

**Lenz, Steph. *In/Out: A scandalous story of falling into love and out of the church* (ABC Books, 2023). 320 pp. \$26.95 paperback.**

Stephanie Lenz's *In/Out* provides a compelling and pertinent exploration of humanity, connection, and the challenges faced by marginalised or minority individuals within Christian communities, particularly those identifying as LGBTIQ or questioning sexual orientation or gender identity.

*In/Out* seems to be written with various audiences in mind, as some speaks as though to those 'outside' the Church, and other parts seem to be written with exactly that community in mind. Still others seem to speak directly to those who might be in a similar position as the author. This variation can be seen in the evolution of the author as she embodies all of these perspectives herself, making it relatable and relevant for various audiences,

This memoir is part biographical, part commentary analysis, in a logical and readable narrative form, taking the reader on a journey through the author's youth and young adulthood with short, sharp chapters punctuated by vivid storytelling and insightful discussion. *In/Out* may be a useful thought provoker for those seeking resources to understand or navigate the complexities our communities are facing.

Notably, Lenz brings evidence of her own searching to the story, devoting significant chapter space to understanding the historical and political influences that profoundly shaped her faith community's actions and beliefs. The author also demonstrates a depth of psychological and social science understanding that is portrayed in her compassionate perspective toward others, even those who were the source of deep distress at the time.

Despite the commendable analysis, it's crucial to acknowledge that Lenz's story is still evolving, in preacher terms, a "fresh-wound." This ongoing process of personal reflection may impact readers differently, and may ultimately land differently in years to come, urging caution in approaching *In/Out*. Likewise, a pastoral consideration, Lenz's candid narrative includes explicit details about her sexual experiences, which may be discomfiting to some. It also includes significant amounts of specific details that do have reason for inclusion, but might strike 'close to home' given the authors proximity to the Australian Christian community in general.

Lenz adeptly connects the reader with her particular denominational experience, but the broader themes will be familiar, if not very identifiable for other traditions, including Pentecostal spaces. The parallels drawn offer insights that could be valuable for leaders across the Christian landscape and the commonality of our stories highlights the potential for shared lessons to be learned.

Unfortunately, (and perhaps due to the proximity of this publication to preceding events), Lenz's final chapters and conclusions about all religious expressions, gatherings, and

faith-based organisations lacks the depth and nuance evident in the rest of her exploration and historical/contextual examination.

Lentz's contextual and historical analysis is generally well-executed. However, there are gaps in theological exploration that will be evident to those familiar with the differences between normative, operant, espoused (authorised), and formal theologies<sup>1</sup> within conservative evangelical contexts. These gaps significantly influence the eventual persuasion of the author, and conclusions presented in the book.

There is an underlying invitation for the discerning reader here to reflect on how the uses of authorised and normative theologies, aligned with political conservatism and dogma, have served to alienate and isolate rather than assist vulnerable or questioning believers in navigating discipleship. We can only hope there will be more to this story, and our own, that will take us all beyond the notion of just In/Out.

*In/Out* is an engaging, necessary and thorough account that sheds light on an overdue conversation. However, potential readers are advised to approach the memoir with a level of caution, recognizing its raw and revealing content, and considering the reservations expressed in this review.

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<sup>1</sup> Cameron, Helen. *Talking about God in practice: Theological action research and practical theology* (London: SCM Press, 2013).