

The Plausibility Problem – the church and same-sex attraction,

by Ed Shaw, IVP 2015.

Review by Ian Hore-Lacy

This book answers a question I have been worrying about for several years as evangelical brethren have been grappling intellectually with discourse on gay marriage in relation to the church. They seem not to address the question of what positive things can be said to a strongly same-sex attracted (SSA) Christian beyond “just say ‘no!’”. How should they live as full members of the church?

The answer here is not with increasingly-accepted rationalisation, nor in covenanted relationships, but in full celibacy and warm acceptance. But the author, who is in this position himself and pastor of a congregation in Bristol, puts the heat on the church to make some significant changes so as to enable SSA celibacy rather than hinder it or degrade its proper upbeat character. He expounds nine missteps that the church has made which exacerbate the challenges for SSA evangelicals, and which drive most of them from the church altogether or into ‘affirming’ congregations. The book rings true in most respects to me, in the light of conversations I have had over the last 15 years.

As Vaughan Roberts says in the Foreword: The author’s “sights are not set on the predictable target – compromising liberals – but on those who belong to his own evangelical tribe.” Few will be convinced of the rightness of the orthodox Christian position on homosexuality unless they are persuaded of its plausibility. This is what the book addresses, uncomfortably. Both Vaughan and the author are part of <http://www.livingout.org>

The author suggests that even with some staple biblical teaching, the church is much more shaped by the world and the spirit of the age than by the gospel, and it is this which makes SSA faithfulness (more than anything else) implausible and unreasonable today.

The nine missteps he addresses are matters of church teaching, emphasis and culture, as follows: Where there is undue emphasis on us being sinners rather than saints, depraved and rebellious rather than permanently-adopted children, then how does an SSA person avoid understanding their sexuality as their identity, and being desperate? And how do we understand family? A mum, dad and 2.4 children, or in practice - not just empty rhetoric - the local church? Marriage is temporary, for this age, union with Christ is eternal. And if a person is ‘gay’, surely in this postmodern era it is natural and OK for them to express it sexually? This ignores the fact that we are all born with the innate ability and desire to sin, by nature, and there is no area of sin where we are not all held accountable – SSA folk and the rest of us in ubiquitous solidarity.

And surely God wants us to be happy? What’s the point otherwise? So we respond to the circumstances of life accordingly. “Today’s ruling authority is our short-term happiness – both outside and inside the church.” Shaw says that evangelicals have been more subtle than liberals in reconfiguring God to fit in with this, but real happiness in God’s purposes is through all of us being countercultural in many respects, not just SSA people being the odd ones out.

Arguably his central chapter is on intimacy, with both biblical example and current experience showing this is not merely sexual, even if our culture focuses it there. The church needs to witness to relationships which are so much more than sex, and thus minimise any sense of sexual deprivation by our SSA members. “Intimate relationships ... are often closed off to me by our society and sexualized culture.” “But what’s been hardest is how the church often discourages non-sexual intimacy too,” by unduly glorifying sexual intimacy in marriage. Proper intimacy outside the marital unit will strengthen marriages, and churches must promote it, not simply for SSA celibates.

The complementarity of male and female is basic to God’s creation and sexual difference is designed to help us grasp the passionate love of God for his people. “God has put sex

on this planet to make us want to go to heaven” – sex as heartfelt longing, not just the practice. “Our view on the morality of same-sex unions needs to rest on this sort of solid biblical anthropology.” “But in the evangelical church, godliness is heterosexuality,” which is a very dangerous attitude, and “spiritually life-threatening for people like me.” Churches are hypocritical in seeing homosexual sex as worse than heterosexual adultery, and Shaw rightly says that SSA Christians should not be held to a higher standard than anyone else in the church. But celibacy has an image problem, and nowhere more so than in the church today. Which is plainly irrational, given that both Jesus and Paul were single, as have been some of the most wonderfully influential Christians in recent decades.

Finally, and as a counterpoint to happiness, suffering is to be avoided. “Our Christian lives are more about self-gratification – seemingly denying the existence of Jesus’ words” in Mark 8: 31-34. “Our contemporary Christian lives of comfort are not the Jesus way. He couldn’t make that any clearer in these verses.” So the real suffering of sex-deprived SSA Christians is actually used by God “for my good rather than as a bad thing he has cruelly afflicted me with.”

In conclusion, Shaw says that “we should begin to see both the people who experience [SSA] and the controversy that it brings as a gift to the church. As a divine gift, because it’s just what we needed at this time in our history to help us see the whole series of tragic missteps we have taken to the detriment of us all, as well as to the world we are trying to reach.”

An 18-page Appendix on the plausibility of the traditional interpretation of scripture in understanding creation, rebellion, redemption and perfection in relation to SSA earths the book exegetically, and a 10-page Appendix on the implausibility of the new interpretation of scripture complements it.

This is a book of great pastoral merit and timeliness. He makes a strong case for the church needing to be more biblical and more countercultural in some key respects, with the need to avoid driving out SSA members and those sympathetic to them – arguably a high proportion of those under 30 years old - highlighting the priority of this. Not incidentally, the church will then more readily be blessed by the great gifts of both SSA people and others who choose celibacy to serve it. They are a humbling inspiration, as I said to one in his 30s recently.

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