Seeking the Straight and Narrow, by Lynne Gerber

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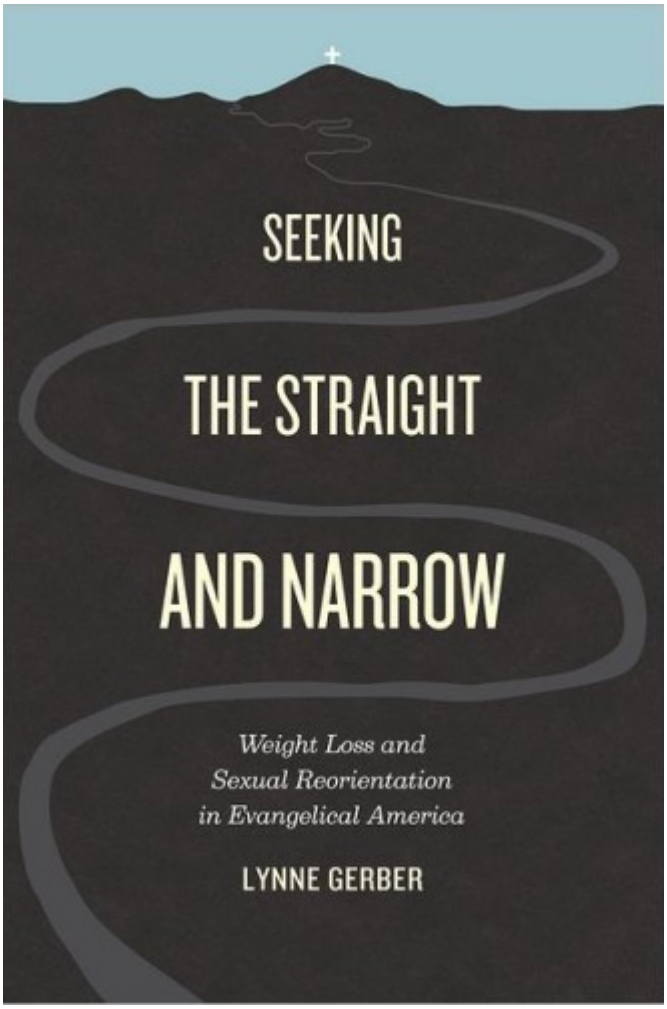
In Review



Seeking the Straight and Narrow

By Lynne Gerber
University of Chicago Press

Last year a furor erupted when Alix Spiegel's story "Can Therapy Help Change Sexual Orientation?" aired on NPR's *Morning Edition.* Spiegel talked to two men who had undergone what is sometimes called conversion therapy, briefly exploring the

ethical questions raised by the controversial practice, which the vast majority of health practitioners regard as not only ineffective but harmful. For Rich Wyler, one of the men Spiegel interviewed, being gay and Christian simply cost too much; despite the substantial criticisms of “reparative” therapy, he wanted it. “How dare they tell me that my goal is not legitimate,” he said. “*That* is unethical.”

Some listeners complained that NPR was giving a hearing to a project that was discredited by the American Psychological Association in 1975. Others suggested that people wishing to become “ex-gay” have the right to engage even in disputed projects like reorientation.

Most people outside evangelical culture contest the legitimacy of groups like Exodus International, the world’s largest conversion therapy organization, with over 260 local organizations. But most people unquestioningly support and even share, at least in principle, the goals of groups like First Place, a weight-loss program associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, even though permanent weight loss is nearly as problematic and unsuccessful as sexual reorientation.

In *Seeking the Straight and Narrow,* Lynne Gerber, a lecturer in religious studies at the University of California, Berkeley, who identifies herself as a nonreligious, straight “fat woman,” offers a compelling look at both organizations and their projects: “I wanted to study what fatness and homosexuality have to say to each other in real life contexts where change is attempted.” To that end, she engaged with the literature and leaders of First Place and Exodus International and with people who have attempted these projects of self-conversion.

Gerber’s interaction with the discourses of evangelical weight loss and sexual reorientation is engaging, surprising and admirably charitable. Neither First Place nor Exodus, she says, wants to contribute to “religious guilt”; both wish to be moderate voices. Thus their ways of speaking—though firmly anchored to faith in personal responsibility and free will (the “load-bearing beam in the American moral infrastructure,” as Gerber puts it)—reflect a valiant, if not entirely successful, attempt to avoid even the appearance of coercion and judgment. Exodus International strives to distance itself from homophobic impulses and the frightful episodes in previous iterations of conversion therapy (like shock treatments). First Place sits comfortably within mainstream culture’s weight-loss discourse; the Bible provides “window dressing” but no real challenge to the principle of fat as “secular sin.”

Exodus International unquestionably understands homosexual activity as a sin, but it acknowledges that homosexual desire is not wrong, and it repeatedly (though less than wholeheartedly) insists that no sin is worse than another. First Place, on the other hand, struggles to find a new category in which to place fatness. Only one interviewee insisted that fatness is a sin, full stop; most said that fatness can't be such a grave sin because they know many good Christian people who are fat. Gerber found that within these groups it is unacceptable, even oxymoronic, to speak of being a homosexual and a Christian. However, both organizations temper expectations and judgment by defining change as a process, so that what counts as success need not be "sudden, miraculous, and complete transformation" but may consist simply in remaining with the program.

Though Gerber does not condone either project, her "visceral memories" of interacting with participants kept her from drawing facile conclusions. She explains that both Exodus International and First Place rely on the disciplinary power of small groups engaging in confession, accountability and prayer. Gerber notes that everyone, even those who eventually broke with the body projects, appreciated the close relationships fostered by group participation. These groups foster bonds of relationship and caring. Being in close relationship with others makes dismissing them on the basis of their identity and convictions difficult; bonding over shared perceived problems is powerful even for those who ultimately abandon the quest for change.

The book ends with stories of "breaking," or separating physically and ideologically from the groups. People who are gay leave organizations like Exodus and find support in well-established gay communities—though, as in the case of Rich Wyler, people who continue to identify as ex-gay have a very hard time gaining acceptance as such. But when people break with organizations like First Place, no accepting arms embrace them; they are unlikely to find welcome in diet-rejecting communities, because such communities barely exist.

Gerber explores "fat hatred," which crosses all kinds of lines. People on the right and left politically and theologically and all over the map economically and socially agree that fat is bad, and they buttress this judgment with supposedly morally neutral medical discourse. People who are fat, she writes, tend to leave First Place believing that the problem lies with them, not with a faulty theology, whereas people who leave Exodus tend toward the opposite interpretation. Gerber shows that there is no coherent challenge to an oppressively dominant, Protestant-rooted ideology of

thinness. Virtually everyone speaks the same diet-and-health discourses, so that even where cultures and churches are “open and affirming,” when it comes to fat, they aren’t.