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Brokeback Mountain - The Men and the Message

By Joe Dallas Copyright 2005

Just when you thought it was safe to say "Howdy, partner", along comes a cinematic romance between two cowboys that's sure to ignite a fresh round of debates on homosexuality. *Brokeback Mountain*, which opened in theaters mid December, chronicles a decades long relationship between two ranch hands who meet, fall in love, then marry women and start families of their own. But despite early religious training and societal attitudes, their secret desires won't be denied. So over the years their affair is continued under the guise of friendship, as camping and fishing trips become sexual trysts and vehicles for long, agonizing discussions about the dilemma of being gay, married, and in love with the wrong person.

The film's a sermon, to be sure, and the message is clear: If society would only abandon its prejudice against gays, these fine men could have openly lived a long and happy life together. It's a message we've heard before, but not against the backdrop of such breathtaking scenery, earnest storytelling, and performances by handsome men mixing homosexuality with America's classic masculine icon, the Cowboy. And since gays are the victims in *Brokeback Mountain*, anyone opposing their behavior will be seen as the oppressor. Christians, then, should expect to be challenged by friends and co-workers who will say, "I saw that movie about the gay cowboys. They were nice guys who really loved each other, so what's your problem with that?"

The question ducks the real issue, as does the film. It isn't whether or not gay men can be "nice guys", nor is it a question of whether they can be masculine, rugged, or capable of deep love. The question is whether or not homosexuality is normal in and of itself, no matter what sort of man practices it. And that's the point *Brokeback* cleverly avoids. Rather than offer a sound argument for homosexuality itself, it presents attractive homosexual characters who viewers like and sympathize with. Then it plunges them into an ending so tragic and moving (brought about, wouldn't you know, by that old dragon Homophobia) so viewer's feelings are likely to evolve from sympathy for the gay characters into advocacy for gay causes. And isn't the goal of every sermon to stir its listeners to action?

Pro-abortionists have milked this tactic for years. Rather than address abortion itself (a procedure most people find repugnant) they shift the focus onto the plight of the woman - her economic difficulties, her limited options, etc. - eliciting sympathy for the practitioner so the practice itself is ignored. The logic goes something like this

"Nice women sometimes have abortions; women having abortions are often in stressful situations; therefore abortion is OK."

Brokeback perfects this technique, telling us, in essence:

"Nice guys are sometimes also gay; gay men are often mistreated; therefore homosexuality is OK."

But wait a minute. Just as abortion is about the taking of an unborn life, not the character or circumstance of the woman having it done, so homosexuality is about sexual relations between people of the same gender, not the character or circumstance of homosexuals themselves. It's about the way our bodies are made, and whether or not our design testifies to heterosexual or homosexual bonding. It's about the differences between men and women, and whether or not those differences create a complimentary bond that homosexuality can match. And it's about whether or not children - and, indeed, society - are best served by socially experimenting with the family institution or by keeping intact. Those are the questions we need to be asking, and we can ask them boldly while agreeing that, yes, two gay cowboys might be a couple of really nice guys. But "really nice" and "morally right" are hardly the same.

Brokeback Mountain scores high points for a persuasive technique. It seeks to convert the undecided, not with good arguments, but through effective storytelling. And experience has shown that when your cause is questionable, you can still rally support by telling good stories about the people within it. Alexander pope's "Essay on Man" puts it well:

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

No doubt we'll be hearing a good deal about Brokeback Mountain. God help us, then, to respond effectively to its message. Because like Vice itself, it offers us a pity we're called to challenge, and an embrace we're compelled to reject.

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