

Focus on the Family

# citizen

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## Guess who's coming to church

The people who brought us abortion on demand and condoms in classrooms now want to enlighten Christians on God's idea of sex.



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# SEX, LIES AND SCRIPTURE

These groups may have Christian-sounding names, but their goals include reinterpreting the Bible to justify sexual liberalism. Don't be fooled.



by Matt Kaufman

**T**he group's work sounds laudable: fighting AIDS through programs like a week of prayer and "the first [Sunday School] curriculum to promote a Christian response to the HIV/AIDS emergency in Black communities." The endorsements sound impressive: The group's Web site proclaims support from "all major Black Christian denominations and caucuses, including the eight-million-member National Baptist Convention USA and the four-million-member African Methodist Episcopal Church." Even the group's name comes straight from the Bible: The Balm in Gilead, a reference to a land known for the healing powers of its medicinal herbs (Jeremiah 8:22).

Alas, something's rotten in Gilead.

The first clue is who's bankrolling the Balm: sources like the Kaiser Family Foundation, a sugar daddy for condom-promoting programs across the country. The second clue is who's heading the group: Balm founder and CEO Pernessa Seele, who calls for condom handouts in "easily accessible places" like subways ("get a condom with a \$15 MetroCard," she suggests).

When you check out the other people associated with Balm, you get more of the same—and then some.

Various boards of the group include members like homosexual pastor Zachary Jones, whose credentials include serving as grand marshal for New York's Stonewall 25 Gay Pride Parade in 1995; and United Methodist Women's Division executive Lois Dauway, whose group has funded Gay-Straight Alliances in schools. Balm in Gilead's forthcoming Sunday School curriculum "Healing in Truth" (funded by Kaiser) is being developed by folks such as the Revs. Yvette Flunder and Valerie Brown Trout, both of the San Francisco-based gay church Ark of Refuge; and Loretta Jemott, whose previous work includes the pro-condom youth video *Be Proud! Be Responsible!*

Thus it comes as no surprise that Balm's theology is not exactly orthodox. An outline for "Developing Sermons on HIV/AIDS" paints homosexuality as pleasing to God, "who so loves diversity," and plunges headlong into moral relativism: "God calls us to be authentic in terms of our unique personhood. Homosexual Christians have determined what is authentic for them."

A book published by Balm assaults

"homophobia" in the black church; one chapter argues that black opposition to homosexuality is rooted in "the ways in which we have been running away from our bodies."

Despite its high-profile endorsements, Balm has received some criticism from within the black community.

"This is yet another attempt to use the African-American church as a forum for a message that contradicts Scripture," said the Rev. LaVerne Tolbert, a Los Angeles-area pastor who has researched sexual behavior among inner-city teens. "But we are not ignorant of Satan's devices."

It remains to be seen just how many churches will buy into the Balm program. But there's certainly reason for concern. In a biblically illiterate age, plenty of people—churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike—won't know better if somebody wearing a clerical collar tells them something decidedly unbiblical. And that's just what's starting to happen.

## Don't believe everything you read

The Balm in Gilead is just one manifestation of a larger and increasingly aggressive effort to distort and reinterpret the Bible until—surprise!—the Scriptures suddenly endorse sexual liberalism.

The most highly publicized examples in the past few years have been drives to get several mainline church bodies (most notably the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA and the Episcopal Church USA) to affirm homosexual relationships. While those drives have so far fallen short, they have shaped policies nonetheless. Last July's Episcopalian vote on blessing "holy unions" almost was approved, and the church ended up decreeing that unmarried couples (no genders specified) could live together in "holy love"—a decision widely seen as a victory for gay activists.

Indeed, if you picked up the country's most prestigious newspaper on Jan. 25, 2000, you might have thought the new sexual consensus was already here.

That was the day *The New York Times* carried a full-page ad announcing the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing. Signed by some 900 "religious leaders," it called for a new "sexual ethic" that should apply regardless of factors such as "marital status or sexual orientation," and featuring (among other things) the rights to contraception and abortion and "the blessing of same-sex unions."

Of course, when you look more closely at those "religious leaders," you find the con-

sensus isn't nearly as broad as all those names make it appear.

That's just what the religious-statistics Web site Adherents.com did. Its findings: Though members of many religious bodies signed the statement, only two are heads of denominations, John Thomas of the United Church of Christ and John Buehrens of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Those small liberal bodies, with a combined membership of 1.65 million (less than one half of 1 percent of the population), have provided roughly 40 percent of the signers. At least 140 signers list affiliations not with recognized religious bodies but with activist or religious-fringe groups: the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, Planned Parenthood, Covenant of the Goddess, Toxic Avengers Theater and Rhinewood Church of Asatru (worshippers of Norse gods like Odin and Thor), among others.

The list of signers has grown in the past year, numbering 2,000 at this writing. But don't read too much into that. Because anyone can sign the statement (which is posted on a Web site), it's remarkably easy to assume the title of "religious leader." The bottom line is, these folk represent a small minority of Americans of any major religion, much less Christianity.

Yet as the saying popular among advertisers and politicians goes, perception is reality. The more people hear the liberal party line repeated by people claiming religious authority, the more they're likely to grant it first respectability, then acceptance.

That's the long-term goal of the group behind the Religious Declaration: the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS).

## Hijacking Scripture

Founded in 1964, SIECUS was an early promoter of the sexual revolution, working to undermine traditional morality on pretty much every sexual front—premarital sex, homosexuality, bisexuality, even incest and pedophilia (see "SIECUS and you shall find," p. 21). The group has also had considerable success in shaping sex-education curricula. But naturally, it's always run into opposition from the Church.

Enter one-time SIECUS President Debra Haffner, who declared that "we cannot allow the far right to define family values"—and who cited Focus on the Family as one of those "far right" groups.

In 1996, Haffner enrolled at Yale University's Divinity School. The experience, she wrote in a 1997 *SIECUS Report* article tellingly entitled "The Really Good News: What the Bible Says About Sex," was a rev-



**FALSE PROPHETS:** Homosexual priests and their supporters gather in Denver on July 6. A week later, the Episcopal Church USA convention in that city declared that unmarried couples of any gender could live together in "holy love."

elation to her. Contrary to her earlier assumption that "the Bible either disparaged or ignored sexuality," Haffner said Scripture actually fit pretty well with SIECUS teaching. She followed up with further studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and SIECUS soon began issuing religious declarations.

In February 2000, Haffner stepped down from SIECUS to attend seminary full-time, with an eye toward building "a national ministry on sexuality and religion." She didn't change her views, though. "I am not leaving the sexuality and reproductive rights field," she stressed. "I seek, instead, to promote its goals as a religious leader."

So what exactly does the Gospel According to Debra say? Well, based on her 1997 *SIECUS Report*:

- Premarital sex is OK; the Song of Solomon "does not talk about sex in the context of marriage or procreation;" and elsewhere Scripture stresses "the special role of sexuality in the first year of a sexual relationship" (Deuteronomy 24:5) and celebrates "ongoing sexual intimacy in a long-term relationship" (Proverbs 5:18-19).

- Prostitution is actually encouraged as a healthy outlet for preventing adultery. Proverbs 6:26 "urges men to seek prostitutes . . . rather than be tempted by the wife of another."

- Adultery itself isn't so bad—at least, Haffner suggests, by any standards we need to observe today. "The Bible clearly con-

demns adultery. It is important to understand, however, that adultery is looked upon not as a sexual sin, but as a violation of property rights."

- Homosexuality is not condemned per se, but only in the context of "gang rape," "inhospitality" and "nearby foreign cults." In fact, scriptural passages positively portray "sexual contact and love between men." David and Jonathan were lovers, and Abraham asks his servant to swear an oath by putting "your hand under my thigh" (Genesis 24:2).

Put it all together and you get Haffner's "new sexual theology," which—she approvingly quotes liberal theologian James Nelson—"will celebrate fidelity in our commitments without legalistic prescription as to the precise forms such fidelity must take." (Bill Clinton couldn't have said it better.) The Bible, she says, is to be used simply to "help people identify and live by their own values and to discriminate between sexual decisions that are life-enhancing or destructive."

In short, in the spirit of the '60s in which SIECUS was born: If it feels good, do it.

## What the Bible really says

The SIECUS version of Scripture hasn't gone unchallenged. In fact, a group of theologians headed by Denver Seminary New Testament Professor Craig Blomberg pro-

duced a response called *What the Bible Really Says About Sex*, published by Focus on the Family.

The authors find occasional virtues in Haffner's work, primarily in connection with her acknowledgment that the Bible isn't anti-sex. But those virtues are outweighed by the vices in what they call "a curious mix of legitimate observations, dubious liberal theology and full-fledged misinformation."

For example:

- Positive biblical references to sexuality in what Haffner calls "relationships" invariably refer to marriage. Song of Solomon 3:11 explicitly speaks of Solomon coming to meet his beloved "on the day of his wedding, the day his heart rejoiced," the theologians note. While the lovers eagerly anticipate their romantic union, two verses (2:7, 3:5) warn them not to "arouse or awaken love until it so desires," and "in the context of ancient Jewish respect for the sacredness of marriage, it is extraordinarily difficult to imagine Song of Solomon referring to actual premarital intercourse at any point." As for other verses Haffner cites when discussing "sexuality in relationships" (Deut. 24:5, Prov. 5:18-19), these too "are explicitly about sexual joy among married people."

- The Prov. 6:26 reference to prostitution ("for the prostitute reduces you to a loaf of bread, and the adulteress preys upon your very life") nowhere encourages the practice. It focuses, by itself and in context, on the evil of adultery, which is said to be even worse than prostitution. Yet prostitution is also emphatically condemned throughout the book, as in 7:10, which compares the adulteress precisely to the prostitute. "[Haffner's] flagrant misrepresentation goes far beyond biblical interpretation," Blomberg and Co. write, "and instead is an imposition of Haffner's or her professor's views onto the text."

- Haffner's notion that adultery was a matter of property rights doesn't square with the evidence, say the authors of *What the Bible Really Says*. "Adultery was forbidden because it violated the divinely mandated ordinance of marriage (Genesis 2:24); it was a breach of the covenant (Malachi 2:14)," they write. Moreover, "It is also clear that Jesus' statements about divorce and adultery (Matthew 5:32, 19:19; Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) cannot be explained on the basis of male property rights. Adultery is the breaking of a mutual covenant between husband and wife and a moral offense against either the wife or the husband."

- The Bible leaves no doubt that God views homosexuality itself as an "abomination," as stated in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (KJV). The most significant text to Blomberg and his colleagues is Romans 1:26-27

(which speaks of both men and women exchanging "natural relations for unnatural ones"), because "it appears in a context that it is describing sexual impurity more generally as the epitome of the idolatrous rebellion of humanity against its creator (1:18-32)."

The authors also don't think much of attempts to discover the secret gay lives of Abraham and David, stating that "only modern Westerners unfamiliar with the physical expression of friendship between men in the Middle East would mistake the Bible's references for homosexuality." They are especially unimpressed in the case of the unmistakably heterosexual David. "After Jonathan has been killed in battle, David does indeed lament that 'his love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.' But . . . David's whole point in this text is that Jonathan was his 'blood brother' with a loyalty that surpassed that which mere eroticism creates."

## And in this corner— paganism

Though liberal theology doesn't hold up well under scholarly biblical scrutiny, the question remains as to how it will fare with a largely unschooled audience.

On the plus side, many of the mainline churches most susceptible to liberal theology are also those that have been losing members most rapidly. It's the more conservative bodies, like the Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist churches, which have been growing in recent decades. And probstinence movements like True Love Waits are gathering more teen support every year.

On the down side, as The Balm in Gilead endorsements demonstrate, many churches are desperate enough over the plight of at-risk teens that they'll open the door to programs promising to reduce pregnancies and AIDS—without always looking too closely at the accompanying theology. Moreover, liberal churches cater to a strong desire among many Americans: to retain some of the trappings of Christianity without opposing the culture's conveniently loose sexual morality. In short, people can tell themselves they're Christians while they live like the rest of the world.

According to Daniel Heimbach, professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., the "new sexual theology" is actually a manifestation of something very old: paganism.

"The whole view of sexual morality is based on the idea that sex is spiritual, and

that by definition makes it moral," Heimbach told *Citizen*.

Ironically, Heimbach pointed out, the pagan view does overlap with Christianity—and that's just what makes it dangerous.

"In one sense it's close to the biblical view because it understands that sex is fundamentally spiritual," he said. "But at the same time it's the diabolical opposite of Christian sexual morality as God gives it to us. The fact that something's a spiritual experience doesn't make it good. Sin is spiritual, as much as holiness is."

To guard against confusion, Rev. Tolbert argues, there's no substitute for a vigorous reassertion of scriptural truth on the part of believers.

"We have to teach what the Bible says about sexual activity. We teach a redeeming message of salvation and forgiveness. We teach how to live a lifestyle in keeping with biblical principles. Our goal is to develop mature believers who learn how to obey God in their daily lives." ●

*Focus on the Family* researchers Jerry Gramchow and Chad Hills assisted with this report.

To receive a copy of *What the Bible Really Says About Sex*, call *Focus on the Family* at 1-800-A-FAMILY. Ask for item number FC099.

# SIECUS AND YOU SHALL FIND (EXTREMISM)

**F**ormer SIECUS President Debra Haffner liked to describe her organization as representing "a middle ground for Americans." Yet from its inception, SIECUS has been anything but mainstream.

Founding SIECUS President Wallace Fulton pronounced the group's goal as fostering a "positive, open, scientific approach to human sexual behavior." That meant the group wasn't into value judgments—not even on incest and pedophilia.

Cofounder Mary Calderone held that "the major effects of [child molestation] are not caused by the event itself, but by the outraged, angry, fearful and shocked reactions of the adults who learn of it." Her philosophy boiled down to "don't ask, don't tell." "It's not that [pedophilia is] a bad thing or a wicked thing, it just simply should not be a part of life in general, right

out on the sidewalk." Original board member Wardell Pomeroy went even further, claiming that "incest between adults and younger children can be a satisfying and enriching experience."

Since that time, Haffner has denounced child abuse as "unacceptable and immoral." Yet SIECUS has never repudiated the likes of Calderone and Pomeroy, and even continues to honor them. A few years ago the group named a library after Calderone.

If these don't sound like people you'd trust with your children, you might want to know that since 1990, SIECUS has been circulating sex-education guidelines to the nation's public schools—funded at times by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Among the guidelines:

- Children 5 to 8 should learn about masturbation ("both boys and girls may discover

that their bodies feel good when touched"), intercourse and homosexuality.

- At 9 to 12 they should hear how "homosexual love relationships can be as fulfilling as heterosexual relationships" and how "masturbation is often the first way a person experiences sexual pleasure."

- From 12 to 15 they should be told that "sexual orientation cannot be changed by therapy or medicine" and that "there are many ways to give and receive sexual pleasure and not have intercourse."

- From 15 to 18 they should be given the phone number of the local gay and lesbian center and information on "creative and sensual ways of integrating contraception into [a] sexual relationship."

If that's "middle ground," it's probably best not to ask what they'd consider extreme. ●

*Matt Kaufman*