

## Gay and Ex-Gay Paths to Resolving the Dilemma of Homosexuality in Christianity

Dear Heavenly Parent, thank you for bringing us together...As we move into your presence tonight, we pray that you will open our hearts and minds to your word. Let your wisdom guide us in our study so that we may learn truth. Thank you for the new members among us and remember those not with us. Keep them safe and bring them back to us. Thank you for the great healing you have brought and guide others to us so that they too can be healed. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

(Fieldnote, gay Christian Bible study)

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing the group here together...Father, we know that you are a holy, holy God and we thank you for your many blessings. We know that it is only through your power that we can do anything. We love you Lord and know that you are truly an awesome God, and we ask you to fill us with the Holy Spirit and bring healing. We praise you for the healing that has taken place and pray that the Holy Spirit will work powerfully in people's lives during the meeting and throughout the week. We pray that you will open our hearts and minds to the truth of your word...and that you will guide us to do your will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

(Fieldnote, ex-gay Christian ministry meeting)

These prayers were typical beginnings to the Bible study and ministry meetings I attended as part of a fifteen month comparative ethnographic study of two groups affiliated with the gay affirming Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) and an ex-gay ministry associated with Exodus International, a group that believes homosexuality can be cured through redemptive prayer<sup>1</sup>. Both group prayers express gratitude and love for God, a reverent desire to know and obey God's Word, and a plea for God's healing and strength as members struggle to cope with the shared problem of being gay and Christian. That these groups had opposing positions with regard to homosexuality--the gay Christian group believed that homosexuality and Christianity were compatible and tried to help members integrate the two identities, while the ex-gay group did not and sought to cure them of homosexuality--may make it seem strange that their prayers were so similar. This similarity begins to make sense, however, when we recognize that both groups emerged from the larger conservative Christian community to confront the mutual problem of how to handle homosexuality within the context of Christianity and used shared core religious beliefs to understand and resolve it. This paper outlines how these groups, working from a similar theological foundation to address the same problem, endorse such opposing resolutions, and examines their implications for participants and larger societal perceptions of homosexuality.

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<sup>1</sup> In the mid 1990s, I collected ethnographic data in these groups to analyze how and why groups with similar beliefs resolved the tension between homosexuality and Christianity so differently. To do so, I attended 2 MCC bi-weekly Bible study groups (one for 15 months and a 12 week course for new members) and 1 ex-gay ministry (weekly for 9 months). In addition to fieldwork, I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 gay Christians, 14 ex-gay Christians, and 15 wives of ex-gay Christian men. I also read MCC and Exodus pamphlets, newsletters, and the books suggested by the groups. Further, I was a participant observer at an MCC regional conference, where I attended workshops on civil rights, diversity, and ex-gay ministries, as well as worship services and social events. I also attended an ex-gay conference for training ministry leaders and healing homosexuality. For further explanation, see Wolkomir 2006.

## Being Gay and Christian: One Dilemma and Two Solutions

Most study participants grew up in conservative Christian families residing in what is known as the “Bible Belt” (e.g., the south and deep south) in the United States. They were active members of their churches, and their relationship with God was paramount in their lives. They were also aware of the stigma surrounding homosexuality in their communities and of the condemnation of it in their churches. It was, as they explained, simply “unacceptable” to be gay. Being gay would not only mean being ostracized in the present in their communities, but it would also jeopardize their future by risking their eternal salvation. So, when these men first began to notice their same-sex desires, they either ignored them or perceived them as a stage en route to normal heterosexual lives. Some responded by trying to be “more” heterosexual, dating more often, becoming engaged, or even marrying. Over time though, as their same-sex desires persisted in spite of their efforts, the men began to see themselves as gay. This realization was traumatic. One man recalled finally recognizing that “these feelings that I had had since I was 13 were not going away, and I did have this attraction to men, and now I had come to realize this as being homosexuality. And I remember rising up in bed one night and screaming at God to deliver me from these feelings. I thought I needed to get rid of these feelings to get on with my life.” None of these men experienced homosexuality as a choice,<sup>2</sup> and all initially wanted to be rid of it so that they could live the lives they had planned.

Realizing their same-sex desire began a long, arduous and painful struggle. The men proceeded, outwardly, to live as they always had, but their same-sex desire continued and they sometimes had homosexual encounters. Their lives, as they explained, had split into two parts--one Christian and the other homosexual. As they pretended to be heterosexual in interactions with friends, family and their church communities, they progressively felt alienated and fraudulent, a sense they described as “having two faces” or as being increasingly a “stranger” or “outsider.” They prayed fervently, begging God to take away these desires. Nothing worked. The men felt trapped, and asked this question: “How can I be the Christian man I want to be when I also know that I am gay?” Without an answer, the men felt chronically inauthentic as Christians, a profound loss given their faith commitment, and they were also continuously anxious, afraid, shamed, and saddened. While some men were fortunate to find help relatively quickly, others struggled for years, ending up on medications (like anti-depressants) or drinking or suffering anxiety attacks. Whatever the duration of their struggle, it was these difficult emotions that finally drove the men to seek help with either MCC or the ex-gay ministry. It was in these groups that the men learned to cope with their spirituality and sexuality, albeit in opposing ways and with different degrees of success.

### MCC: Integrating Homosexuality and Christianity

In 1968, Reverend Troy Perry founded MCC because he felt called by God to create a space in which the gay community--and anyone who believed in God’s love and forgiveness--could

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<sup>2</sup> Research regarding the origins of sexual desire, whether innate, learned or some combination, remains decidedly inconclusive. We do know, however, that most people do not experience their sexuality as a choice. Instead, research reveals that most people perceive their sexual desires as emerging naturally--an inherent part of self (Thumma 1991; Mahaffy 1996; Whisman 1996; Wolkomir 2006).

safely worship (Perry 1990). Put briefly, MCC combines aspects of evangelical Protestantism (e.g., belief in one triune God, the Bible as the divinely inspired Word of God, personal salvation through Christ, and an indwelled Holy Spirit) with liberation theology<sup>3</sup> to create a gay affirming theology built on two simple, but powerful, religious tenets. The first is non-condemnation of difference, or the idea that God made people diverse to fulfill divine purposes. As a result, MCC contends that *all* people are to be similarly valued and given the opportunity to participate fully and equally in their faith. With regard to homosexuality, this tenet means that God made gay people and loves them. Change is not possible or even desirable because doing so would work against God's creative intent. The second tenet is all-inclusive love, built on Jesus' example of extending love to all people. This theology has been compelling, and MCC has grown into one of the largest gay-affirming religious organizations in the world, with about 300 congregations in 22 countries in 2004 ([www.ufmcc.org](http://www.ufmcc.org)).

When the men were first introduced to MCC, they were simultaneously extremely skeptical of its theology--having spent their lives believing that homosexuality was sinful--and hopeful that they might find a solution to the problem that plagued them. The most important thing to these men, as they explained repeatedly, was that they be "right with God." So, before they could accept that homosexuality and Christianity were compatible, they had to be convinced it was right with God. Over months of intensive Bible study, the men compared translations, looked up words in the original languages, and read biblical scholarship. For instance, during one meeting they examined Deuteronomy 23:17-18, comparing the King James and New International Versions. They discovered that the KJ passage seemed to condemn both homosexuals and prostitutes, but that the NIV passage seemed only to condemn prostitutes. To resolve this contradiction, the men looked up the words "whore" and "sodomite" in Hebrew, discovering that "whore" in Hebrew was "qadeshah," meaning female prostitute--a reasonable translation. However, "sodomite," translated from the Hebrew word "qadesh," was a poor translation and should refer to male temple prostitutes. From this work, the men agreed the NIV passage was translated more accurately, leaving them to conclude that this scriptural passage condemned prostitution but not homosexuality.

As the men used this same procedure to systematically analyze the biblical verses they once read as condemning, they found, to their amazement, that such condemnation was missing. It seemed that the condemnation of homosexuality was not biblical truth but the result of human intolerance and misinterpretation of the Bible, much like the case with slavery. This new understanding freed them to embrace MCC's theology of inclusion, based in the many biblical examples of Jesus loving all people, that defined good Christians as those who followed his example and bad Christians as those who excluded others and treated them unequally. In doing so, these men not only came to believe it was possible to be gay and a good Christian, but they also turned the tables on Christians who condemned them; their exclusionary practices were sinful. As one member concluded, "I finally knew, and no one will ever tell me different, that I am a child of God, worthy for good things because of God's plan for me."

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<sup>3</sup> Liberation theology was developed and utilized as part of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. Put briefly, it rests of three key premises: 1) theology must be culturally contextual; 2) sin is defined as structural oppression of others--not simply individual wrong doing; and 3) salvation is construed not as a reward in the afterlife but as the construction of a just society in this life (Nepstad 1996: 110-111).

## Exodus: Healing Homosexuality through Christianity

While MCC reconciled the antagonism between homosexuality and Christianity by integrating homosexuality into a Christian identity, Exodus took an opposite approach. Founded in 1976, Exodus ministries are devoted to curing homosexuality through redemptive prayer. Despite these contrary approaches, Exodus is quite similar to MCC theologically; it too is rooted in conservative evangelical Protestantism. The key distinction is that Exodus believes that homosexuality is sinful. Exodus does not assert that homosexuality is innate or consciously chosen; instead, they perceive that it results from thwarted psychological development, caused by disruptions of important relationships (especially parent-child) at critical developmental junctures, and/or can be associated with masturbation, molestation or other forms of sexual abuse (Payne 1981, 1985; Davies and Rentzel 1993). In brief, Exodus posits that homosexuality most often results when a child does not achieve an emotional bond with a same-sex parent. This failure to bond can happen for any number of reasons--divorce, sexual or physical abuse, or even parental emotional detachment--but it creates an unconscious need for same-sex connection. This emotional need can become confused with burgeoning sexuality at puberty, giving rise to homosexual attractions. In other words, during puberty, a boy misinterprets his emotional need for male bonding as sexual attraction and can become a homosexual. The cure, put simply, is for the gay individual to develop a "right" relationship with God (his ultimate Father), which will allow God to step in, heal the broken psyche, and restore heterosexuality. If the individual wants to heal badly enough and, as the ex-gay group leader explained, "gets right with God," then he will be cured. This solution to the problem of being gay and Christian, like MCC's, has also appealed to large numbers of people, and Exodus, as of 2002, had 150 ministries in 17 countries (Chambers 2002).

When the men joined Exodus, they were comfortable with the group's theology and were instead anxious about their ability to change their sexuality. To reassure and guide the men toward sexual transformation, the support group used a process similar to MCC. First, the men had to learn that their belief that homosexuality was an especially damning sin was the result of human misinterpretation of the Bible. Through Bible study of passages like 1 Corinthians 6: 9-10, the men learned that homosexuality was ordinary sin, no worse or condemning than, for instance, adultery or stealing. Then, they had to perceive that their sexuality was not a mark of inherent individual deficiency, but rather it was a "sickness" or "disorder" that resulted from what others had done to them. While these steps diminished shame and opened the possibility of healing, the men still had to understand their pathology and take steps to correct it. To do so, the men were encouraged, in small group discussions, to explore their biographies and find what went wrong. The men recalled childhood molestations, repetitive masturbation, absent fathers, and/or a domineering mother and submissive father, and they came to see these situations as the root cause of their homosexuality. To be healed, they had to engage in sincere prayer, resist homosexual desires, and deal honestly with emotions. Group leaders told the men that healing would be a long process, but if they prayed and resisted temptation, then God would work to cure them.

In fact, becoming an ex-gay Christian did not necessarily mean successfully undergoing sexual transformation. Instead, these men learned to redefine being a good Christian as *struggling* to be righteous. As a group member explained, "all Christians struggle, but we who struggle with

sexual temptation, must work very hard to be righteous. Our path is more difficult, and we must push harder against evil.” Whether they experienced healing or not, the men came to perceive that it was their efforts to be righteous that were especially virtuous. In other words, these men learned to assess their worth as Christians through their struggle--not the transformation of sexual desire. Paradoxically, this reframing required that the men simultaneously distance themselves from homosexuality and embrace it as the temptation against which their mettle as Christians was measured.

### Individual and Societal Implications

Joining either group had immediate benefits including: higher self-esteem, lifted depression (in some instances, quelled suicidal impulses), more honest and satisfying personal relationships, and safer sexual practices. As a group, however, gay Christians tended to benefit more fully from their transformations than did ex-gay Christians. Gay Christians had gone through a process of accepting their homosexuality and were, for the most part, comfortable with it in the context of their faith and able to pursue fulfilling lives. For ex-gay Christians, the road was much tougher because making a successful transformation to an ex-gay Christian was not the same thing as successfully changing one’s sexuality. Becoming ex-gay meant that the men learned how to struggle against sexual temptations and to value that struggle; it did not necessarily mean that the men were able to alter their sexuality. In essence, while being an ex-gay Christian could (and sometimes did) mean that an individual had successfully developed heterosexual desires, it often meant that an individual was embroiled in a struggle against homosexuality that could, and perhaps was even likely to, fail.

While the sample here is too small for generalizations, findings indicate that about a third of the ex-gay men experienced some change in sexuality (e.g., felt more heterosexual than homosexual desires over an extended period of time). This change did not mean that they no longer felt homosexual urges, but rather that these urges were fewer and less intense, making it easier for the men to resist them. The rest of the men did not experience this kind of sexual change. Six men altered their sexual behavior but reported little change in same-sex desire. Four other men dropped out of the group because they had not experienced change and continued participation made them feel worse. The outcomes for individuals in this study are consistent with those found in other studies of sexual change (Erzen 2006; Spitzer 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Haldeman 1994) and anecdotal data<sup>4</sup> from past Executive Director of Exodus Bob Davies (2001). At present, the only conclusion possible from existing research is that some people can achieve some level of change sometimes.

Ex-gay ministries can backfire for individuals who do not experience change, making membership potentially debilitating. Exodus asserts that change is possible **if** an individual wants it badly enough and desires to live in obedience to God’s word. Failure to change thus becomes an individual failing; s/he did not desire to change/follow God enough. Some people, as in the case of three men in this study, pray for years for a change that does not come and

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<sup>4</sup> Beyond the above noted research, very few (if any) large-scale, reliable studies have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of reparative therapies for homosexuality. Further, because of its assurances of confidentiality to members, Exodus does not keep records of members and their success in groups. It is impossible to know how many Exodus members experience any or sustained change in their sexuality.

wonder, as one man put it, “why God had not healed [them]. What was wrong?” Others can come to believe that their lack of progress stems from their unworthiness or lack of true desire. In such cases, members may feel like “double failures,” sinful homosexuals and Christians too weak in their faith to elicit healing from God. Failure to be healed becomes their failure as Christians. Only one man in this study had this experience, but he reported that it made him “so depressed that [he] did not want to live.”

### Concluding Thoughts

While many people view gay affirming religious denominations and ex-gay ministries as polar opposites in a “culture war” (Hunter 1991), the groups have much in common and function to offer different resolutions to a shared cultural problem. As solutions, neither is perfect. MCC urges that we tolerate gay people because God made them gay, and they have no choice. In doing so, MCC advocates better treatment--a far better outcome than rejection, discrimination, or harassment--but their argument risks allowing people to imagine tolerance is enough in our society. When we are told to “tolerate” something or someone, we are developing a hierarchical relationship that makes it clear that *we* (the good, normative folks) must put up with *them* (the less worthy folks). Tolerance is not mutual respect, nor does it promote equal citizenship. And Exodus’ solution is worse. Their theory of homosexuality presents gay people as psychologically disordered. While the group does urge others to help homosexuals heal, it is still highlighting the idea that gay people are damaged and deficient, perpetuating the kind of thinking that research shows leads to discrimination and violence (Franklin 1998).

Intelligent, reasonable, and compassionate people--scholars, theologians, and members of faith communities--disagree about what the Bible says about homosexuality. But, if we do agree that our society should be built on justice and equity, then civil rights and full participation in social institutions cannot depend on whether we choose our sexuality or if we can change it. Rather, justice and equity demand that we remain open to building shared understandings of the world that enhance our opportunities to move forward collectively. A church provides key pathways through which members make sense of their lives *together*; a key, then, to the future of any just church is that it keep a multitude of paths open such that minorities are not forced from togetherness into second-class membership.

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