

Book review: Justin Lee, 'Verscheurd'. Amsterdam (Ark Media) 2014.

I spent my Easter Weekend 2014 partly by reading Justin Lee's book *Torn*. I read it in Tobya Jong's excellent translation in Dutch. It is a long time ago since I read such a heavy weight book in just two days (in between two Easter Services, having a late night drink with a friend and making Easter lunch for my parents ;-). I was surprised to see Lee's book being published by Ark Media and the appraisals on the cover of the book by people of orthodox Reformed and evangelical origin aroused my curiosity. I have been a Facebook member of the Gay Christian Network that Lee erected for quite a while already and recently I added Lee himself to my Facebook friends, because I feel akin to his perspective. Considering all of this made me very curious of the contents of his book.

If anything this 334 page book is a must-read for everybody who is involved in the ongoing debate between Christians and LGBT-people. Although very clearly staged in an American context (the ex-gay movement for example is not half as strong here in Europe as it is in America, thank God), Lee's description of the opposing viewpoints in this debate is quite recognizable. LGBT people stress the importance of being free to choose for their own way of living and mostly conservative Christians emphasize the normativity of the Bible concerning human sexuality and its rejection of same-sex relationships. One of Lee's achievements is that he blames no-one. His love of the Christian tradition and of the Church seems to be limitless. This is not because he is naive or because as a Christian he can hardly be objective. It is because he is deeply concerned about the way the churches damage their own good message (*euangelion*) for everyone. I was deeply moved by this perspective, because it is mine for a long time now as well. Considering Lee's own story of discovering his homosexuality in a Baptist church, he had all the reason in the world to leave it. I grew up in a similar context (the Salvation Army), but what I had to go through was not half as horrible as Justin's sometimes awfully lonely journey. To me it seemed to be enough to dismiss the Christian tradition and the Church altogether. I thank God for people like Justin Lee who simply refuse to give up and keep on bringing people together to relate and connect, to build bridges, even when this hardly seems possible. Lee's perspective is one of kindness and of a spirit of patience in wanting to understand each other. In his perspective this is the only Christian way to overcome the culture clash, as he puts it, between Christians and LGBT people, including those who are Christians themselves. It most certainly is representative of the fruit of the Spirit.

A very sympathetic feature of the book is the way Lee lets his own biography and his Biblical perspective on sexual orientation and its place in church and society run parallel. It makes very clear that (t)his perspective and everything a lot of homosexual or bisexual men or women that grow up in the Christian tradition go through and have to discover and overcome, have absolutely nothing to do with 'a homosexual agenda' of which (Christian) LGBT organizations are so often accused, as if they only want people to be seduced to a 'sinful gay lifestyle'. Step by step Lee finds out that he did not *choose* for his own homosexual feelings, but simply had them, that there can be no such thing as a cure for homosexuality, let alone becoming straight and that the passages in the Bible about 'men having sex with men' are not half as clear as some/many Christians would want them to be. All the while he expresses his ongoing concern not to be seen as a heretic but as an authentic Christian who wants to listen closely to what the Bible has to say about human relationships and about sexuality. Doing this is a great achievement and to my opinion he emphasizes rightly that understanding among

people/Christians can only grow if we are all willing to choose for this bio narrative strategy of telling each other our very personal stories, i.e. in close relationship to our understanding of Christian faith. Lee makes clear that focusing on isolated texts in the Bible will not lead us anywhere, but that our core attitude should be to love each other like Jesus asks us to do. 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13, 34 and 35, NRSV). This Great Commandment of Love does not neutralize any other 'rule of law' in the Bible, but it radicalizes it and puts the way people relate to each other, especially Christians, in a totally new, otherworldly perspective. This is what should be at the beginning and heart of any encounter between people, however much they differ from each other. I sympathize greatly with the way Lee stresses the importance to take very seriously how LGBT people can be and are led by the Holy Spirit in their discovery of God's love for them. He even challenges LGBT Christians not to turn away from their calling to let this journey of discovery and self acceptance in the eyes of God replace all the misinformation about sexual orientation that has become mainstream in so many churches. There cannot be any Biblical witness without the guidance of the Spirit and Her guiding can only be discerned by very closely listening to each other's stories.

Not to lose myself in total appraisal, ;-) I have a few comments to make also:

1) In the last chapter of his book Lee acknowledges celibacy as a realistic possibility for Christian LGBT people. I myself think you can only respect people's individual choices. We are never to judge. I was a bit surprised though by Lee's somewhat uncritical approach, especially after all the words devoted to making clear that the ex-gay approach should be abandoned altogether. I know you cannot compare the two just like that, but in my experience a choice for celibacy is not always made as free as presupposed and all too often it is based on being ill informed, as is the case for many people who desire to be 'cured' of homosexuality and become heterosexual. It should be Lee's own desire to combat misinformation too in this case, i.e. to be understanding and loving but critical also of choices for celibacy. I know from my own contacts with LGBT people that choices for celibacy can be as damaging and devastating too, if made for the wrong reasons and personally I can hardly think of any good reason to choose for such a lifestyle. It is true that Paul recommends celibacy above being married, but this kind of celibacy was heavily accentuated by the eschatological perspective of Christ's rapid return to the world. To my opinion just this fact should make contemporary Christians very reluctant to choose for celibacy. As Lee states himself relationship in Biblical understanding is at the heart of what it means to be human.

2) I wholeheartedly agree with Lee's perspective of dialogue as described above. Dialogue from heart to heart should be at the basis of any encounter between Christians. We are sisters and brothers in Christ and nothing less can be expected of us. There is only one flaw in this perspective (and maybe there are more) and that is that it does not take into account that based on the position of people in churches the dialogues are hardly ever taking place on an equal basis. There seems to be little use in dialogue on a bio narrative basis if rejection is what you get in the end time and again (and I know what I am talking about...). The willingness of pastors and other clergy or people with leadership responsibilities to let LGBT people participate in their communities should not only reach to dialoguing with them. I am curious to know what has happened with Lee's own (God directed?) deep desire to be a leading figure in his church of birth. How does he appreciate that desire now and the difficulty of church leaders to relate to these kinds of callings of LGBT people? What I mean to say is that apart from the high calling LGBT Christians have to patient dialogue time and again our patience does not have to be as limitless as Lee seems to suppose. I talked to a church leader not so

long ago who with the same sincere and authentic intention told me that full inclusion would take a long time. As true as this is, I answered him that a 28 year old Lutheran girl I know in Russia does not have the luxury of waiting another 25 years to be included into her community and to be able to fully participate as a sister in Christ. So maybe we need several kinds of dialogue: the ones that Lee supports and also those with people in leadership positions making them clear that LGBT people act impatiently out of may I say eschatological concern to make God's kingdom come...

3) Maybe this was not the particular scope of his book, but I would also like to know what Lee has to say about the contribution LGBT people can make to the moral texture of the church community from the perspective of their inherent diversity. Our calling cannot only be limited to doing away with all misinformation there is about sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBT people in themselves enrich the community of the Church to the point of, I think, resembling the kingdom of God. Maybe this fruit of Lee's labor is still to come or I am overlooking something. I stand to be corrected with gladness.

Concluding: it was a great joy and pleasure to read Justin Lee's book. This Easter there could not have been a more appropriate story of Resurrection!

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