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## Loving Women, Loving Men

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## Loving Women,

## Loving Men

by Reta Finger

Several months ago my friend Sylvia received a very loving letter from one of her female colleagues at work who appears to be lesbian. How should she take it? Since this was not her first amorous note from a woman, she asked me in obvious discomfort, "Why do lesbians seem attracted to me?"

Elena, another friend (not a Christian and quite heterosexually promiscuous) and I were on a two-day trip together. We spent the night with a family I knew, who had only a double bed to give us. Elena expressed anxiety about us sleeping together, saying this had happened once before with another friend. On that occasion she had lain awake most of the night for fear of rolling over and touching the other woman and thus be suspected of lesbian attractions. Amused by Elena's bewildering sexual standards, I assured her I would imagine no

such thing that night!

Now what if we are Christians and have been taught that homosexuality is sinful? Our fear and/or revulsion may go much deeper than Elena's or Sylvia's. Some of us may have unconsciously absorbed the standard that sexual sin is the worst of all, and homosexuality is the worst sexual sin. In just the last few years we have been asked by some gay Christians and their supporters to do an aboutface and completely accept homosexual expression as a natural alternative for a minority of people. In the face of significant evidence, and stories such as Charlene McLauchlan's (elsewhere in this issue), some of us have been able to do so. Others are more wary. Likely some of us have not yet been able to deal with the issue. Secretly, we wish the problem would go away.

I must confess I don't want to get into this topic either. I'm somewhat embarrassed because I have never been able to hold one detailed, comprehensive position on homosexuality. I know generally what side of the fence I'm on, but then I read something on the other side and start wavering. I agonize so much because I want to be true to the biblical message of human sexuality. At the same time, I want to understand how it fits with stories of earnest Christians whose sexual orientation differs in some ways from the norm. The Gospel tells us we are accepted as we are, but it also calls us to repent and change. How does it all come together?

On a more immediate and practical level, I want to avoid this topic because of its divisiveness among Christian feminists. I don't want lesbianism to be the main issue. We biblical feminists have a real message for the church that will not be heard otherwise. I don't want us to be dismissed out of hand by people who first need to find out what the Gospel says about women as a whole. An overwhelming majority of biblical feminists are heterosexual.

On the other hand, the Christian feminist

movement attracts women who in many ways do not fit the traditional feminine stereotype. That no doubt includes lesbians too. There must be a place for them to find acceptance and to continue to work on wholeness.

So far I may have implied that there are two kinds of people, straight and gay. The popular notion about homosexuality seems to imply this, too. And those who believe in complete acceptance of homosexual behavior, no questions asked, are the loudest in maintaining that such persons cannot change their sexual orientation.

It is at this point that doubts creep into my mind. My own experience tends to belie it. My sexuality has been at times so confused, so fluid and so passionate in an unconventional way that I don't see this problem in an either/or light. I wonder if the experience of some others would confirm this.

I have been asked to share my own story for what it is worth in the ongoing dialogue concerning Christian lesbianism. Since I am not lesbian, this request has cost me hours of sleep wondering if I am qualified. Mounds of crumpled paper lie waiting for Chicago's landfill projects. Yet I think it's worth a try.

Growing up in a sheltered community with traditional, quite rigid sex roles, I never fit the mold to start with. As a child I wanted to do things boys usually did, like climb trees and play baseball. I had no interest in housework, little in playing with dolls or babies. At the same time I related well to girls and women, minimally to most men, and had outright contempt for the boys in my class at school, most of whom seemed ill-behaved and not nearly as smart as the girls.

That's not unusual for grade school kids, I guess. But in high school, when hormones are supposed to draw girls and boys together, mine weren't working that way. I became even more loyal to my girlfriends, especially one, for whom I felt a great deal

of love and wanted to be with constantly. I drew much closer emotionally to several female teachers than the male teachers I had.

Life seemed too joyous and exciting just as it was—why clutter it up with boys and romance? The thought of spending an evening alone with such an alien male creature was enough to fill me with horror. (Well, maybe that's a little exaggerated, but you get the point.) Most of the time I could not imagine marrying one of them.

College was not much different. I formed new and deep attachments to some of my female peers, as well as to a couple of older women who played the role of mentors. I still felt uncomfortable around single men and made little attempt to date. Down deep, I hoped someday some man would have the courage and understanding to break through some of these walls I had erected through the years. But I could never admit these needs to anyone else.

I did fall in and out of love with men several times through the years, but I tended to put men off by acting as if I did not emotionally need them. Instead, I would turn to my women friends for support. I did eventually marry at the ripe old age of twenty-eight, however. I finally found a man of many similar interests and who connected amazingly well with the reflective, intuitive side of my nature. We did not live happily ever after in never-never land, of course. Some of the transfer of strong feelings from women friends to my husband did not come easily.

Looking back over the years, I can understand much of my past feelings and behavior in psychological terms. As a sensitive, somewhat mystically inclined youngster, I looked for those qualities in other people. In a culture where most boys couldn't have cared less about a poem and had their heads full of cars, farming or sports, I simply could not be bothered. Girls and women seemed much more deep and mature. As a teenager, I had had a mystical experience

with Jesus and from then on, he seemed to fulfill many of my needs for a male lover. Besides strength and wisdom, Jesus had that quality of understanding tenderness I was always looking for. Only rarely did I see it in a man—and then he was always older and married.

It became a matter of pride to behave like I didn't need the masculine in my life. I repressed that need so deeply that most of the time I did not even feel it. But eventually, after years of stubborn and increasingly subtle resistance to men, my husband and a few other men gradually helped me to face up to my own responsibility. Some of the contempt and avoidance I felt for men, or the masculine, was sin.

I simply did not want to get as emotionally involved in friendships with men as I did with women. I preferred to criticize them for their sexism from a distance and did not care to find out what they were really like. As I realized that God created humankind male and female to mutually complement each other, I saw that I was not wholeheartedly living out that truth.

Admission of sin calls for repentance, and true repentance brings change, in the power of God through Jesus Christ. In coming to terms with my sexual confusion and my feelings about men, and in learning to truly love one man, I feel I have come a long way. I'm not finished yet, and healing in these intimate areas comes slowly. But today I no longer have any lingering doubts about my heterosexual orientation, and still retain many deep, loving and infinitely comfortable relationships with women.

Pondering my own story, a question lurks in my mind. What if a lesbian lifestyle had been suggested to me as a youngster? Would I have turned out differently? In high school I had never heard of it. In college I understood homosexuality as something quite out of the ordinary and which had no relevance to me.

Adolescence is a time of confusion in many areas, including sexual confusion.

Some of us mature much later than others in this area. I suspect that, along with some unhealthy patterns both in myself and in my culture, I was also a late developer. And perhaps I am not alone. If a lesbian alternative is presented to a teenage girl whose sexual orientation may still be somewhat in flux, what happens?

For myself, I'm glad I never had that choice. I think it would have thrown me into far greater tumult. On one hand, I may have emotionally rejected men entirely and began looking for a woman who felt the same way I did. More likely, I would have feared lesbianism, pulled off from my women friends, and thus denied myself of my major source of intimacy. I would have become a miserable, lonely, repressed individual.

Maybe neither would have happened. Hopefully I would have had the strength of character to just be myself. Still, knowing about lesbianism as a viable alternative would have seriously complicated matters.

So it is because of my own story that I feel great empathy for women loving other women—and at the same time believe that at least some of them shouldn't stop there.

As a feminist, I believe Jesus calls us to be inclusive. I want the Church to equally value feminine and masculine qualities. I want men to embrace the Feminine and its embodiment in women, even in the deep spiritual and sexual areas of their own lives. In the same way, I believe God calls women to open up their inmost beings to the Masculine. For me this has not come easily. Yet I welcome the struggle, for I want to grow up into full maturity, into the image of the Creator who formed female and male and called them into relationship with each other.

*In between writing difficult articles and working as editorial coordinator for Daughters of Sarah, Reta Finger takes time for cultivating friendships, participating in a marriage, and helping raise two sons.*