An Open Letter to My Christian Friends

ED MADDEN

An open letter to my Christian friends, and to my Harding University brothers and sisters, after reading many email messages and forwardings about “Ellen”:

I, like many young Christian men and women, grew up in a loving and warm Christian home, attended an active and devoted rural church, went to a spiritually enriching Christian college, and spent a great deal of my life devoted to the work of Christ. As a high school student I won the state Bible bowl competitions several years in a row and played an active leadership role in my church. As a college student I went on mission trips to Europe, and actively pursued study of the Bible. As a graduate student I took time to attend (and graduate from) a Christian seminary, and I worked with the educational programs of my church.

Like many young men and women, though, I also grew up knowing that I was different, realizing later that that difference was and is homosexual orientation. And I spent a great part of my life learning how to lie, how to deceive, and how to hate myself. Sexual issues were rarely discussed in my church and family, except in cases of condemnation, and homosexuality was even more rarely discussed, except as something absolutely abhorrent, unspeakable, and disgusting. When you’re a little kid, and when you are beginning to sense that the difference you feel from your culture is something so hated, you learn your lessons well. Often you spend your time working for God’s favor and praying for change. Sometimes you spend your time cultivating the favor of your parents, knowing that there is something about you that they might (and often do) reject. Sometimes you cultivate asexuality, and avoid love or devotion altogether. Sometimes you date women to keep up appearances. Always you learn to be silent. Always you learn to lie, when necessary. Always you learn how to hate yourself.

After I left Harding University, a good Christian school that was essential to my spiritual development, I decided to be honest, both with myself and others. I have known I was gay at least since I was eight years old, if not before. I spent most of my life learning to hide my feelings, or worse, learning to fake feelings I didn’t have. I tried to become engaged, in an act of desperation. I felt almost suicidal when my girlfriend (wisely) broke up with me—she seemed my last hope, my last bargaining chip with God.

Ed Madden teaches in the English Department at the University of South Carolina. A scholar and poet, he is also a committed Christian. This letter, written in 1997, originally circulated as email; the version reprinted here was forwarded to one of the authors from a friend rather than coming directly from Madden. Readers from the Christian tradition will be well aware of the importance of the epistolary tradition in their faith. Most of the books of the New Testament began as letters written to distant churches or believers, prompted by particular historical events. The event that prompted Madden’s letter was the controversy following Ellen DeGeneres’s coming out on the Ellen show.
I spent a great deal of time in reading and prayer, trying to understand. I do not fit the usual right-wing or pathological explanations of homosexuality. I was never abused as a child. I did not have a smothering mother, nor did I have an especially distant father. Nor did I “choose” to be gay. My orientation is a pre-conscious condition, not a willful choice or a perverse preference. I realized that being gay is not a choice; being honest is. I prayed and prayed for God to change me. He did: he changed my mind.

I left the Church of Christ for the Methodist Church, a church at least willing to discuss the issue and have compassion and understanding for gay and lesbian Christians. I may have been wrong about the Church of Christ, and your particular church may be different, but my only sense of things was that it was a church that refused to deal with the issue, a group that felt a compulsion to silence those who wished to address it, and a community that demonized those who, by no choice of their own, found themselves to be lesbian or gay. You were rejected, that is, unless you were dying of AIDS, and then you were welcomed back into the church as a prodigal son. Dying as a precondition for acceptance.

It was also a church in which homosexuality was treated simply as a behavior, not as a condition, much less an identity. The experience of most gays and lesbians is that being gay is not something we do. It’s who we are, regardless of what we do. The failure of our community to recognize that distinction (it’s not what you do, it’s who you are) only complicates our attempts to deal with the issue as gay or lesbian Christians. Furthermore, homosexuality is more often than not treated as the worst sin, an unforgivable sin, something unspeakable. It is demonized, pathologized, and silenced. And those of us who grow up knowing we are gay or lesbian, but also knowing we are Christian, find ourselves in an impossible situation. We are both part of the community, and we are its object of hatred.

For example, when I once worked with preteen boys on a biblical drama, a “parable project” in which we acted out parables from the gospels, those little boys made it clear to me that early on we learn in Christian families that homosexuals are people to be hated. We were modernizing the parables for them to act out (the kids wrote the scripts, planned the costumes, worked on props, and talked about the important Christian lessons being taught). We were working on the parable of the good Samaritan. My female co-teacher and I talked about the Jewish contempt for the Samaritans, and suggested that they come up with
a modern equivalent. Since the church was a progressive urban church, the boys did not choose the obvious parallels of racism or even religious hatred. Without any prompting, they suggested two groups that people (including their parents, they said) hate or despise: homeless people and gay men. Although they chose to act out the parable using a homeless man as a good Samaritan, which was probably the wisest choice given the context, I learned the lesson that they had also learned all too well: it is okay for Christians to despise and hate homosexuals. Wisdom from the mouths of children.

(Read Bette Greene's adolescent novel _The Drowning of Stephan Jones_, based on a true story, about teenage boys killing a gay man, and justifying that murder with the hatred they learned in their Christian communities.)

When I decided to be honest with my family, I further learned how Christian and family values are acted out when you happen to be gay. What are those family values? That honesty has a cost. That family love is conditional. That brother may reject brother. That the use of scripture is selectively enforced. (Although Jesus has a lot to say about greed, homosexuality is the condition that requires that you reject your own loved ones.) That dishonesty is a virtue. (I was told that I should spend my life lying, that I should "lie to [my] grave.") That homosexual is the worst possible thing one can be. (If only, as one family member said, I could be addicted to drugs or had murdered someone, they could deal with that.)

My students tell me horror stories. One kid's father asked him to leave his house when he found out that his son was gay. While this student was hurriedly packing up some things and preparing to leave, he decided to run to the hallway and grab a family photo. All the photos with him in them were gone, and his father was in the backyard destroying them. The last words he ever heard from his brother, a respected Southern Baptist minister, were: "I hope you get AIDS and die like all the other faggots." Another kid I know had his father write to him: "Tell me if you're ever coming home, so that I can leave town." Another man I know opened his mail in January to find that his father had returned to him all the Christmas gifts he had sent to him, all of them unopened.

The ultimate value most gay kids learn in the church is dishonesty. We learn that being dishonest, lying, is a good Christian practice. How many closeted gay men have I known who have stayed in the church, only on the condition of their own dishonesty? If they are honest, they will be rejected, stigmatized,
effectively driven away. If they remain closeted, they can stay in the church. They may secretly "fall" with a frequency that would appall most of their companions, they may indulge in bad sexual behavior. Or they may remain celibate and silent and perpetuate the stigma and the lie that we are not part of the Christian community. Or they may even marry to keep up appearances. They are good citizens of the church, good brethren, and good liars. Those of us who try to live with honesty and integrity, who wish to be honest about who we are, are often rejected by our families, despised and rejected by our communities, and sometimes silenced by our churches.

I realize some gay men and lesbians may try to change, or deny and repress the deep fact of their orientation. I respect them for their decisions. But what if they were allowed to be honest?

It is no wonder that 1/3 of teenage suicides can be tied to issues of sexual identity. Many of us know we are gay, and we imagine ourselves therefore fully deserving of hatred and rejection, even though we may have never had sex or fallen in love. We hear of the "lifestyle" we lead that deserves condemnation, even though we may never wear leather, dress in drag, or pursue anonymous or promiscuous sex. And, as the outrage about "Ellen" demonstrates, our friends and companions make it clear that discussion about or even awareness of homosexuality is something to be silenced. It is a chilling monologue, not a conversation that results: "Hate yourself!" "Shut up!" Or, more often than not, "Leave."

Regardless of what you think about homosexuality, please remember that you know homosexuals and lesbians, whether you are aware of them or not. Remember that most of us experience our sexual orientation as an essential part of who we are, an identity, not an isolated act or a behavioral choice. Remember that some of us found ourselves rejected by our families and our churches, and many of us have not experienced compassion or understanding from the Christian communities in which we grew up. Remember that most of us were, in fact, forced to find other communities in order to be honest people.

Remember that there are lots of frightened gay teenagers, who are studiously learning how to hate themselves and how to lie, who have all their self-hatred and fear affirmed every time they hear messages of demonization rather than messages of compassion. Remember that lots of other teenage kids have grown up in a Christian community that taught them that it is perfectly accept-
able to despise and hate gays and lesbians, even if they're in your own family, and it is perfectly within the bounds of Christian love to reject your own brother or sister if they happen to be gay or lesbian.

We are your invisible sons and daughters, your invisible brothers and sisters. Please at least think about that.

In Christian love,

Ed

RESPOND

1. What sort of ethos does Madden establish for himself as author? How does he do so? What do you believe Madden is asking of his audience? In other words, what does he hope the outcome of his letter will be? Why? What is the tone of his letter? Is it effective, given the writer's purpose and argument? Why or why not?

2. In paragraph 7, Madden writes, “We [gay and lesbian Christians] are both part of the community, and we are its object of hatred,” a point to which he returns in the letter’s closing paragraphs. Why does he characterize the situation of lesbian and gay Christians in this way? Can you think of other groups about whom a similar claim could be made?

3. Think of Madden’s letter as an apology, in the original sense of the term—that is, a genre that aims to explain or justify a strongly held idea or position about a matter of importance. Madden’s letter addresses a particular situation about which he feels a need to take a stand and to do so honestly, though he is aware that doing so will likely cost him a great deal. Part of the power of his letter comes from the nature of the situation and how it is viewed by our society at this time. Write a letter in which you explain to someone—a friend, your parents, a teacher, for example—why you have been moved to take a stance on some issue with which they disagree.