

Interview with Andrew Comiskey

By Joseph Nicolosi, Ph.D.

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-----Andrew Comiskey

Recently, I sat down with Andrew Comiskey (M.Div.), founder and Director of Desert Stream Ministries. For over thirty years, Andrew has worked with sexually and relationally broken men and women. His ministry developed out of his commitment to overcome his own homosexuality, and his many years as husband to wife Annette and father to their four children.

*He is author of **Pursuing Sexual Wholeness** (Creation House), **Strength in Weakness** (InterVarsity Press), **Naked Surrender: Coming Home To Our True Sexuality** (InterVarsity Press) and founder of the Living Waters healing program.*



Nicolosi: Andy, as you know, there has been a lot of controversy lately about the reality of absolute sexual-orientation change. The debate seems to be between two groups: psychotherapists, many of whom are in NARTH, vs. some spokesmen in the ex-gay movement who deny complete change. In your forty years experience, do you believe anyone can be completely free of homosexuality?

Comiskey: I have heard people report that.

Nicolosi: There are men that I've worked with who have said, "I have no more homosexual desire." In our final sessions, they may consciously try to conjure up the old gay fantasies, the porn images, whatever, and it's just nothing: "That's it. Finished." I tell them, "I'm sorry to have spoiled your fun."

Comiskey: Yes, I can understand that.

Nicolosi: Or a man sees a good-looking guy in a gym locker room and he says to himself; "I remember I used to get a charge from that, but I just see him now as a nice-looking guy and that's it."

Comiskey: Yes, I can see that. But for most, the healing process occurs along a continuum in which people make movement from a same-sex to an opposite-sex orientation. That is the experience of my friends and colleagues. It is a process in which we encourage each other daily toward being a good offering for our spouses, special friends, etc. For these people, I see movement along that continuum.

Nicolosi: I think we agree that each individual moves along that continuum to the best of his ability. Some people are able to go two steps; some, ten steps.

Andy, let me ask you this: would you consider this an example of change? A man is walking down the street; he sees a good-looking guy, and gets a bodily reaction. Some of my clients call it the 'zap,' but it

may not necessarily be a genital zap. It could be a shot in his chest, like, "Oh, wow!" Gays would say that this is evidence that he is still homosexual. But he says to himself: "Ah, yeah, this feeling is about my old way of relating to men. This is the kind of guy that I idealized. I know what this is about." In other words, the bodily response is the same, but now, he attaches a different meaning of it. He experiences that moment in a new way, which makes it for him, not a sexual moment. He knows what that moment is really about – namely, his old way of desiring to connect with men. Now, is that homosexuality?

Comiskey: I would say not. That momentary experience indicates that the person continues to work out a clear sense of self-acceptance in the light of seeing another man to whom he may be tempted to abdicate himself. I don't see that as an indicator of essential homosexuality, but as an indicator of continued integration that he is still working out.

Nicolosi: Would you agree that "still working out" might mean that in two years, he may walk down the same street, pass the same guy and feel nothing or almost nothing, thinking to himself: "Oh, nice looking guy... next," and nothing more?

Comiskey: Exactly. I think the "good processing" that you describe is the integration of the true self, and its capacity to be fully present to the public, or to a friend, or a spouse.

Whenever one processes his experiences of momentary attraction well, he is contributing to his own healing... to his own integration as a normal man. For me and for those with whom I'm closest, our "good processing" is what liberates the pretty good offering we are to one another and to our families. I am that much freer to offer myself to others as a result of it. Hopelessness sets in when a man is bound up in his shame -- living small, within that closed horizon of fantasy and self-absorption.

Nicolosi: There is another aspect to this. Some men report that their bodily reaction to another man serves them as a signal that they are not "in their integrity." I remember when Richard Cohen and I did a TV show and the hostess said, "Richard you're now married; can you say that you no longer have any homosexual thoughts or feelings?" Richard answered: "When I have a homosexual feeling it's a signal to me that I'm not taking care of myself."

In those cases, can we say that a man is still homosexual when he feels the "zap" which becomes a signal to ask himself: "OK what's really going on with me?"

Comiskey: What they do is to withdraw the focus of energy from that other person and metaphorically, bounce it back to themselves. Ultimately these attractions are all about themselves.

Nicolosi: Yes. They're not really about the other guy.

Comiskey: Cultural norms also intensify this self-absorption, this disintegration. Today's culture is all about affirming the gay self. We live in a culture of excess that is the opposite of one of positive restraint. The cultural message is: "I feel, therefore I do."

Nicolosi: "Therefore, I consume."

Comiskey: Therefore I abandon my true self! You know, I was thinking of how important one's community is, in addition to working with a solid therapist who keeps you focused on what you need to work out. One has to be in a healthy community--a culture within a culture--that is encouraging one to work out this integration in real life. That cannot happen via a 50-minute session once a week. We need *both* -- the incisive nature of the therapeutic relationship, combined with a community of shared, counter-cultural

values. I think both are non-negotiable. We must work hard to try and ensure both for those who are gradually walking out of their same-sex attraction.

Nicolosi: Your emphasis on supportive community is confirmed by a recently published study that found that 65 % of a client's success was due to having a supportive community. This is not just for SSA, but also for any unwanted condition.

But tell me, Andy, in your years of ministry experience, what would you say are a few critical issues that an individual needs to address to resolve his homosexuality? What would be the key challenges to the individual desiring to diminish his same-sex attractions?

Comiskey: One key is his own motivation, which can range from immature to mature. Does a person want to change for church or for Mother or some other powerful figure in one's life? I think a mature motivation is: "I want to be free for my own sake."

Nicolosi: *I want this for me.*

Comiskey: I want this for me, and I think it takes time to know that, and it takes time to get there. There also needs to be a strong spiritual component. Our yearning for God is related to our sexuality. A transition out of homosexuality requires a presence more powerful than self, and a mature willingness to submit to that higher power.

Nicolosi: So it's personal desire aligned with this transcendent force outside oneself.

Comiskey: No person can escape the fact that what we are created for, sexually-speaking, is written on our hearts. No amount of cultural shifting can erase that.

When you see the ardor in the gay activist, you can't help but think he is working his conflict out on us, and on the culture -- trying in vain to prove just "how good and normal I am" through another legal victory like gay marriage.

On the other hand, power is unleashed in true submission to the Creator and the Redeemer. When you are in alignment with His purposes, you hit solid ground and start to move forward. That has everything to do with the person's movement on this continuum rather than on simply "sin-management."

And of course, there must also be a willingness to go to the heart of one's pain, the early suffering in one's life.

Nicolosi: That would be equivalent to what we call the Grief Work, the final stage of reparative therapy.

Comiskey: I think you describe that very well. I was inspired by your work, Joe, and it confirmed what we have seen in our Living Waters ministry participants with regard to the depth of the shame related to many men's gender disintegration. One must go to that depth of grief, and yet one can't go there unless there is that "therapeutic alliance" with those trustworthy companions or good helpers like yourself. That alliance, combined with spiritual union, is what enables one to go into the pain.

Nicolosi: I like your term, "gender disintegration." It captures the phenomenon these men are experiencing.

Comiskey: Yes. And the healing process we're talking about necessitates an honest dealing with those core issues, and developing intimate but non-erotic relationships in which new experiences of friendship can be forged.

At the same time, Joe, we need to have a healthy regard for the power of sin. I don't know how else to put it. I think we're losing a kind of a "holy fear," if you will, in this healing process. Without that fear, one can readily digress into sensual and dependent unions that stoke same-sex attraction and foster false selves. We have talked about this before....there is a true self, made in the image of God. We must encourage a godly fear of Him en route to integrating that self, toward becoming whole.

Nicolosi: You and I approach the problem of homosexuality from somewhat different perspectives, since I am a psychologist and you are a minister, but there seems to be much agreement between us in our view of the healing process. I appreciate your bold witness. Although change may happen on a continuum, we both see so many men who were once -- as you say -- "living small, within that closed horizon of fantasy and self-absorption," who have been freed to grow more fully into their gender wholeness.

Thank you, Andy.