

Can You Change?

Born That Way? A True Story of Overcoming Same-Sex Attraction with Insights for Friends, Families, and Leaders. By Erin Eldridge (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1994).

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BORN THAT WAY? ASKS A QUESTION about the origins of homosexuality, readily answers it in the affirmative, then turns to the author's, and the church's, real thesis: You can change your same-sex attraction and "lifestyle," whatever the origin.

The text begins with Ms. Eldridge's personal story, moves to chapters considering the stages of the change process through use of gospel principles and standard psychotherapeutic techniques, then concludes with a chapter addressed to friends, families, and leaders. Appendices of personal stories, books, and organizations focusing on the change process are provided. Although the subtitle implies the book is geared towards friends, families, and leaders, this is considered in only one chapter; the main focus in the book is on people who themselves experience homosexual interest.

Overall, the book written in the standard church book format of thesis-affirming stories with quotes from scriptures and general authori-

ties boldly contrasted with negations of ideas and practices not church approved. Within this scope, the book is well written. The author and her co-writers or co-editors (not specified, but alluded to on p. 128) have written a careful story of a woman who was aware of her attraction to women from an early age, who was sexually abused as a child, who became involved in alcohol and drugs as she battled the split between her "true self" and her "natural self," and who finally chose a years-long process of learning to lean on Christ and follow church commandments culminating in an attraction to the opposite sex and temple marriage. For those Mormons who wish to embark on a process to change gender orientation, this book provides more techniques and strategies while being less judgmental than many others on the same topic.

Some of the ideas in the book exhibit a compassionate step forward in the Mormon perspective on the complex issues surrounding homosexuality. Same-sex attraction may easily be caused by biological factors, abuse, early learning, or a combination of factors. Indeed, "it is no longer believed that families *cause* same-sex attraction. The cause is most likely a complicated combination of factors that are still only partially understood" (141). Any change is a long, arduous process that is often accompanied by depression, behavioral setbacks, suicidal feelings and attempts.

Fear of judgment from other church members as well as abuse or insensitive treatment at the hands of church leaders occur at times. Friends, families, and leaders are encouraged to be compassionate and non-judgmental, and the crushing pain of the spouse of a gay person is acknowledged. Additionally, this book has many good suggestions for any number of changes a Mormon might want to make in his or her life. The chapter on repentance is well done, providing a good balance between strict obedience and compassion for self in the forgiveness process.

When the whole issue of homosexuality is broadened, however, Ms. Eldridge's focus is too narrow. Indeed, the author states, "This book cannot change minds and does not attempt to. This book is for those who believe, somewhere deep within, that homosexual behavior is sin and should be overcome" (back cover). How then should this book be viewed if other factors are considered? What if one is happy with his or her gender orientation? What if one experiences a continuity of the Spirit despite ongoing, persistent same-sex feelings and actions? What if a person has persistently made whole-hearted efforts to change, even for decades, and has not succeeded? Maybe this book is just not for them, and should be disregarded.

It should not be ignored, however, for at least two sets of people—those who either are or know of someone who is Mormon and homosexual, and those who are interested in the whole area of Mormonism and sexuality. Because the church has its unofficial imprimatur on this book, having been published and heavily advertised by Deseret Book, the con-

tents can easily be read not only as the church's current statement on homosexuality, but also as the church hierarchy's current attitudes about sexuality in general.

Given these broader concerns, there are some important limitations to this book. First, the author adopts a number of sealed premises—premises which are completely true regardless of any other evidence—thereby disqualifying the reader from dissent. A sample: The "natural self" is inclined to sin, and only repentance and living the commandments develop the "true self." No matter what etiological evidence emerges, homosexuality is wrong because God has revealed it. Any continuing forbidden sexual thoughts or platonic relationships with others sympathetic to homosexuality (defined as emotional dependency, pp. 98-99) are sinful and idolatrous. It is impossible to have homosexual thoughts, feelings, or actions and have a relationship with Christ. All scriptural interpretations that do not condemn homosexuality are wrong, i.e., "People can present convincing arguments contrary to mine, but they are cleverly mixing philosophy and scripture. But it comes down to eternal truths" (51).

Second, Ms. Eldridge's long battle with abuse recovery, drugs, alcohol, and depression are integrated into her change from same-sex attraction. In her view homosexuality is clearly classified as an addiction. An author who focused only on the same-sex issue would have been better able to accomplish the church's mission in publishing a book designed to denounce homosexuality and encourage church members to change.

Third, the author uses the words "gay" and "gay lifestyle" in ways

which promote stereotyping, not understanding. For example, she maintains that people have homosexual urges or actions, but no one can have the identity of being "gay" or "homosexual." Also, she frequently alludes to the homosexual "lifestyle," by implication unidimensional and sexually promiscuous, ignoring the broader truth that homosexuals have as varied lives and sexual patterns as heterosexual people.

Fourth, although she states that the book is only for people who want to change, Ms. Eldridge clearly asserts that homosexuality or any attendant behavior is sin and that change is always possible. Therefore, one could not read this book and come away feeling that a choice to remain homosexual is a legitimate option. Indeed, there are numerous people who have also made years-, even decades-, long whole-hearted efforts to change their gender orientation without ever encountering substantial change. I am assuming that they are as honest as the author of this book. So if change does not occur, what then? The failure seems to rest on the person's shoulders with no other recourse offered, and with implied blame for not seeking Christ and the commandments first, even if a person has and does.

Heterosexuality and homosexuality are not either/or phenomena, but rather form a continuum. This is illustrated by the Kinsey scale, which ranges from 0 (totally heterosexual thoughts, feelings, behavior) to 6 (totally homosexual thoughts, feelings, behavior). Research since the 1970s documents that those who are most likely to change are those who have preferences for both genders, therefore appearing in the middle of the continuum (3 or 4). A closer look at

what factors are in favor of change and if those changes are durable over time is crucial, but a good analysis is too lengthy for this review. Briefly, there is consistently a minority of people who are a 6 on the Kinsey scale and who report a change of gender orientation at the end of a structured, long-term therapy program. These range from a little less than 50 percent downward. However, these figures deteriorate markedly over time. In five-year follow-up studies only 12 percent report durable change, and the numbers continue to decline to around 5 percent for longer than five years. The church has had a program to help people re-orient for several years; unfortunately they have never released outcome statistics. In light of the statistics available, Ms. Eldridge is to be believed in her personal account. But there is an enormous difference between a 5-12 percent likelihood of success and the almost 100 percent chance of success that she promises. Although the author quotes biological and social science research about causation of homosexuality, nowhere does she quote any research outcomes about change of orientation.

This leaves a certain percentage of active, believing people within the church in their isolated, painful, frustrating position. Bishops as well as lay readers will, from this book and other materials from the church such as a pamphlet titled *Counseling Persons with Homosexual Problems*, released to church authorities in 1992, believe that change is always possible. Therefore, all responsibility for lack of change rests on the unfaithfulness of the person with the same-sex attraction.

For those 88-95 percent of exclusively homosexual Mormons who probably will not change gender ori-