

Perfect Fear Casts Out Love

by Peter Walker

There's a lot of fear in me. The problem is, much of it I'm not even aware of. I find it scary that God promises to complete the work He started in us (Philippians 1:6) because it means we don't get to hide from the dark places in us.

Once several years ago, a pastor took me out for dinner to ask, "Peter, I'm not really sure how to say this but ... do you struggle with homosexuality?"

"Excuse me?" I was so taken off guard that I didn't believe he'd actually posed the question.

He apologetically stumbled to explain, "I just ... I hear you make a lot of jokes. And you're a pretty open, affectionate guy. I wouldn't have assumed anything, but some of the other pastors were talking. You know, the last young man at our church to be so involved with music and drama ended up ..." He trailed off awkwardly, but I already knew about *the artsy one who got away*: a gay man who left our church after confessing his homosexuality.

"No," I answered. "I'm not gay. I know I'm not a typically *macho* guy. I don't play sports – and yeah, I joke with my friends, but ..." I raced for a convincing answer. What if he didn't believe me? He wasn't acting suspicious, but my words felt hollow. Why was I so bent on defending myself?

At that moment there seemed nothing worse than the thought of someone thinking I was gay.

I had lunch with my friend Duan several days later. Over Chinese Special #5 I angrily recounted the "inquisition" I had endured. "How am I supposed to be involved in ministry when they're questioning my ethics? My sexual health?"

Duan's response was pointed, "How is it any different than any other kind of sin? Are you innocent of lust?"

I defended, "But this is different. It goes to the core of my identity ..."

"Your identity is a sinner, saved by grace, isn't it? You don't think the church understands that?" he probed.

I suddenly felt very sheepish, confronted with the inconsistencies in my personal moral code. I'd complicated my identity with social and cultural baggage, making one sin more dubious than others. Even worse, I was sitting with a friend who *did* struggle with homosexuality. Indirectly, I was treating him like a leper. I knew I had a lot of internal work to do.

Not long after that lunch, I found myself in a Corvallis café reading several books about emerging kinds of Christianity. A man who had been standing in line nearby moved toward me after ordering. "What are you studying?" he asked.

"Christianity and postmodernism," I answered. I offered the book for his appraisal.

"Interesting, I've never heard those two words used together," he said, flipping through the pages and resting his eyes on the back cover. "I'm Scott," he extended his hand and I shook it.

We began talking about religion and politics and exchanged e-mail addresses for further dialogue. A professor at Oregon State University, he was curious about my writing, my beliefs, and so on. I appreciated his Ph.D. and the breadth of knowledge it encompassed, so I met Scott at another coffee shop several weeks later.



The night air was crisp and foggy as I walked from my car to the coffee shop. Opening the front door brought warm, rich gusts of coffee smell out into the cold. Lights were low inside and it took me a moment to locate Scott, already at a table near the back. I waved acknowledgment and went to the front counter to order.

When I arrived at our table, Scott was looking relaxed, legs crossed, sipping herbal tea. He reached out his hand to shake, but this time it was not a firm clasp. It was gentler. Soft. Immediately something in my chest felt heavy and a barely-conscious fear crept into me. I pushed the subtle thought aside and began chatting with Scott. He asked for more details about my beliefs, and I offered examples of things I believed and things in the church I was frustrated by.

He nodded and smiled warmly. And there was that fear again! He was looking right into my eyes. Somehow it didn't feel like interest in what I was saying ... it felt like interest in ... *oh God! Me!* Did I overlook a glaring trait at the other café, weeks ago? Were there undertones to that conversation I had not picked up on?

"Keep going," he said. Talking about God brought normalcy and grounding back to my thoughts. Maybe I was imagining the rest. Then he leaned in, "What do you think about before you fall asleep?"

And there it was: I had accidentally found myself on a gay date.

Here's the thing: It seems every day I watch Christians, even my close friends, proclaim, "I'm not homophobic; I just disagree with that lifestyle." I get so tired of that excuse. I once met a Christian man who said, "I'm not a racist; I just don't think I could be friends with an Arab." I heard someone else say, "I don't care if people speak Spanish, as long as they don't do it around me!"

Listen, we have to wake up! *He's* an ethno centrist, *she's* a racist, and ... I guess *I'm* a homophobe!

But I'm not proud of it. Neither should any of us be. The Bible says, "Perfect love casts out fear ... he who fears is not made perfect in love" (I John 4:18). But I *am* afraid. I am afraid of guilt by association: someone will see me with a homosexual and think I'm one of them! I'll be pegged a closet-case or repressed or self-deluded – or worse! And I thought I was progressive.

You probably guessed it: I managed to survive that evening of conversation. When the encounter ended, I felt I'd reached a new low in irrelevance. Scott and I shook hands and I promised we'd get together again. We never did.

Here's the problem: if I want to offer hope to the wounded, hurting, seeking, or lost, I can't do it paralyzed by fear. How can I love what I'm afraid of? I've got an idea that I've been testing out for a while now: I try to spend more time with people who don't fit the safe, sterile mold my suburban, middle-class upbringing created. In the Gospels, Jesus was clearly uninterested in the spiritually self-satisfied.

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and *sinner*s." Luke 7:34

This love thing takes a lot of stretching ...

I'm thankful for the work Duan and Kendra are doing with Mid-Valley Fellowship. It is stretching to reach out to a group that has in many ways been demonized within our Christian culture. My own prejudices reflected that, but thankfully I'm growing beyond them. MVF's ministry reminds me of the work Jesus is doing *outside* of our comfort zones. Too often the rhetoric we hear, both from television and pulpit, blinds us to the reality that these are real people with real feelings who, like us, need love and acceptance. I see MVF as a force of love – a safe place to explore identity and self in a Christian context.

A student at George Fox Seminary, part-time preacher, and aspiring writer, Peter Walker is a friend of MVF and his writing can be found at www.theOOZE.com, www.Off-The-Map.org, www.The-Next-Wave.com, and *Relevant Magazine*. Peter is a contributing author in *The Church of the Perfect Storm*, releasing early 2008 by NavPress. He lives in Corvallis with his wife and their agnostic cat.

Prayer Gathering

A couple weeks ago, a small group of people gathered and joined together in prayer for the ministry of Mid-Valley Fellowship. The focus was praying through where we are and seeking guidance for where we are headed. Our intent was to pray with open hands – not praying "God give us" or "God do this." Instead, our desire was to seek God's leading in the opportunities before us.



As we entered into the prayer time, it was incredible to be reminded of the many ways God has directed and provided since we first stepped into this adventure. We are deeply grateful and blessed. Please join us in prayer, celebrating what God has done.

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