

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Book Review by Guenther “Gene” Haas, December 2014; “Tragedy, Tradition, and Opportunity in the Homosexuality Debate” by Ronald J. Sider, CT Weekly, November 18, 2014.

Has reviews *Gracious Spaciousness: Responding to Gay Christians in the Church* by Wendy VanderWal-Gritter. She led an Exodus group that Haas supported, but now she supports same-sex relationship (SSR) and he doesn't. His over six pages of hostility, the longest review in this issue of *JETS*, is evidence of the need for her book.

He claims that, “as a book written by a professing evangelical and published by an evangelical publishing company [it's] unique” in affirming “monogamous committed SSR”. But for many decades now, SSR has been affirmed by leading evangelicals – such as an ETS president and four of *Christianity Today's* top-ranked authors of its first 50 years, including its No. 1 author. The president of Covenant Seminary during Haas' student days helped to found EC. And evangelical presses published their books.

VanderWal-Gritter learned from “ex-gay” *tragedies* but Haas didn't. Faulting her for going “contrary to the teaching of the church for two thousand years”, he's at fault for thinking the church *addressed*, much less ever *understood*, same-sex attraction (SSA) or SSR. Until recent times, conservative churches opposed mixed-race marriage, mixed-race congregations and racial integration in general. And earlier, they supported slavery. All of it was backed with Bible verses no longer used for those purposes.

Haas tries and fails to refute her borrowing from Hebrew scholarship on “one flesh” as “kinship bond”, instead of *gender* “complementarity”. He fails to see *gender* as vital in SSA. But it's vital in all sexual attraction *per se*. He misreads her as thinking “sexual relations has nothing to do with our physiology”, but if that were her view, she'd not have written her book. Everyone's sexual attraction is of *la difference!*

Sadly, he objects to her focus on *love*; accusing her of ignoring “truth”. But Truth Himself summed up the Bible's truth in *love*? He told legalists of his day to look *deeper* into God's truth: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” – *love, not liturgies and legalisms*.

Jesus said *false* teaching is seen in *rotten* fruit. Paul said the fruit of the Spirit of Truth is *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faith* – the very fruit VanderWal-Gritter finds in Christians who, in their growing in grace and love, affirm SSA and embrace SSR.

Haas gripes of “tremendous cultural pressure to accept SSR”, but he doesn't mention *evangelicalism's* tremendous cultural and financial pressures to *reject* SSR. He labels an SSA Christian's unmet psychosexual need as a “cross to bear” but he doesn't twist that term against single *heterosexuals*. For them, he keeps the door to intimacy open.

He denies that SSR can be an example, today, of what Paul saw as a “disputable matter” in his day. And he does so as dogmatically as those old legalists rejected Paul's fresh discernment. Yet, while they had clear texts for long-held traditions of *their* elders, Haas has only anachronism, eisegesis and confirmation bias to support his view.

He's right to object to her reading SSA or SSR into friendships of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, et al. Historians see such readings as anachronistic. Yet, Haas contradicts himself by insisting that, “Scripture speaks” of SSA and SSR.

On what he calls, “the most serious problem with this book”, Haas begs the question, failing to distinguish between what the Bible “says” and what, in *his* cultural setting, he thinks the Bible *should* say. That's *his* most serious problem! In citing the Protestant Principle, that the “Spirit will always lead the church to teach and disciple believers in accordance with Scripture and never

contrary to Scripture's teachings”, he restricts this to *his interpretation* of Scripture. But all the atrocities perpetrated on the basis of what our ecclesiastical forebears claimed “the Bible says” raise red flags for today's debate.

Haas says the author “undermines biblical authority by arguing that traditional exegesis is wrong.” But is biblical authority and traditional exegesis the same thing? From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King – and long before them – our forerunners in faith were told they were undermining biblical authority when they were but going deeper into biblical truth. Haas presumably subscribes to: “Reformed and always being reformed”. That divine passive form reminds us that God's Spirit “moves in mysterious ways” that, nearly always at first, we find unsettling. Only later, do we learn they're so truly liberating.

Sider, an evangelical and activist, has long taught theology at a Baptist seminary and worships with Mennonites. Except for abortion and gay issues, he trends to the Left.

He notes it's a “tragedy that evangelical Christians who long to be biblical are widely perceived as hostile to gays”, and, he admits, “it is largely our own fault.” Yet, with but a more polite approach, he pursues the same inhospitable routine.

Rehashing misuse of the creation story and celebrating “biblical” (arranged?) marriage, Sider alleges that, “wherever the Bible refers to homosexual practice, it condemns it.” But, *whatever* the Bible references in these instances *cannot be today's same-sex relationships between peers*. The text was written *by* and to people who had no concept of same-sex *orientation* or *gay marriage*. He admits that same-sex acts in ancient days exploited slaves and other inferiors, as in pederasty, but he's mistaken that, in that male dominant culture, *marriage* between two *men* of equal status was ever an option.

He reverences “the historic Christian teaching on same-sex intercourse” – however ill-conceived – while he rejects e.g., the *historic* Christian teaching on slavery, racial segregation, mixed-race marriage and the basic inferiority of women. He sees the social progress that he *favors* as a spiritual “trajectory” that he won't extend to gay folks. And he gets himself waylaid over an activist's silly straw man *apologia* for homosexuality as a “unifying center of consciousness”. Yet, having celebrated their 50th anniversary, the Siders surely appreciate heterosexuality as at least *one* very significant component of consciousness, even while, as he affirms, commitment to Christ is the *most* important.

He says: “We need to find ways to love and listen to gay people”. Well, let's be “*quick to listen and slow to lecture*” and not merely mutter a, “ ‘Go in peace, keep warm’, while doing nothing for physical needs. What good is that?” (James 1:19; 2:16) One needs a mate (Gen 2:18) to keep warm (Eccl 4:11). Now, of course, violating a weak conscience is wrong, but so is a careless stigmatizing of the liberty of Christian maturity. Sider ends in a vision that mimics Graham Greene's dumb leper who's lost his bell and wanders the world *meaning* no harm: “Imagine the impact if evangelical churches were widely known to be the best place in the world to find love, support, and full affirmation of gifts if one is an openly, unabashedly gay, celibate [?] Christian.” Yeah, just imagine.

