

## **“Behold, I Do a New Thing”?**

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For many of us in this debate we have our convictions and they will not change. The debate may well help us carry those convictions with a greater degree of humility but for someone like myself, who holds to a conservative social ethic, it is not likely that there is any “new” argument or anecdotal story that would change my core convictions on the matter.

Yes, we quote any number of reputable sources which the “other side” has little confidence in due to the fact that we are “using” history or science or the Bible to advance an argument that we already have the answer to. Mea culpa! Deeply held convictions are not likely to change with a reference to studies that are, at best, disputed, and, over time, likely to be dismissed upon peer review. What folks remember is the initial media reaction to the “new” discovery and slowly but surely that “new thing” settles into our consciousness. The “born gay” and if God made me this way there is no possibility of change to my orientation and behaviour is an example. The scientific community is, at the very least, mixed and no less driven by politics than the rest of us. The work of Dr. Robert Spitzer, an advocate of gay rights, nonetheless also suggested that there is solid evidence that “ex-gays” do exist, something deemed politically unacceptable and for which Spitzer came under fire.

This appeal to the “new thing” that God supposedly is doing in our midst, ie. the blessing of same-sex relationships via a local option, is asking us to accept the “new thing” although it is premised on the principle of discontinuity with the rest of the tradition. When Scripture speaks of God doing a “new thing” that doesn't mean that the new thing is completely different than the old thing. Scripture speaks of a “new” heavens and earth but it is still a heavens and earth. It speaks of a new body in the resurrection but it is still a body. Jesus came in “fulfillment” of Scripture not as one who overturned it. His teaching on marriage is but one example in contrast to the more liberal view that sought to use the certificate of divorce to diminish the status of women. When Jesus says “but I say to you” (the “new thing”) it is an intensification of the earlier teaching not a rejection of it. The fact that the New Testament continues a conservative social ethic in sexual mores should come as no surprise. That Jesus would have been in continuity with that tradition should equally come as no surprise.

So yes, the transforming power of God can bring about something “new” including the transformation of the Christian community but the way forward is not through some “new” emergent church that is discontinuous with its past, especially its core beliefs, but in a church that is bold to be faithful to the core tradition revealed in apostolic teaching.

“Being church means loving well” is one aspect of Christian community but certainly not its only one. The way “love” is often used in this debate is, as Stanley Hauerwas observes, “the ethics of love is often but a cover for what is fundamentally an assertion of ethical relativism.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, to do the loving thing is full inclusion without imposing norms or demands of sexual fidelity, as the New Testament is consistent in doing. Richard Hays cautions in reducing the gospel to a rubric of inclusion because the “biblical story teaches us that God's love cannot be reduced to inclusiveness: authentic love calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation.”<sup>2</sup>

We have reduced “gospel” to the psychological category of “acceptance” rather than as the power that puts to death in order to bring forth new life in Christ. If I am to be accepted as I am then why the cross? The prophetic word could simply have said, “I’m okay, and you’re okay, as you are” -of course that leaves us with the nagging question as to who is causing all the trouble- and we could have dispensed with the messy business about a blood sacrifice for the sins of the world. I don’t see how the cross of Jesus brings me to the conclusion that my “nature” is acceptable. True, “just as I am I come” but also “without one plea”- not with my “identity” or my “orientation” or my “behaviour” or my “lifestyle” and ask that these things be blessed and baptized.

In Hay's book he tells the story of “Gary,” a Christian, a homosexual, and one who died from AIDS in 1990. Gary was not a gay apologist, and reminds us of the diversity of attitude within the gay population. He did not buy into the “draw your identity from your sexuality” argument. As a Christian he defined himself as Christians always have, that our identity is grounded in God alone and what God has done for us through Christ alone. These were Gary's last words: “Are homosexuals to be excluded from the community of faith? Certainly not. But anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning, and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged.” 3

Good words for all of us, and why I feel that our Synod (of Alberta and the Territories) has gone as far as is needful to extend a word of welcome to homosexuals without endorsing full inclusion of the lifestyle in its 1998 Synod Convention action:

“as an expression of the church catholic, shall welcome people of homosexual orientation into its congregations and shall provide them with pastoral care and support.” 4

For the Gary's of our community, and their families, this would be enough, and they ask no more. It likely is not enough for those who seek full inclusion, but it allows the pastoral care needed while maintaining the substance of the church's teaching on human sexuality. Behold, I do a new thing...in continuity with the tradition received.

Respectfully submitted,  
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1. As quoted in Richard B. Hay's “The Moral Vision of the New Testament” c1996, HarperCollins, page202.

2. Ibid, page 202.

3. Ibid, page 401

4. The Seventh Biennial Convention Minutes, Synod of Alberta and the Territories, ABT 98-19, page A17.