concerned, such a therapy is really a form of violence. It would be like trying to change the skin color of black people so that they might become white people. In both cases, the result would be the same: instead of people who are healthy and normal, we’d have people racked with self-hatred and internal conflicts. Besides, even if it were possible to become heterosexual, why would I want to? If sexuality is as closely tied to personal identity as many people in our time have come to believe, then this, too, would be tantamount to a form of suicide, an erasing of who I have come to be as a human being. Hence, I have decided (after much struggle and doubt, to be sure!) that who I am is alright and that I don’t have to apologize to anyone for being gay. And although I would have liked to remain an ordained minister, it is no longer possible for me in good conscience to represent an institution that has claimed divine sanction for its anti-gay violence.

I suppose it isn’t possible to convince all people, whatever their beliefs and attitudes might be, that homosexuality is neither sinful nor sick. But I suppose it would also be difficult to argue rationally with a member of the Ku Klux Klan that black people are not inferior to white people. So I have given up trying to argue about whether people like me are normal or not. Gay people have more urgent things to worry about, such as overcoming internalized shame, learning to love ourselves and one another, as well as building a more just and humane society. Of great importance is the task of bearing witness, as I am doing in this account, to what it means to struggle for dignity as a human being when all the institutions that have shaped our identity (from the family to the church) would rather that people like us disappear once and for all. But we won’t! As the slogan goes: “We’re here and we’re queer.”

I have to hope that these very personal reflections will assist a few readers to perceive why the question of “conversion therapy” is not as innocent as it first appears and, indeed, that the burden of conversion really lies elsewhere. 

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was willing to go out to the strip clubs and, in an alcoholic blur, to drown my sorrows and lost dreams.

Somehow, though, I knew that God was waiting for me to come back to him. In 1986, I met a man in San Francisco whose background was very similar to mine. Although at that time we thought we were born as homosexuals, both of us desired a deep relationship with God. In 1987, I rededicated my life to the Lord. This time I wanted Jesus truly to be Lord of my life, especially over my sexuality.

After a Sunday visit to a church I had found in the yellow pages, I scheduled an appointment with one of the pastors and shared my story. Although he admitted that he did not know how to counsel me, he said he loved me and wanted me to be a part of his church. Several couples in the congregation surrounded me with love, even though I did not share my struggle with them because of my pride and fear of rejection. Then, during a time of intense struggle in January 1988, I finally broke down and shared my story with one of the couples. How blessed I was when this couple just loved me, prayed for me, and did not reject me.

Two days later I went to a Christian bookstore and shared my struggle with the owner. I purchased some literature and finally realized that I had not been born gay. A tremendous sense of peace flooded me. Two weeks later, I heard about Regeneration, a nearby ministry to men and women struggling with unwanted homosexuality, and I began attending their support group. What a joy it was to find others who were like me, searching for a way to process and understand our homosexual feelings.

Although understanding root issues was necessary to my process, the foundational truth that made the real difference was knowing who I am in Christ. As I pored over the book of Romans, the Holy Spirit revealed the truth that my old nature was not only crucified but was dead and buried. It was no longer I who lived, but Christ who lived in me (Rom 6).

I began to see that I was a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Neither my temptations nor feelings ultimately defined who I was. The occurrence of a homosexual attraction did not mean, “I am a homosexual.” I could experience temptation, but resist it and walk in freedom!

I also began to have a relationship with God as my “Abba,” a word of intimacy similar to “Daddy” in the original biblical language. He was the only source of meeting my needs. Now, as a Christian, I can clearly see the truth: My relationship with God is the foundation of my identity. 

*BOB RAGAN is chair of the board of directors of Exodus, a nonprofit, interdenominational Christian organization promoting the message of “Freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ.” He directs the Regeneration office in Fairfax, Virginia. This article is an edited version (with permission) of a longer form that can be found at <http://www.exodusnorthamerica.org/testimonies/freedom/a0000511.html>.*