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Tainted Love: Sojourners rejects LGBT ad

Jamie Manson | May. 17, 2011 Grace on the Margins

Earlier this week, Jim Wallis and *Sojourners* magazine, upheld by many as the great, white, progressive hope of Protestant Evangelicalism, found themselves on the defense after rejecting a video ad from an organization called Believe Out Loud.

The ad, which can be seen on Youtube [1], shows a young boy walking up the aisle of a church flanked by two adults. As the threesome moves past the pews, children point at them and adults give them disapproving stares. When they reach the front of the church, the camera raises to show that the boy is accompanied by his two mothers. A clergyman looks at them from the sanctuary and announces, ?Welcome, everyone.?

No statements about gay marriage or the ordination of gays and lesbians are made. According to the Believe Out Loud website, the group ?is a collection of clergy and lay leaders, LGBT activists, and concerned individuals, working together to help the Protestant community become more welcoming to gays and lesbians.?

In a statement on the *Sojourners* blog, Wallis reasserted *Sojourners* support of civil rights for gays and lesbians and their welcome of gay and lesbian staff at the organization.

He went on to explain: ?We wish to engage first and foremost in dialogue on difficult issues within our editorial pages, and we typically do not display advertising relating to issues amongst people of faith that have unfortunately, and too often, been reduced to political wedge issues.?

Wallis and *Sojourners* believe that publishing the ad would have been interpreted as the organization?s taking sides on the issue.

Using a justification typical of the ?progressive? Evangelical set, Wallis argues that debates over LGBT issues ?have not been at the core of our calling, which is much more focused on matters of poverty, racial justice, stewardship of the creation, and the defense of life and peace. . . . Essential to our mission is the calling together of broad groups of Christians, who might disagree on issues of sexuality, to still work together on how to reduce poverty, end wars, and mobilize around other issues of social justice.?

Wallis isn?t the only social justice-oriented Evangelical to use this argument. Shane Claiborne, the charismatic figurehead of the evangelical ?New Monastics? movement and a Wallis protégé, has offered a similar position.

?We?re careful not to get hijacked by those [issues such as homosexuality] but to recognize that these are real issues. . . . Personally, I would not be able to [marry a same gendered couple] if I were a pastor, but I also don?t have any shame in saying, ?I?ve got a pastor friend who would love to marry you,?? said Claiborne in an interview published in the Oct. 29, 2010, issue of *NCR*.

Not long after *NCR*?s story on Claiborne was published, I had the opportunity to speak briefly with him about this stance. He explained that his community had decided that, though they understand that the issue is important for many who fight for social justice, it was not one that they were willing to ?die on the hill for.?

What social justice-oriented Evangelicals don?t seem to understand is that many gay people I know -- my partner and myself included -- wish that there were no ?hill? to begin with. All we really want is to serve the church without being made to feel that our loving, committed, same-sex relationships somehow taint our faithfulness to the Gospel and, most importantly, to God.

Like Wallis and Claiborne, my partner and I have a deep passion for working with the poor, the hungry, and the homeless. Our commitment to this work does not come simply from a desire for the common good, but from the yearnings of our spirits.

I?m a Catholic with a Master of Divinity degree and my partner grew up Evangelical and attended a Midwestern bible college. For us, the margins are a sacred place where we have some of our deepest experiences of ?church,? the way Jesus envisions and incarnates it in the Gospels. It is in the face of the broken and desolate that we most clearly see the face of Christ.

And, yet, because we in a same-sex relationship (as opposed to remaining celibate, as Catholic and Evangelical beliefs would have it), we walk into most churches and church-related activities with deep trepidation.

We look around the room to see if we can locate any congregants that ?appear gay.? We know to avoid holding hands during prayers unless we feel confident that it?s a safe space. We know not to be immediately forthcoming about our relationship if someone talks to us after the service.

Regardless of what good work we do for the church, our efforts will be seen by many church people as tainted because of our loving, committed relationship. The congregants in my partner?s home church are extremely proud of the work that she is doing with the poor in New York City. However, if they knew she was in a relationship with a woman, they would cease to talk about her. All of her good work would be invalidated in their eyes.

I have a similar experience in my writing career. Though I do sometimes write about gay and lesbian issues, more often I write about young adult Catholics in the church. My essays on this theme have led several editors to invite me to write books for their religious publishers. Unfortunately, once these editors learned that I am openly lesbian, they rescinded their invitations.

I have been uninvited from many speaking engagements for the same reason. Though my insights into non-LGBT religious issues are appreciated, my voice becomes tainted by my also being openly lesbian.

Elie Wiesel famously wrote ?We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.?

While I understand *Sojourners* unwillingness to ?take sides? on the issue of LGBT inclusion, they should also understand that there are soul-shattering repercussions to such decisions. Wallis and Claiborne are very well aware that there are countless gays and lesbians doing the work of justice, feeding the hunger, giving shelter to the homeless, ministering in refugee camps, protecting victims of all kinds of violence. They know these LGBT people, love them, and, at least privately, support them.

But I?m not sure they realize the spiritually damaging results of their unwillingness to be more forthright and prophetic about their support of gays and lesbians. So many religious gays and lesbians have to operate ?under the radar,? and keep silent about their personal lives in order to answer God?s calling. (Check out the list of bloggers on Wallis?s ?God?s Politics blog. Can you find an out gay person among them?)

By refusing to take sides, men like Wallis and Claiborne only reinforce the need to hide for the sake of serving

the kingdom of God.

While it is commendable that *Sojourners* seeks to defend gay people against physical or legal harm, their unwillingness to fight for their spiritual protection fails to get at the root of most gay and lesbian discrimination.

Most homophobic and homo-hating attitudes in society have their root in the religious belief that same-sex relationships do not have the same potential for goodness and holiness as heterosexuality. One need only look at Uganda to realize the violent, if not deadly, effects that anti-gay, Evangelical efforts can have on the safety and peace of LGBT persons.

But I believe there is an ever more disquieting question that arises out of this situation. What is the real reason that progressive Evangelicals try to sidestep taking a stance on welcoming gays and lesbians into churches? Much as I would like to believe that their desire is to unite Christians with differing opinions on sexuality in the work of social justice, I cannot help but think that this ultimately comes down to a fear of losing financial and communal support.

Wallis himself admitted in his statement that, ?Like the larger church, *Sojourners* ? constituency, board, and staff are not of one mind on all of these issues.?

So, if *Sojourners* were to make a definitive statement about something as innocuous as welcoming gay and lesbians into church pews (not even the ?full monty? of supporting gay ordination and marriage), they would risk losing a crucial segment of their funding.

Sadly, Evangelicals with progressive viewpoints on poverty and war but conservative convictions about LGBT inclusion are wealthier and more powerful than Christians committed to justice for the LGBT community. So, for the time being, we must accept that our need to be treated with dignity can be sacrificed for the greater good of maintaining a larger base of patrons and enthusiasts.

Many non-profits are forced to make similar compromises everyday. Coming from a background in fundraising for church-based social service agencies, I sympathize with the desire to serve poor and the victimized at almost any cost.

However, when the gays are lesbian who faithfully serve these populations are denied the opportunity to also be upheld and protected, the prophetic integrity of the organization begins to weaken.

What does it profit a Christian social justice organization to gain the admiration of the political and religious world at the cost of harming the souls of so many of its own servants?

[A modified version of this column originally appeared on the Religion Dispatches Web [2] site May 14. Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0buh-1quVs

[2] http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/sexandgender/4605/tainted_love:_the_cost_of_sojourners%E2%80%99_refus
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