

My Coming Out by Rick Brentlinger

I grew up in a King James Bible believing Baptist home and church in the 1950s. Dad was a deacon, Sunday School superintendent and the adult Sunday School teacher at Northside Baptist Church, part of the General Association Of Regular Baptist Churches, now North Park Community Church, Lima, Ohio. Mom was also a Sunday School teacher and held Bible studies in our home for the neighborhood kids. My Pastors back then, Rev. Spaulding and Rev. Richard MacIntosh, who eventually became a Professor and Dean of Students at Cedarville University, would sometimes preach on hell. Those sermons on hell and salvation raised a lot of questions in my young mind. In response to my questions, Mom showed me in the Bible, how to get saved and I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior when I was eight years old.

Knowing that God loved me and had made me His child through faith in His blood was a life-changing experience even at such a young age. I grew up in a loving Christian family. My parents loved God and us kids but in the 1950s and 60s, being gay was not something to be embraced, it was something to be ashamed of. For a gay Baptist teen, there was literally no human being to talk to who would understand. And there was no Internet to Google for answers.

It's hard for people today to understand what gay kids faced years ago. There was no way a book that was positive about being gay, if one existed back then, would ever find its way into our home. I have come to understand since then that the Bible is positive about gay relationships which are within the Biblical moral framework but years ago, I was taught that the Bible condemned homosexuality.

Back then it never occurred to me that books positive toward gay people even existed or that many Christians have discovered that the Bible is affirming toward gay people. I thought I was a freak of nature. When I was a teenager, it never occurred to me that there were other gay people in the world. Even though I was saved and had assurance of my eternal salvation, I believed I was all alone and felt that God hated me for being gay. The isolation, guilt and loneliness I experienced before my coming out were devastating.

In the movie, Brokeback Mountain, Jack Twist tells Ennis Delmar, "Truth is, sometimes I miss you so much I can hardly stand it. I wish I knew how to quit you!" Even though he loves Jack, Ennis cannot bring himself to make a commitment and he replies to Jack, "If you can't fix it, you gotta stand it."

That's the position I was in as a saved gay fundamental Baptist teen. I couldn't fix the fact that I was gay so I had to stand it. Standing it brought years of tears and tons of turmoil as I struggled to integrate Christian faith and sexuality. High school was an in the closet nightmare. My coming out was a long way in the future. To survive, I pushed the

gay stuff to the back of my mind and focused on learning, becoming a member of the National Honor Society. Throughout high school, none of my friends knew I was gay.

When I graduated from high school in 1969, that part of my solitary struggle ended. Strangely enough, alone with my secret, my coming out a long way in the future, I was growing stronger. God's grace didn't answer all of my questions but God did sustain and strengthen me. I believe God leaves some questions in our lives unanswered because the tension between understanding everything and trusting God for what we can't understand is good for us. I began to get a glimmer of understanding about what God meant when He told Paul, "My strength is made perfect in your weakness." 2 Cor 12:9.

I'm glad I didn't quit when I was discouraged. Mom and Dad dedicated me to the Lord when I was a toddler. Mom always believed that God would call me into the ministry. In high school God had begun to deal with me about ministry. I completed my first year of college at Ohio State University, Lima campus, as God continued to impress on my heart that He wanted to use me in ministry. For my sophomore year, I transferred to Baptist Bible College, Springfield, Missouri, and graduated in 1973. At Baptist Bible College in Springfield, Missouri, I began to meet gay people but I was still deeply closeted. I didn't discuss being gay with anyone until my college friend Charlie Lyons, a straight guy from Chicago, asked me if I was gay. I denied being gay and he never brought it up again. My coming out could have begun with Charlie's thoughtful question but I just wasn't ready yet.

I began full-time ministry as a Youth Pastor at Foothills Baptist Church, Montrose, Colorado, under Pastor Don Kiser. I also taught High School English in our Foothills Christian school. Even in full-time ministry, my inner battle raged. I struggled to reconcile my same sex attractions with what I had been taught that the Bible said about being gay. I still had not studied for myself what the Bible says on this important topic. My coming out was many years in the future.

Over the years, I began to acquire other ministry experience, helping to start churches and engaging in street preaching and evangelistic ministry. I helped start True Vine Baptist Church, 8471 Cheaspeake Blvd, Norfolk, Virginia, in 1980. We built a small congregation of about 75 people, started the True Vine Bible Institute, began training future pastors and Christian workers, started a weekly street preaching and street evangelism ministry. We also started a ministry to the military, winning souls and training vibrant young Christians to serve God.

Pastor Ron and Alice Burress and I trained Dave Gibson for about two years and then turned True Vine Baptist Church over to him to pastor when we moved to Phoenix, Arizona in October of 1983 to start another True Vine Baptist Church. Pastor Dave Gibson has been leading True Vine Baptist Church of Norfolk, Virginia now for 31 years and continues the street preaching ministry we started in 1981. During those early years, Pastor Burress and I also trained Ed and Susan Ware in our True Vine Bible Institute.

In 1983 when we moved to Phoenix, Arizona to start another church, Ed and Susan Ware were among the 27 people who quit their jobs and moved with us to help start another True Vine Baptist Church. After a few months, we turned the young church over to Pastor Ed Ware. True Vine Baptist Church, now of Glendale, Arizona, struggled for several years and eventually disbanded but under Pastor Ed's and Susan's leadership, they emerged from their struggles. In 1988 Ed and Susan started the church again and now, 26 years later, they are still preaching the glorious gospel of Christ.

Our spiritual work for God in Norfolk, Virginia continues to bear fruit as some of my grandsons in the ministry, whom I have never met, continue to start churches and win souls. For example, Pastor Richard D.S. Glen and True Vine Baptist Church of Portland, Oregon have been preaching the gospel and winning souls for twenty years. Pastor Glen was trained by Pastor Dave Gibson, whom I helped train, and Pastor Glen also served as Associate Pastor of True Vine Baptist Church in Norfolk, Virginia before answering the call of God to start a church in Portland, Oregon.

I should point out that these churches and pastors are anti-gay and want nothing to do with me. I was not out at the time I helped train Pastor Dave Gibson and Pastor Ed Ware yet by His amazing grace, God used me to preach and teach His infallible word and to help train these independent Baptist preachers. God loves and uses and blesses His gay Christian children just like He loves and blesses and uses His non-gay Christian children.

I helped start or nourish churches in Kaneohe, Hawaii, Norfolk, Virginia, Yuma and Tempe, Arizona and Pensacola, Florida. After 12 years of working in the ministry, struggling daily with being both gay and Christian, the struggle with loneliness became too great. In October of 1986, I resigned my pastorate, Open Door Baptist Church of Pensacola, Florida and began working in the secular world. At the time I thought I had failed God. In my own mind, I was through with the ministry but God had other plans. My coming out opened a whole new world of ministry opportunities, serving my Lord of grace and glory. It may seem strange to anyone who has never struggled with being both gay and Christian but even in the midst of my awful struggle, I began to have a settled, calm assurance that God loved me just as I was, in the middle of my coming out struggle.

My secular career took me to New York City in the winter of 1989. There, for the first time in my life, I met a happily married gay couple. It was an astonishing revelation! Ray and Rich had been together for eleven years at the time I met them. They loved each other, owned a home together and were happily partnered. And they offered me their friendship and the hospitality of their home. Meeting Ray and Rich, a happily partnered gay couple, re-started my quest to discover for myself what the Bible really says about homosexuality. I think my coming out journey actually began here. I was 39 years old and until I met Ray and Rich, it had never occurred to me that two men or two women could get married and spend their lives together.

Years ago, I was angry at God. Why, I wondered, hadn't anyone ever told me that being gay was okay and that I could partner with a wonderful gay Christian man for life? I wrestled with the knowledge that I had known several gay men who also loved God and believed the Bible. But back then, because of what I was taught by people who didn't know any better, it never occurred to me that we could partner for life and serve God as a gay Christian couple.

Depression lapped my soul like waves assaulting an endless beach. I experienced intense feelings of loss as I looked back at twenty years of loneliness and struggle. I questioned God. "Was all of that loneliness really necessary Lord?" I had gay friends and a gay room mate in college, wonderful people whom I dearly loved. Yet it never occurred to me that I could have a same sex marriage, that I needn't have wasted the previous 20 years struggling with loneliness and depression. My coming out would not happen for a few more years.

I cried out to God for answers. The conversation went something like this. "Lord, I am so discouraged right now I'm ready to quit. You watched me sink into despair. You watched me battle loneliness and struggle with depression all those years. Why didn't you tell me its okay to be gay? Why didn't you let me know that years ago?" And like a still small voice, God answered me.

"What does my word say about homosexuality?"

"It says its abomination Lord. It condemns me."

"Does it really? Is that what you think it says?" the Lord asked.

"I'm not asking what you were taught" He continued.

"What you were taught has made you miserable for twenty years. I'm asking, What does My word actually say?"

And slowly, ever so slowly, it began to sink into my heart. I had never studied for myself what the Bible says about homosexuality. My coming out would have happened years earlier if I had only studied the Bible for myself. Even though I had graduated from Bible college, had been in the ministry for 12 years, had led many souls to Christ, had helped start and lead churches, had read the Bible time after time, that spring and summer of 1989, I began to read and pray over and study the so called "clobber passages" for the first time in my life. My coming out journey only ended successfully because I accepted responsibility for studying the "clobber passages" for myself.

The experience was almost like being born again for a second time. As I read the Bible and made notes in the margins and in a notebook, I was amazed at what God showed me. The Bible does NOT say what I'd been told it says. The scriptures which are alleged to talk about homosexuality came alive to me as I read them in context, the way God intended. The pace of my coming out journey rapidly accelerated.

It was like the Holy Spirit was asking me questions as I read and studied. In Genesis 19, the Holy Spirit asked, “Now where did I use the word homosexual in this passage?”

And I had to answer, “I don’t see the word homosexual anywhere in this passage Lord.”

The Holy Spirit asked another question. “Have you read all the verses where Sodom is mentioned in the Bible?” Of course I had read those verses. I’d read the Bible through from cover to cover a number of times.

“Did you notice that homosexuality is never mentioned in the same context where Sodom is mentioned?”

“No Lord, I never noticed that before.”

So I looked up every time Sodom is mentioned in the Bible. I discovered that Sodom is mentioned 48 times in the Bible and homosexuality is never mentioned in the context of Sodom. I also discovered that the Hebrew word for Sodom has absolutely no linguistic relationship to the Hebrew word for sodomites. The Hebrew words for Sodom and sodomites are two entirely different words, with no linguistic relationship whatsoever. Click on Sodom and sodomites and see for yourself.

What I discovered excited me! I had been taught wrong by the Baptist professors and pastors who had mentored me! They had simply passed on what they were taught, without ever studying the relevant scriptures, alleged to deal with homosexuality, for themselves. Could my coming out journey possibly have a happy ending?

I began to study Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. I kept praying this prayer. “O Lord, please show me Your truth. I don’t want to be led astray. I want to believe Your truth, whatever it is.” Again the Holy Spirit seemed to be questioning me.

“Who is Moses talking to in Leviticus chapters 18 and 20?”

I read the context and discovered that Moses is talking to the children of Israel, around 1450 BC, as they are preparing to move into the land of Palestine. He is not addressing his remarks to Christians living 3000 years later, who are not under the law and who are not residents of Palestine.

If you are fretting and struggling, wrestling with coming out, I encourage you - first, learn what the Bible says. The Bible is your friend, not your enemy. People are going to throw scripture at you which, taken out of context, seems to condemn homosexuality. My coming out journey was hindered for years because I didn't take time to study the Bible for myself. You don't need to make that mistake. My coming out story can help you on your coming out journey.

“And what is the context of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13?” the Lord asked.

I reread it and then read it again and excitement began to rise in my heart.

“Lord, he’s talking about people who worship Molech, Leviticus 18:21, 20:2-5. He’s talking about people who worshiped the false gods of Canaan.”

Slowly it began to make sense. The prohibitions of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 were not universal prohibitions of all homosexual practice. Instead, those prohibitions dealt specifically with the sin of worshiping Ashtoreth, the fertility goddess consort of Molech, the ancient Canaanite fire god. God and Moses had a specific type of sin in view when they wrote those verses.

The ancient Canaanites worshiped Ashtoreth, the fertility goddess consort of Molech. Their false worship consisted of men having anal sex with men and sometimes, men having anal sex with female worshipers. Their seed was viewed as an offering to the fertility goddess. The Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 verses did not have then and never had any reference to loving, committed, faithful, noncultic gay partnerships. My coming out continued as I walked with God through the process, one step at a time.

My depression began to lift. The Bible simply did not say what I had been taught that it said. I continued to read and study and pray and talk to God. I got to Romans 1:26-27 but that passage still seemed to condemn me. The Holy Spirit was patient but He kept prodding me with questions.

“Who is Paul referring to in Romans 1?” He asked.

I read the chapter again, for what must have been the thirtieth time and finally it dawned on me.

“Lord, he’s referring to idol worshipers who rejected God to worship idols.”

“Okay,” the Holy Spirit answered, “What else do you see in Romans 1?” I read it again.

“He is talking about idolatry, like the Leviticus verses.”

Next I studied 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. In some ways those were the hardest and took the longest to figure out because there is not much in the context to indicate what the verses mean. And nothing in the context defines the meaning of the Greek words used. Not studying these verses early on considerably slowed my coming out journey. But what about 1 Corinthians 6:9?

Discovering the answer to 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 took several more years. I studied the Greek text of those verses and the specific Greek words Paul used, to discover what Paul’s first century readers would have understood when they read those verses. The Greek words at issue are malakoi and arsenokoites. I began by studying Greek lexicons to help me understand the meaning. But the Greek lexicons

were not particularly helpful. They all seemed to say, to one degree or another, that malakoi and arsenokoitai in the first century, were Greek words for homosexual.

I was stumped for a while until I noticed that the lexicons cited ancient Greek writings to support their definition of malakoi and arsenokoites. I began to look up the ancient Greek literary references cited in the lexicons. Now it began to get even more interesting! As I studied, I discovered that the Greek words malakoi and arsenokoitai were rarely if ever, used to refer to homosexuals in the first century. The lexicons simply repeated the popular misconception, that malakoi and arsenokoites were frequently used in the first century to refer to homosexuals. Of course, that is NOT the case at all. Malakoi and arsenokoites are rarely, if ever, used to refer to homosexuals.

Here's something to consider. If malakoi and arsenokoites were frequently used in the first century to refer to two men in committed faithful noncultic partnership, anti-gay Christians would be trumpeting that fact all over the media. Yet the truth is, anti-gay Christians cannot cite even one first century reference where the malakos stem and the arsenokoit stem were used to refer to two men in committed faithful noncultic same sex partnership. And a few conservative anti-gay evangelical Christian scholars now have the courage to admit that important fact.

The verses that seemed to condemn me in years past took on new meaning when I read them in historical and religious context and learned how our first century Greek speaking ancestors understood those words. My coming out journey continued. I also discovered that anti-gay, conservative evangelical scholars agreed with what I had discovered, that malakoi and arsenokoites are rarely, if ever, used in the first century to refer to homosexuals. This discovery shocked and angered me!

If evangelical scholars knew that malakoi and arsenokoites did NOT refer to gay people, why did so many evangelical Christians use 1 Cor 6:9 to condemn gay people? How could it be that Bible translators were translating those words in modern English Bibles to mean homosexual when the Greek words rarely if ever meant homosexual in the first century, when Paul used them?

Don't allow a biased translation of 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 to keep you from loving God and coming out as a gay Christian. My coming out was slowed because I blindly accepted the false teaching that these verses universally condemn homosexuality. Please don't make the mistake I made in my coming out journey. I started to get angry all over again. For years I had believed and I had been taught lies about homosexuality. I thought God hated me for being homosexual. Self-hatred and falsely believing God hated me slowed my coming out as an openly gay Christian.

And now I knew that the clobber passages were not talking about homosexuals in committed, faithful, non-cultic relationships. My coming out journey joyfully shifted into high gear. My anger began to melt away as God's incredible peace and joy flooded my heart. It was time for my coming out to Mom and Dad. I made up my mind in the summer of 1989 that I would begin the years long process of coming out to family and

Independent Baptist friends. I would live as an openly gay Christian man, exactly as God created me. My job in the New York city area ended and I returned to my home in Florida. The first thing I did was visit Mom and Dad to explain to them that I am a gay man. Dad was shocked. It had never occurred to him that I might be gay. Mom had worked with gay men and lesbians for years. The first words out of her mouth were, "I always figured that."

Both Mom and Dad were upset and had lots of questions. They were concerned that I would be discriminated against or harmed for being gay. They had no good information about gay Christians or the many resources available to gay Christians today. We sat in the living room and went through the clobber passages verse by verse as I explained the cultural and historical and religious context. We talked for hours. They asked me questions about my personal life which I answered honestly.

I left that afternoon to drive to my home about twenty miles from where Mom and Dad lived. I was totally surprised when, about ten minutes after I got home, Mom and Dad pulled into my driveway. They both got out of the car and walked over to hug me. And so, my coming out to my parents ended with hugs and Mom telling me this.

"We forgot to hug you when you left and we didn't want you to think we don't love you just because you're gay"

Coming to terms with having a gay child isn't always easy. Over the years Mom and Dad struggled to come to terms with their gay Christian son and my coming out journey. They were always loving and supportive of me but most of the time, they preferred not to talk about me being gay. Fifteen years after I came out in 1989, Dad was finally getting more comfortable with the idea that his son was gay. He told me in 2004: "I'm praying God will use you in the ministry as a gay man. I'm also praying God will give you the partner you've been wanting."

My coming out story is now told. I hope it will bless and encourage you. Perhaps some day it will not be necessary to educate others about being gay and Christian. But for now, it is a necessary, ongoing process. Coming out is not a one time event. For many of us it is a life-long process. We continue to come out as we meet new people and run into old friends we haven't seen for years.