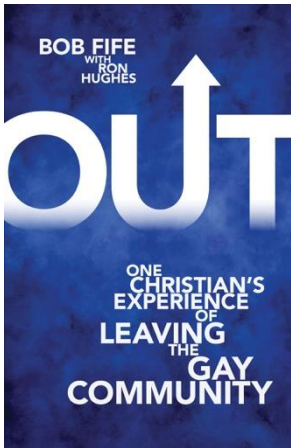


An interview with Bob Fife, Author of *Out: One Christian's Experience of Leaving the Gay Community*



When molested as a child by an older boy he trusted, Bob Fife had no idea how his life trajectory would be altered drastically by the event. Something happened in his heart that night, launching Fife on a quest for acceptance, security and masculinity. *Out: One Christian's Experience of Leaving the Gay Community* (Kregel Publications) is the vivid story of Fife's descent into homosexual practices — and his courageous fight to climb out again.

Q: You share some very personal and difficult details about your life in *Out*. What moved you to write this book?

Many times when I shared my testimony, friends and fellow believers would say, "You should write a book." I prayed about it a lot and felt this was what the Lord wanted of me. However, I also knew I was not a writer. When I invited Ron Hughes to help me with the writing process, he agreed, and the book became a possibility. As we worked together, I discovered I had three goals. I want the book to offer hope to those who are reluctantly same-sex attracted. I want it to give an example of how a church might provide support to them. I hope it will help begin a calm loving conversation the church needs to have about ministering to same-sex attracted individuals.

Q: Can you share about your family situation growing up? What was your relationship like with your father?

I was the youngest of six children. My father was very abusive to my mother, my siblings and me. I felt he particularly targeted me, and I had no meaningful relationship with him in my formative years. My oldest brother, who had joined the military, dominated me. My other brother was mentally challenged, and I couldn't relate to him as a peer. I never had a healthy male role model and didn't want to be like any of the males in my family. I didn't respect them for a variety of reasons.

Much is sometimes made of the relationship between same-sex attracted boys and their mothers. I can't say I identified with my mom, though she often defended me against my father. I sought the friendship of my sisters, but when I was young they formed a block and kept me at a distance, though individually I did have something of a relationship with each of them.

My family, during my childhood, could only be described as dysfunctional, with the ruling emotions being anger and fear. I understood affection as expressed in the care of my mother, but because she worked when I was little, I didn't have much time with her to experience the nurturing and cherishing I later learned is typical of maternal love.

Q: Though you didn't recognize it as such at the time, you were molested by your sister's boyfriend when you were a child. What role did that experience play in you later identifying as gay?

That loss of innocence had a profound effect on me. While I had no real idea of what was happening to me, it came to represent masculine acceptance. Because of the unfamiliar and powerful sexual urges of adolescent males, I bonded strongly to Roger. Since I had had no sex education at home, school or church, I assumed our relationship was typical of all male friendships. At this time in my life, I was forming my identity, values and worldview. Subconsciously I concluded sex was the way men expressed regard for each other. Perhaps, because I had never sensed healthy love and respect from my father and brothers, I perceived Roger's attentions as love. In that highly moldable period of my life, I decided love means sex, and sex means love.

Q: Did your experience growing up in church have any effect on your choices to enter — and eventually leave — the homosexual lifestyle?

Typical of the time, sex was a taboo subject in the church. When it was referred to at all, it was done using scriptural language of the 1600s, which meant nothing to me. No one was explaining words such as "fornication" and expressions such as "burning with lust." When I was an adolescent, even popular terminology such as "petting" and "necking" were vaguely understood to be bad things that older teenagers did (though I wasn't sure exactly what). While heterosexual behavior was referred to in incomprehensible jargon, homosexual activity was not even obliquely referred to. We young people were on our own to figure out what

sex was all about. So in the absence of any meaningful guidance, I can't say the church had any effect at all on my choice to begin engaging in homosexual activities when I was an adolescent, other than leaving a vacuum.

Later, after my encounter with Lance and my introduction to the gay scene in downtown Toronto, I had a clearer sense of the traditional sexual morality espoused by the church, but by then my earlier experiences had shaped my attitudes at such a deep level that my faith, such as it was, did not act as a deterrent.

My decision to leave the gay community was not really affected by the church, since I hadn't been in one for years. However, once that decision was made, the church where I sought to rebuild my relationship with the Lord played a huge role in my following through on that decision. The believers in that fellowship gave me the spiritual support I needed as I learned how to develop and maintain non-sexual relationships with men and to relate in a meaningful way to women. I know God provided these people in my life because I sincerely doubt I could have moved out of the gay community without a welcoming church family to hold me in its embrace. Actually, I learned early on that the depth of relationship I could attain with individuals in the church was greater than anything I had known in my gay relationships, even the longer-term ones. They all seemed to come with an implied expiration date. On the other hand, some of the first Christians who befriended me are still my best friends after 25 years.

Q: You met your wife, Audrey, in a Bible study group. What attracted you to her and what changed your relationship after you got married?

In my late teens, I was looking for acceptance and relationships. I had not been successful in developing lasting homosexual connections, so I was looking anywhere to get my emotional needs met. When the opportunity to join this home Bible study group came along, I took advantage of it. It offered much of what I was looking for. I saw Audrey as a beautiful person, both physically and spiritually. She was a young woman with real depth of personality and strength of character. I soon came to admire and respect her. Before very long, I came to love her intensely. As a godly Christian woman, she was not looking for a sexual aspect of our relationship to develop. I was insecure when even contemplating the idea of sex with a woman. Consequently, we suited each other very well.

I believe two main factors had a negative impact on our relationship. Firstly, my career became my number-one priority. I neglected my relationship with God and soon thereafter my relationship with Audrey. The less time I spent with Audrey, the less appealing she seemed. We were also young parents at the time, and while I loved little Sean, I preferred to avoid the aspects of his care that required constant devoted attention. Secondly, I had never faced and dealt properly with my childhood experiences and attractions. They were a secret part of me, and secrets have a way of festering in the dark, neglected parts of our minds. My memories turned into imaginings, and my imaginings became fantasies. When I was introduced to Toronto's gay scene, all of these were unleashed in a torrent of experimentation and experience. Dear Audrey didn't stand a chance!

Q: What was the catalyst for you leaving the gay community?

The catalyst was two-fold. For starters, my son challenged me and told me it was possible in God to be free. I hadn't thought seriously about God and the life I had left behind for years. Seeing Sean again awoke a longing in me for things I used to think I didn't want. But more than that, I wasn't being fulfilled. I was always seeking more. By that point in my life, I can honestly say there was no sexual experience I desired that I hadn't had. I couldn't imagine ever being satisfied by either an endless round of partners or the confines of some gay version of domestic life. What I didn't realize was the longing I had was more spiritual than either social or sexual. I'd tried the latter two without restraint but ignored any kind of connection with God. So when Sean brought God back into the picture, suddenly I began looking for all the things I needed in the right direction.

Q: How was your "exit" after your son's visit to Toronto different than your attempts to do so previously?

I had not seriously attempted to leave previously. When I first confessed my same-sex attraction to Audrey, I rode an emotional high that gave me the strength to be faithful to her for a few weeks, but my drive to be with men did not lessen. I soon concluded what she hoped for me was not possible. I couldn't leave my homosexuality behind, and I had no particular motivation to do so.

My son's visit gave me both motivation and hope. Riding our bicycles past that church I had visited years earlier gave me a point of contact, and after Sean left I went back there and established contact. Somehow being in that old, familiar place triggered spiritual desires I had long ignored. I was upfront about my life choices and goals with the leadership, and they received me warmly. Within a short time, I knew this was where God would do His work in me.

Q: How did your relationship with God enable you to make such a drastic change?

After I shared my story with the elders at my church, I was amazed by their acceptance and willingness to support me. It was more than I had dreamed could be possible. Church became a spiritual hospital for me. I began to appreciate God's love for me in a new way, and I fell in love with my Savior anew. The spiritual intimacy I developed with the Lord and His people filled up the emotional spaces in me that I had tried to fill with sex-based relationships.

Q: What was the difference between making lifestyle changes under your own power versus through the power of the Holy Spirit?

I have quite a bit of will power. I could set goals and reach them, yet when it came to my same-sex attraction I knew I could do nothing on my own. As long as I had no inclination to leave the gay community, I had no problem. Once the desire to change had been born in me, the struggle began. Like Paul in Romans 7, I was wretched, and only Christ could give me the victory. I had to learn "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." While there certainly was a "miraculous" aspect to the realignment of my life, God also used Scripture reading, prayer with others and by myself and healthy, non-sexualized friendships with both men and women to fill my life with everything I had been craving all along.

Q: Other than the Lord, what was the biggest factor in your successful life change?

One of the reasons I failed in marriage was I had never acknowledged and dealt with the violence of my childhood and that first sexual relationship with an older boy. I went to a support ministry called New Direction that helped me identify things in my early life that contributed to my same-sex attraction. Throughout the months I was in the program (and then later as I led a group for them), I had time to process things, both one-on-one with a counselor and in group sessions. I began to understand things I didn't even want to know earlier. Processing the past was a big factor.

However, I'm not sure that alone would have been enough. You can't just empty yourself. You need to be emotionally fulfilled in the present. That's where new friendships rose to prominence in my life. I had people I could spend time with, talk to, pray with or spend a day at the beach with. So much of my previous life had always been driven by the expectation of a sexual encounter that I had to shift my focus and learn to enjoy other people for other than the realization of those sexual expectations. I learned to have fun with people and appreciate them for their personal and spiritual qualities. That said, I doubt having new friendships without processing my early life would have been enough either. It certainly wasn't when I attempted marriage.

If you can somehow roll those two factors into one, you have my answer to your question.

Q: According to your accounts, much of the homosexual mindset is wrapped around the idea of identity. How has your concept or definition of "identity" changed through this process?

Everyone needs identity. In fact, we all have one whether we're consciously aware of it or not. Where you get it often depends on environment. I did not have "healthy masculine identity" as a child. I didn't like or respect the men in my childhood. Many of them were violent and for one reason or another directed that violence at me. The experience with my sister's boyfriend was what I saw as the first positive experience with another male. It was socially intimate. It was physically pleasant. It was psychologically fulfilling. It shaped how I wanted to see myself — who I wanted to be.

This all happened when I was an adolescent. I had no idea what was happening. My identity was being shaped in a values vacuum when it came to sexuality. No one was talking about it at home, school or church. I think many of us in that generation had the same experience whether we identified as hetero- or homosexual. I knew girls everyone thought were "good girls" who became pregnant at least in part because no one had explained the practical aspects of sexuality. I can't believe that didn't shape their identity.

I think it is possible for healthy families and churches to have a very positive role in shaping young identities. Someone needs to be conscious as this is happening, and it isn't likely to be the hormone-driven adolescent!

Q: What advice would you give to someone struggling with homosexual temptations?

First of all, "the struggling" thing is really important. Lots of LGBTQ people are perfectly happy where they are and defend their lifestyle choices loudly and proudly. There's no struggle for them. I know about this, as do other people I mentioned in the book. I felt this way myself for years.

However, eventually for some of us a struggle begins. It may be self-driven, perhaps a longing for an earlier identity we have abandoned. It may be socially driven, perhaps a desire to fit into a different group where social needs are met without sexual expectations. It may be Spirit-driven; perhaps God is behind the struggle. It may be any combination of these factors. The point of all this is that at some point a real struggle begins.

If you are struggling with temptations regarding homosexuality and you want out, I'm here to tell you there is HOPE. You'll hear a lot of voices these days tell you sexuality is fluid and can be changed. Other voices tell you sexuality is fixed and cannot be changed. Still other voices will say you can only change in one direction but not the other. It certainly is confusing. My experience is that meaningful change can be experienced, so don't give up!

Add to the issue of orientation the idea of sexual addiction (which can crop up in anyone), and things get even more complicated. Sexual addiction is the strongest of all addictions, and it seems impossible. Often people make attempts to change on their own and are met with defeat. My advice, to begin, is to cry out to God, the giver of life. However, as in my case, you'll probably discover God uses people to help you. Counselors, pastors, friends and family are all resources God uses in our lives. Sometimes God does truly miraculous things, but that doesn't mean we can just pray something like, "God, deliver me!" and then carry on until a thunderbolt strikes from the blue. Take positive steps of your own as well. The book tells about the things I did that helped me, things such as getting into a program, purging physical triggers from my home and establishing non-sexualized relationships.

Q: What would you say to the individual who is as immersed in the gay culture and lifestyle as you were and who wants to get out? What resources are available to him or her?

I would say a few things.

1. Cry out to God and ask for forgiveness and deliverance.
2. Seek out a few Christians who will support you (ideally an understanding church).
3. Seek a ministry that can help you develop the identity you long for and deal with the issues, whether issues of the past (such as childhood molestation) or of the present (sexual addiction and so on).
4. Take time to grow in your relationship with Jesus Christ. This is most important!
5. Share your story only with a few you can trust, until you are strong enough to come out to the world.

Q: How can the church reach out to those in the homosexual community?

As I suggested earlier, we should learn to see the local church as a hospital, not as a hotel. Whether or not you are in a position of leadership, you can demonstrate the love of Christ to everyone around you. Some won't need your help because they don't want it and resent you for suggesting they need it. Some won't need your help because, well, they may be spiritually more advanced than you are. But some WILL need your help. These are the ones who are struggling. Take them under your wing. Walk alongside them. Understand they will probably fall. Don't write them off when this happens. Pick them up, dust them off and help them get going again. Don't demand that people achieve perfection before they are acceptable to you. Love them with the love of Jesus. He loved His own even when they denied and abandoned Him. Don't give up.

Learn more about Out and Bob Fife at www.BobsExperience.com or www.kregel.com.