

Jonathan Merritt outed as Gay: A Follow-up

I [first posted](#) on this issue when I followed a [pingback](#) to one of my posts wherein I critically examined one of Jonathan Merritt's positions. It ultimately led me to the site of self-professed "gay evangelical" Azariah Southworth >>>

It was there Southworth made the [astonishing claim](#) concerning Merritt. [Some alleged](#) Southworth came across as being an unreliable or discreditable witness, a [claim I rejected](#) based upon Southworth's impressive public profile. As it turns out, Southworth apparently was not bluffing with having tangible evidence necessary to substantiate his stunning allegation that Jonathan Merritt was apparently gay—or at least, in his experience, *behaved* as a gay man.

On Ed Stetzer's blog, [Jonathan Merritt now confesses](#):

"In 2009, I was contacted by the blogger in response to an article I wrote about just that--that Christians must love people who experience sexual brokenness. We corresponded several times by email and text for a couple of weeks, some of them inappropriate. When I was traveling through a city near him, we met for dinner because we'd corresponded so recently. As we were saying goodbye, we had physical contact that went beyond the bounds of friendship. I was overcome with guilt, knowing I had put myself in an unwise situation. We never saw each other again and we ceased contact after a period of time."

Though the language appears naturally guarded, Merritt seems to substantiate what Southworth claimed on his blog. Apparently, there was at least one encounter which involved "physical contact that went beyond the bounds of friendship." Presumably, Merritt implies the "physical contact" "was sexual contact or at least sensually-oriented contact since it not only went "beyond the bounds of friendship," but also because of the excruciating guilt and subsequent counseling Merritt claims he sought.

Merritt bases, at least in part, some of his presumable confusion about his sexual identity—that is, while apparently *behaving* (at least on one occasion) as a gay man, he chooses not to *believe* himself to be a "gay" man—on a tragic childhood experience. He forthrightly says:

My story begins at a very young age when an older male who lived in our neighborhood sexually abused me. The experience was followed with a tidal wave of shame and guilt so great that I never told anyone for many years.

No one need condemn—nor surely desires to condemn--the young Merritt for his tragic experience during childhood. The number of people who were abused as children stuns the imagination of those who have not been abused, and, for those who have, reminds them of a bleeding wound that rarely, if ever, scabs over completely or permanently. On the other hand,

neither may he nor another plead a childhood tragedy as a valid excuse for the sin one performs as an adult.¹

One of the troubling aspects of Merritt's confession is not his excruciating rehearsal of it. Rather, more disturbing are the responses to Merritt's confession concerning his morally inappropriate encounter with Azariah Southworth.

Stetzer himself rides his self-righteous donkey right down main-street condemning all and everybody who had a part in this debacle as presumably deviously rotten to the core—all, of course, but Jonathan Merritt. He claims "many sought to discredit Jonathan after he dared to defend Chick-fil-A" as if he has an inside scoop into precisely why this is now happening to Jonathan. Yes, and that's precisely what many were suggesting about Southworth as well. The problem is, Southworth happened to be, at least in part it seems, right about Merritt. Hence, he did not *try or seek to discredit* Merritt; rather *he indicated Merritt actually discredited himself* by his hypocrisy concerning the gay community.

Moreover, Stetzer points the reader to Merritt's clear and unambiguous position on homosexual practice and his position against redefining marriage. Interestingly, the [piece Stetzer links was posted in 2009](#), the same time period Merritt says his inappropriate rendezvous with Azariah Southworth took place. Hence, we would ask Stetzer whether Jonathan penned his clear and unambiguous position on homosexual practice and denial for redefining marriage immediately before or after his inappropriate hook-up with Southworth? In other words, I'm unsure Merritt's supposed clear, unambiguous position on homosexual practice and traditional definition of marriage carries little, if any, persuasive moral weight if he expresses his position during the same time period he's behaving contrary to it.

What is more, Stetzer laments the moral audacity of those who not only intentionally "outed" Merritt,² but those like myself who linked to the "outing" piece. He writes:

"Outing," in case you do not know, is the practice of revealing that a certain person is gay without his or her consent, is not an unheard of occurrence though it is not always looked on favorably within the LGBT community. My heart grieves to see such low integrity, particularly when done by a person who claims the title "Christian"--and I am deeply disappointed with a few "Christians" in the blogosphere, who, since they disagreed with Jonathan in the past, seized the moment. Sad.

To my knowledge, I am the only one among Baptist bloggers who posted on this issue, with [Ken Silva at Apprising Ministries following up on my piece](#). Indeed, in the post I published, I made it clear—even *redundantly clear*--that while Azariah Southworth made a stunning claim concerning Merritt, I offered neither affirmation nor denial. I *described* Southworth's article. In addition, I explained how I even knew about the article, having no aforethought about "seizing the moment" so to speak (see the opening lines above). Stetzer seems to assume that if one contends with one on one issue, it necessarily follows one is always "out to get" the one with whom he or she contends. For my part, this borders paranoia-type approaches to interpersonal conflict which displays excessive suspicion concerning the motives of others, hardly a tenable approach for a Lifeway Vice-President.

Even so, bloggers like myself (and presumably Ken Silva) not only have their motives impugned for initially alerting the evangelical community to an apparent “whistleblower” post on an evangelical Christian, but also subtly but surely implied that the Christian faith of those who linked to and mentioned the "whistleblower" post is hardly genuine. After all, what would be the purpose of Stetzer’s intentionally placing “Christian” in quotation marks in his assertion if not to insinuate the "Christian" status of those who cited the claim against Merritt was somehow sub-standard?

Additionally, while I have disagreed with Merritt in the past, to suggest I posted the piece solely as a way to “seize the moment” against Merritt is as insulting as it is false. Begging pardon, I personally did no such thing (nor is there any reason to assume Ken Silva did either). And, if Stetzer has a scintilla of proof to validate his insulting implication, let him produce it. Of course, since my name specifically is not attached to his degrading rhetoric (nor is Sliva's), Stetzer can always claim he had somebody else in mind. Of course.

Leaving aside whether Stetzer had another in mind, the question still arises, is this appropriate behavior for a Vice-President of Lifeway to respond to those who happen to raise questions about the behavior of someone he personally supports? To not only impugn their motives without the least evidence whatsoever, but also question whether their faith is genuine? My church orders Lifeway material four times a year. Am I to passively accept that one of its Vice-Presidents freely impugns the motives of others (and with fairly good reason to believe I personally am in some way connected with the “others”) and questions their Christian faith on a blog which has Lifeway across the banner? Is this the way Lifeway desires to operate? Perhaps Dr. Thom Rainer can address this issue in the next blog post he writes on handling conflict well.

One final thought: not only is Ed Stetzer’s participation in this debacle sorely lacking in reasonable courtesy and thoughtful, mature reflection, but the majority of the comments in the thread reveal an all-too-common tendency of the pop Christian community to glibly dismiss the severity of fallen leaders. Perhaps in a frenzy to display charitable reaction to confessing leaders, all too often we go overboard by maximizing mercy and minimizing responsibility. Let me show you what I mean:

- I, for one, am thankful to Jonathan for sharing his story
- Thanks, Jonathan, for being open, honest, and for being an example to all people on how to respond to brokenness and sin
- Thanks for your integrity and honesty.
- Jonathan is a gift to the Body of Christ and one of the brightest young minds in this country. I appreciate his unwavering commitment to living a holy life and standing for biblical truth, no matter the cost.
- Jonathan, thank you for your humility, courage and faith
- To Jonathon, thank you for being so candid.
- And thank you Jonathan for your honest response in which you acknowledge and note your repentance for past sin and your pursuit of current and future holiness.
- Shame on anyone trying to destroy Jonathan through blogs and other outlets.
- Thanks, Ed for giving Jonathan an opportunity to share his story... What does matter is that Jonathan is seeking God, and not skirting personal responsibility while doing so.

- Jonathan, it takes a lot of courage to do this, and as a fellow Christian I'm proud of you. God bless you.
- Courageous and inspirational
- Jonathan, your honesty and willingness to engage this situation with humility and grace is commendable.

While the above does not constitute all the comments by any stretch (nor is there a complete absence of corrective missives logged), the comments above point to a weakness we have in the Body of Christ. By attempting to show how merciful, forgiving, and compassionate we are (and ought to be!), we nonetheless end up virtually whitewashing the supposedly confessed sin by transforming it into something it's not. Here is the cold, hard truth: *Jonathan was neither courageous nor necessarily humble nor necessarily honest in sharing his story*. Jonathan didn't *display guts* by coming clean so much as he *displayed grief* for being *exposed*. It saddens me to write this. But someone needs to say it.

If it was revealed, for example, that a prominent pastor had been involved in an inappropriate liaison with another woman, we would not be justified, upon the pastor admitting to the relationship, in whitewashing the incident as a “courageous” “inspiring” “humble” moment which proves him to be a “gift to the Body of Christ” who shows “unwavering commitment to living a holy life and standing for biblical truth, no matter the cost.” The moral absurdity of such a response remains so glaring it's hard to imagine someone would embrace it. Yet that's precisely how the majority of responders on Stetzer's blog appears to respond. Moreover, if we carry the analogy an additional but fully legitimate step, given Stetzer's response to Southworth, the woman who exposed the supposed pastor in the inappropriate liaison would possess “low integrity” not because she was an adulteress mind you. Rather because she “outed” the pastor as an adulterer! The moral circus we've created within evangelical ethics remains frightening.

And, for the record, Jonathan Merritt can claim all he wishes that he intended to make all the confusion about his inappropriate relationship known. Perhaps he was intending to do just that. Indeed he had a perfect opportunity to do so in [his latest book](#). Instead he not only went after his *alma mater* university with a vengeance—a university which gave him virtually free of charge his entire education for his undergraduate degree—but Merritt also went after Jerry Falwell *exposing Falwell's supposed sins*. Even so, the truth remains: Jonathan Merritt did not *confess* his inappropriate behavior. Instead he *responded* to another who *exposed* his inappropriate behavior.

For that, Merritt is not entitled to personal descriptions displaying courage, inspiration, role modeling, candidness, humility, or standing for biblical truth. Instead he qualifies only for the church putting her arms around him and loving him, forgiving him, and putting in place an accountability process through which he, like any other fallen leader, may seek biblical restoration to the Body of Christ. Jonathan Merritt needs—*indeed must have*—the full support of God's people. But such support will not be found in sitting at Jonathan's feet to listen to his counsel. Instead he should sit at the church's feet and heed her counsel.

Consequently, this means, at minimum, while he may always have a place in our pews, by no means should Jonathan Merritt be guaranteed a place in our pulpit. As trust has been *breached*, trust must be *earned* back.

¹for purposes here, I do not assume Merritt claims or supposes his past experience determines his present circumstances

²While Stetzer claims “outing” is particularly of “low integrity” I’m personally conflicted about whether “outing” is morally justifiable. Obviously, those who know me personally know I’m very particular about sharing personal information people share with me. I guard myself well and believe trust to be a delicate but necessary commodity in interpersonal relationships. In addition, pastoral confidentiality must always be evident for men whom God entrusts to His people. Even so, times call for morally “outing” so to speak. For example, if a man entrusted to me in pastoral confidence that he was having a sexual affair with a woman not his wife, my pastoral role would honor his “secret” so long as he immediately began working through this issue to bring it to a proper, biblical vetting. In other words, my first step would not be to tell his wife. But it would eventually be an appropriate step if he did not move forward with me in dealing biblically with the sinful situation. In short, I would “out” him if he pushed me to. But under few, if any, circumstances, would I “out” him publicly which, for me, is the initial moral grievance one could allege against Southworth not the generic “low integrity” Molotov which Stetzer unthinkingly lobs.