

FUNDAMENTALLY GAY

A REVIEW BY JAMES O. CHATHAM

Stranger at the Gate

To Be Gay and Christian in America

By Mel White

Simon & Schuster

333 pp., \$23

The reviewer is the minister of Highland Presbyterian Church in Louisville.

MEL WHITE is gay. This book is the story of his highly successful, profoundly embattled, life.

During the 1980s, before it was openly known that he is gay, White worked as a ghostwriter for several giants of the Christian right: Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Jimmy and Tammy Bakker, W. A. Criswell, Oliver North and others. He shared their faith-orientation, having grown up in a strongly religious home and having devoted his own life to piety.

Except that he was gay.

For nearly four decades White struggled against his gayness, believing the message of his religious friends: that being gay is a sin, a mortal evil against God. He tried to ignore, to put aside, his attraction to other men. He tried to absorb himself in his work. He followed the best wisdom of his age: Marry a good wife and you will be cured. He underwent endless counseling. He took medicine. He received shock therapy — all in a determined effort to reorient his sexual attraction from men to women.

And all to no avail. The "evil" would not go away.

Until finally he came to believe that this "evil" was God's gift, God's provision for him of fulfillment and serenity. God's grace.

At which point White now returns, as a *Stranger at the Gate*, to preach to his former Christian-right colleagues. His message is: You are wrong about homosexuality! It is not a sin people choose; it is a way people are made. It is not a tool of Satan; it is a gift of God. Those who are gay cannot repent and un-choose gayness; it is permanent. This is White's purpose: to urge (somewhat in anger but also with lingering respect) his former Christian-right friends to open their own eyes and repent.

White contends that in the early 1990s, "the religious right shifted the focus of their fund-raising appeals from the 'evil Communist empire' to 'the homosexual agenda for the destruction of America.'" Falwell, White says, "officially declared war against gay and lesbian people . . . because, according to Jerry, homosexuals 'have a godless, humanistic scheme for our nation — a plan which will destroy America's traditional

moral values.'" As did the Nazis, White says, the religious right stirs up "that ancient pool of misinformation and hatred against homosexuals to recruit new volunteers and mobilize their troops."

White tells of a time when Falwell "represented a 'Bible-based' tradition of exclusion on the basis of race that he (Falwell) now acknowledges to be wrong." White calls for Falwell to undergo a similar "conversion" regarding homosexuality.

"When will the lying end?" he asks. "Right now, the hate (gays and lesbians) feel coming from the church and its leaders keeps them from the love of Christ. One day soon I hope Jerry will show gay and lesbian people . . . what real love looks like."

The book has one serious liability. It is overwhelmingly self-centered, so much so that this reviewer grew weary after about a hundred pages. White seems compelled to show us how "in demand" he has always been, sought by the beautiful 18-year-old girl who later became his wife, sought by the high school class that elected him president, sought by college faculties, by film publishers, by seminary students, by the crowds that flocked to the church where he was pastor, by the best known leaders of the Christian right and finally by gay men. It is truly unfortunate that White, in writing his autobiography, never escapes his own need to be admired.

But his attempt to speak back to his former friends on the religious right is courageous. In what has to be a difficult struggle, he opens up his previously sealed-tight life, telling the full story of the battle within himself. In a world where intolerance and hatred are often practiced as religious virtues, this book is dedicated to diminishing both.

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