



ARTICLES OF FAITH BY REV. STEVEN BAINES

# Moral Failures of Repressive Religion

AS SOMEONE WHO WAS RAISED AND ordained as a Southern Baptist I was saddened, but not shocked, at news of the recent arrest of Rev. Lonnie Latham, a minister from Tulsa, Okla., and an executive committee member of the virulently anti-gay Southern Baptist Convention. Rev. Latham was reportedly arrested for propositioning a male undercover police officer in front of a motel known as a high-traffic area for gay hustlers. Unfortunately, Rev. Latham's story is one repeated by those in the darkest corners of the closet who are trapped by the damaging teachings of misguided religious leaders.



The fall of this religious-right figure is part of an inevitable cycle of scandal, as the self-appointed guardians of "traditional values," their moral ships sinking under them, find themselves in the lifeboat with the rest of us sinners. The moral hypocrisy of many right-wing religious leaders comes from their fundamental misunderstanding of religion as the practice of a complicated and esoteric set of rules designed to restrict human freedom, rather than a way of living which frees individuals to lives of greater compassion and personal growth.

The incidences of national conservative religious leaders caught in scandal are many, and run the gamut from the tragic hypocrisy of the closet to personal ethical lapses to outright crimes. Here are a few recent high-profile examples:

**Ralph Reed**, the former executive director of the Christian Coalition, is embroiled in the Jack Abramoff lobbying scandal and stands accused of using funds Christians had donated to fight the spread of gambling, to actually promote gambling on Native-American reservations.

**Monsignor Eugene Clark** used his pulpit at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and his program on the Eternal Word Television Network to blame gay priests for the Catholic child sex abuse scandal and once denounced the United States as "the most immoral country in the Western Hemisphere." He resigned in August 2005 after an affair with his married secretary was exposed.

**William Bennett** is the standard-bearer of the right-wing "traditional values" crusade and chief propagator of one of the most damaging lies being spread about the gay community: the "statistic" invented by a discredited psychologist that the average age of death of gay men is 43. In 2003, it was revealed that Bennett had a gambling addiction he kept hidden from his family, despite losing a reported \$8 million.

**John Paulk** is the former chair of Exodus International who appeared on the cover of Newsweek in 1998 as an "ex-gay"

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and founder of Focus on the Family's ex-gay program Love Won Out. He was discovered and photographed in September 2000 buying drinks for patrons in a gay bar in Washington, D.C. Although Paulk left Focus on the Family in 2003 to pursue "other ministry opportunities," Love Won Out continues to hold events across the country.

It is not my intention to cast stones of condemnation at these individuals. We all have times when we need grace and forgiveness for our ethical failings or inconsistencies, whether from religious communities or from the community at large. There is, however, a profound need to understand that, when religion is used to bring repression and darkness rather than liberation and light, it is toxic to both leaders and followers. It is inevitable that those who pile so much guilt on the rest of the world will sooner or later be crushed by it themselves.

It is self-loathing that drives some public figures with careers espousing "moral values" into lives of deception as they sneak into dive bars, cheap motels or gambling casinos for a night's escape from a life of repression. It is the same fear and shame that causes them to lash out at lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. The life-altering message that I and so many other LGBT people of faith have found is that freedom comes not from lies and denial, but by recognizing our mutual connection to all our neighbors with honesty and humility in the face of the Creator. ▼

Based in Washington, D.C., Rev. Steven Baines is an elder in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and a member of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force National Religious Leadership Roundtable. He serves as chaplain of Gay, Lesbian and Affirming Disciples.

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