

Review: JAH042

THE MEN AND THE MESSAGE OF BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN

a film review of
Brokeback Mountain
directed by Ang Lee
(Focus Features, 2005)

This review first appeared in the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 29, number 2 (2006). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

Just when you thought it was safe to say, “Howdy, partner,” along came a cinematic romance between two cowboys that ignited a fresh round of debates on homosexuality. *Brokeback Mountain*, which opened in theaters last December, has already won four Golden Globe awards and three Critics’ Choice awards, including best drama for both. It chronicles a decades-long relationship between two ranch hands who meet, fall in love, then move on to marry women and start families of their own. Despite early religious training and societal attitudes, however, their secret desires won’t be denied; so, they continue their affair under the guise of friendship through the years, as camping and fishing trips become sexual trysts and vehicles for long, agonizing discussions about the dilemma of being homosexual, married, and in love with the wrong person.

The film is a sermon, to be sure, and the message is clear: If only society could have abandoned its prejudice against gays, these fine men openly could have 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 rugged, handsome men mixing homosexuality with America’s classic masculine icon, the cowboy. Christians should expect friends and coworkers who have seen the film to say, “They were nice guys who really loved each other, so what’s your problem with that?”

That question ducks the real issue, however, as does the film. It isn’t a question of whether gay men can be “nice guys,” or masculine, rugged, and capable of deep love, but whether homosexuality is normal *in and of itself*, no matter what sort of man practices it. That’s the point *Brokeback* cleverly avoids: rather than offer a sound argument for homosexuality itself, it presents attractive homosexual characters whom viewers like and with whom they sympathize. It treats them as victims, such that viewers will identify anyone who opposes their behavior as the oppressor. It then plunges them into an ending so tragic and moving (brought about, wouldn’t you know, by old Homophobia) that viewers’ 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, they shift the focus to the plight of the woman—her economic difficulties, her limited options, and so on—eliciting sympathy for the patient so that the practice is ignored. The logic goes something like this: “Nice women sometimes have abortions; women who have abortions often are in stressful situations; therefore abortion is OK.” *Brokeback* perfects this technique, telling us, in essence: “Nice guys sometimes are also gay; gay men often are mistreated; therefore homosexuality is OK.”

But wait a minute. Just as abortion is about the taking of an unborn life, not the character or circumstances of the women having it done, so homosexuality is about sexual relations between people of the same gender, not the character or circumstances of the homosexuals themselves. It’s about the way

our bodies are made, and whether our design testifies to heterosexual or homosexual bonding. It's about the differences between men and women, and whether homosexuality can match the complementary bond that those differences create. It's about whether children—and society—are served best by socially experimenting with the family institution or by keeping it intact. Those are the questions we need to ask, and we can ask them boldly while agreeing that two gay cowboys might be a couple of really nice guys. "Really nice" and "morally right," however, are hardly the same.

Brokeback Mountain scores high points for persuasive technique. It seeks to convert the undecided, not through good arguments, but effective storytelling. Experience has shown that when a cause is questionable, proponents can still rally support by telling good stories about the people in 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.

The video and DVD release of *Brokeback Mountain* will give Christians another opportunity to respond to a new round of debates over homosexuality. May God help us respond effectively, because, like vice, *Brokeback* tempts us to approach its message with a pity we're called to challenge, and an embrace we're obliged to reject.

— reviewed by Joe Dallas