

Can One Be a "Gay Evangelical"?

My answer to a *New York Times* reporter and how she reported it

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On 11/29/06, Neela Banerjee, religion reporter for *The New York Times*, emailed me to ask my views on "gay evangelicals" and about whether I thought "such a term can be honestly used." On the same day I emailed my response. She took two quotes from my response for her article in the *Times* on Tuesday, Dec. 12, entitled "Gay and Evangelical, Seeking Paths of Acceptance" (front page, continued on p. 18; temporarily available on the web [here](#)). She was pleasant in her email. However, her handling of my response merits some comment and qualification. Here is the excerpt from the article that quotes me, along with the immediate context of her article and with boldface added to the quotations of my words:

But for most evangelicals, gay men and lesbians cannot truly be considered Christian, let alone evangelical.

"If by gay evangelical is meant someone who claims both to abide by the authority of Scripture and to engage in a self-affirming manner in homosexual unions, then the concept gay evangelical is a contradiction," Robert A. J. Gagnon, associate professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, said in an e-mail message.

"Scripture clearly, pervasively, strongly, absolutely and counterculturally opposes all homosexual practice," Dr. Gagnon said. **"I trust that gay evangelicals would argue otherwise, but Christian proponents of homosexual practice have not made their case from Scripture."**

In fact, both sides look to Scripture. The debate is largely over seven passages in the Bible about same-sex couplings. Mr. Gagnon and other traditionalists say those passages unequivocally condemn same-sex couplings.

Those who advocate acceptance of gay people assert that the passages have to do with acts in the context of idolatry, prostitution or violence. The Bible, they argue, says nothing about homosexuality as it is largely understood today as an enduring orientation, or about committed long-term, same-sex relationships.

For some gay evangelicals, their faith in God helped them override the biblical restrictions people preached to them. . . .

Here is the email that I sent Ms. Banerjee, from which she extracted the quotes (I have placed the quotations in boldface):

Dear Neela,

Are there “gay evangelicals”? Yes and no.

YES: Well, there certainly are self-described evangelicals who experience homosexual impulses and, more, affirm these impulses as something good--just as there are evangelicals who both experience various sinful impulses and sometimes even wrongly attempt to justify these impulses from Scripture. For example, there are evangelicals who attempt to justify sexual relations outside the covenant bond of marriage (i.e., evangelicals who are also fornicators). The apostle Paul's “first” letter to the Corinthians rebukes the Corinthian Christians for affirming an incestuous relationship between a member of their community and his stepmother (chap. 5) and later goes on to warn the Corinthian believers not to be adulterers, men who have sex with other males, or men who have sex with prostitutes lest they risk not inheriting the kingdom of God (chap. 6). Such persons who are “one spirit” with Jesus scandalously involve Christ in a sexually immoral “one flesh” union. So the phenomenon of Christians acting in ways that are contrary to the call of the Christian gospel, and even affirming such behavior, is as old as Christianity itself.

NO: But if by “**gay evangelical**” is meant someone who claims *both* to abide by the authority of Scripture *and* to engage in a self-affirming manner in homosexual unions, then the concept “**gay evangelical**” is a **contradiction** in terms--all the more if one understands “gay” to be a self-constructed identity that seeks to justify and gratify preexisting homosexual impulses. It is a contradiction in terms because **Scripture clearly, pervasively, strongly, absolutely, and counterculturally opposes all homosexual practice**. I trust that “**gay evangelicals**” would argue otherwise but **Christian proponents of homosexual practice have not made their case from Scripture** (see my website at www.robagnon.net for this; start with my critique of your colleague Nicholas Kristof at <http://www.robagnon.net/homoAPReporter.htm> and work your way to my critique of a recent book by Myers/Scanzoni at http://www.westernsem.edu/files/westernsem/gagnon_autm05_0.pdf). So to construct a self-identity around behavior that Scripture deems to be an egregious instance of sexual immorality, all the while claiming to be an evangelical Christian who upholds the authority of Scripture, is to engage in a self-contradiction. At best one might speak of “self-deceived gay evangelicals.”

Since Jesus himself would have found any self-affirming, unrepentant homosexual activity to be appalling, putting the perpetrator at risk of not inheriting the very kingdom of God that he proclaimed (see pp. 56-62 in my article cited in the last link above), he would have rejected any attempt to construct an identity around the affirmation of homosexual impulses as

incompatible with the call to Christian discipleship. To be a true disciple (learner) of Jesus one must (according to Jesus himself) take up one's cross, deny oneself, and lose one's life. So the expression "gay Christian"--not just "gay evangelical"--is a contradiction of terms, just as "self-affirming polysexual Christian" or "self-affirming adulterous Christian" is a contradiction of terms.

We all sin and are regularly in need of God's grace and forgiveness. But there is a difference between this and engaging in *serial, unrepentant* sin of a severe sort. Jesus called the adulterous woman *out of sin*, "lest something worse should happen" to her. The church should do the same in love for self-professed "gay evangelicals."

Hope this helps.

Rob

I appreciate that Ms. Banerjee quoted parts of three of my sentences, which is more than most scholars espousing a position against homosexual practice could expect to get in a major newspaper heavily invested in promoting homosexual relationships, like *The New York Times*. Yet there are several corrections and comments worth noting here:

- **Ms. Banerjee misconstrued my remark "Christian proponents of homosexual practice have not made their case from Scripture" to mean that such proponents in my view had not even *tried* to make a case from Scripture. To this Ms. Banerjee responds in the article: "In fact, both sides look to Scripture"—as if I were unaware of this **obvious fact**. She then goes on to explain—again, as if I were unaware—that "those who advocate acceptance of gay people assert that the passages have to do with acts in the context of idolatry, prostitution or violence" and not with acts in the context of "an enduring orientation, or about committed long-term, same-sex relationships."**

Now it should have been obvious to Ms. Banerjee that I knew about the frequent *attempts* on the part of many to neutralize the Bible's clear opposition to homosexual practice. My publications on the subject of the Bible and homosexual practice over the last 6 years have dealt with all of these arguments in detail. Had Ms. Banerjee checked out the links that I provided her, or read any of my print publications on the subject, she would have known this. She would then have realized that **my point was that Christian proponents of homosexual relationships have failed to make a *good and convincing* case from Scripture.** (See the links above and, added to these, my recent extensive critiques of Jack Rogers's recent book on the subject of the Bible and homosexuality, on my website; start [here](#) and then proceed [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) The idea that Scripture says nothing against loving homosexual behavior entered into by homosexually oriented persons is akin to arguing that the

Bible poses no obstacle to committed incestuous unions engaged in by consenting adults or that the New Testament is open to committed polyamorous (multiple-partner) unions entered into by confirmed “polysexuals.”

To her credit, when I pointed out this error, Ms. Banerjee acknowledged in an email that she had misunderstood me and apologized. I appreciate that. I doubt, though, that the *Times* will issue any *public* correction.

- **In answer to Ms. Banerjee’s question about whether the term “gay evangelicals” can be “honestly used,” I said “yes and no” and explained both responses. Ms. Banerjee noted only the “no” part of my answer. My response is considerably more nuanced than the *Times* article would suggest.** Of course, on an empirical level there are people who claim to be both “gay” (involving a self-affirmed identity around the acceptability of homosexual relationships) and “evangelical” (involving a belief in Scripture’s supreme authority for matters of faith and practice). But, since Scripture cannot be made serviceable to the acceptance of homosexual practice, it is a *contradiction in terms* to claim that one is an “evangelical” while affirmingly constructing an identity based on behavior that would have appalled all the authors of Scripture, to say nothing of Jesus.
- **Ms. Banerjee was not quite accurate in characterizing my position as claiming that “gay men and lesbians cannot truly be considered Christian, let alone evangelical.” This way of wording things can convey a meaning different from my stated position to her, namely, that the term “gay Christian” is “a contradiction in terms”—“just as,”** so I noted in my email to her, “‘self-affirming polysexual Christian’ or ‘self-affirming adulterous Christian’ is a contradiction of terms.” First, I made clear in my email that I understood “gay” as a label for someone who not merely experiences homosexual impulses but who, more, “engages in a self-affirming manner in homosexual unions.” Clearly, someone can be a Christian and experience homoerotic desires, just as Christians experience an array of sinful desires on a daily basis that ought not to rule their lives. Second, a person can even be a Christian while engaging in a self-affirming manner in homosexual practice, just as (again noted in my email) Paul dealt with the case of an incestuous Christian in 1 Corinthians 5-6. However, such a person would be a Christian at risk of exclusion from God’s kingdom (1 Cor 6:9-11 and often). So a “gay man” or “lesbian woman” who calls him- or herself a Christian while engaging in serial, unrepentant, and self-affirmed homosexual activity could be “considered” a Christian who is at risk of not inheriting eternal life. There is an elementary distinction here between being and behavior, where a Christian engages in behavior that is not Christian.

- **Ms. Banerjee left out my concluding word on the importance of love and the distinction between succumbing to homosexual temptation out of weakness and actively affirming the homosexual behavior that one engages in.** Such a note might have provided some balance to an article that otherwise appeared to be working hard to paint a sympathetic portrait of self-affirming “gay evangelicals.” It is also puzzling that Ms. Banerjee didn’t solicit any quotes from Christians who “take up their cross and deny themselves” as regards homosexual impulses.

On Ms. Banerjee’s behalf I can say that I’ve seen far worse reporting on this issue. At least Ms. Banerjee solicited my comments, was polite, and actually used most of three of my sentences. Moreover, she ended her article on the helpful note that relatives of one “gay Christian” in a homosexual relationship tell him, “We love you, but we’re concerned.” These features of her article and reporting should be applauded even as we continue to seek improved reporting on the subject of Christianity and homosexuality from the *Times* and other major media publications.

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