

The 'Ex-Gay' Myth

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Summary

The Anglican Church, like many others, is struggling on how to proceed with the tumultuous task of reconciling faith and homosexuality. Traditionalists want to cling to the long held view that this is a sin that can be overcome, while the opposition believes that new scientific and sociological information has changed the context of how this issue must be viewed and addressed.

In making their case, social conservatives will be tempted to use so-called “ex-gays” to show that gay people can convert to heterosexuality through a combination of prayer and therapy. The goal is to supposedly prove that homosexuality is a learned behavior or a result of parental abuse or neglect - and therefore not natural. They might point to examples of “former homosexuals” who claim that they prayed away the gay and now live completely heterosexual lives.

The “ex-gay” viewpoint collapses, however, when confronted with credible scientific studies, modern psychological data and rational evidence. Indeed, ex-gay groups keep no statistics showing their failure rate, nor do they publish peer-reviewed studies to prove their unsubstantiated claims. Many of the ex-gay leaders who once claimed to go straight, eventually came out of the closet or have been caught engaging in clandestine homosexual behavior. Here is a snapshot of the historical, empirical, psychological and biological knowledge on this controversial issue.

History and Empirical Evidence

In 1976, Exodus International was founded in Anaheim, California. Its spokespeople were Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper, who traveled the nation proclaiming they had prayed away the gay. The two eventually fell in love, left their families and eventually held a commitment ceremony.

In the late 1970's, Colin Cook founded Homosexuals Anonymous and appeared on various television shows, including Phil Donahue. But he had to step down for giving nude massages and having phone sex with his clients.

With such an ignominious record, the gay community and social conservatives soundly rejected the ex-gay myth. Indeed, the ex-gay concept never gained much traction until AIDS hit the gay community in the early 1980's.

“The impact of AIDS on the work of Exodus has been profound,” former Exodus President Sy Rogers said in *One Nation Under God*. As the epidemic raged, some men were literally scared straight - or at least into making the futile attempt.

Still, while the numbers inside these ministries increased, the idea remained an obscure oddity on the religious fringes. Even by the mid-1990's it had not entered the consciousness

of mainstream Americans and certainly was not part of national political debates on gay rights.

This dynamic radically changed in the politically tumultuous summer of 1998, when ex-gay ministries were thrust out of nowhere onto the political stage. It started when Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), on a conservative television show, compared homosexuality to alcoholism and kleptomania and recommended that a gay person should try to “control that problem.”

Lott was blasted in the media and his remarks were even called “backwards” by Clinton White House Press Secretary Mike McCurry. Aside from Lott’s remarks, there was a flurry of anti-gay legislation winding its way through Congress and conservatives had also placed a hold on the confirmation process of James Hormel, who Clinton nominated to be Ambassador to Luxembourg.

Politically, conservative power had reached its pinnacle with Newt Gingrich (R-GA) as House Speaker and Lott in charge of the Senate. The conservative base expected to be rewarded for helping elect Republican majorities. With a midterm election only months away, Focus on the Family’s James Dobson threatened to pull his support unless the Republican Congress passed anti-gay legislation.

However, times had changed and outright gay bashing no longer played well with the soccer moms and affluent suburbanites that Republicans needed to maintain their congressional majority. They needed to appease their base by passing anti-gay laws, but without alienating moderates by appearing gratuitously intolerant.

The right wing’s answer was enthusiastically jumping on the ex-gay bandwagon. With this strategy, they could claim that they “loved” homosexuals, while systematically denying them equal rights.

On July 13, 1998, 15 right wing organizations, including the Christian Coalition, Coral Ridge Ministries and the Family Research Council, launched \$1 million dollar advertising campaign featuring “former homosexuals.” The kicked-off the blitz with a full-page ad in The New York Times featuring a former lesbian below the screaming headline, “I’m Living Proof That the Truth Can Set You Free.” This was followed by full-page ads in major daily newspapers, including The Washington Post and USA Today. There was also a television campaign that featured Michael Johnston, an ex-gay who was HIV-positive, whose mother warned about the dangers of the so-called “homosexual lifestyle.”

The ads were a media sensation that headlined news programs from the Today Show to Nightline. At the campaign’s apex, ex-gay couple John and Anne Paulk graced the cover of Newsweek under the headline, “Gay for Life.” The effort was deemed so successful, that Bob Knight, who then worked at the Family Research Council, called the onslaught, the “Normandy landing in the larger cultural wars.”

The Great Unraveling

In the end, this campaign looked more like Vietnam than World War II for social conservatives. They never took into account that ex-gay simply meant a change in sexual behavior, not an actual shift in orientation. On September 19, 2000 they learned the hard way, after Focus on the Family’s ex-gay poster boy and Exodus chairman John Paulk was photographed in a Washington, DC gay bar.

Even more devastating, it was alleged in August 2003 that the HIV positive Michael Johnston had engaged in unsafe sex with men he had met on the Internet. As a result, he abandoned his ex-gay ministry and retreated to a sex addiction facility in Kentucky, with the American Family Association acknowledging he had a “moral fall.”

If this wasn't bad enough, another ex-gay spokesperson, Anthony Falzarano, held a media conference at the National Press Club to complain that the right wing group's who sponsored the campaign were only interested in passing anti-gay laws, not helping people go straight.

“Many of us in the ex-gay movement feel we are being used,” said Falzarano at his press conference. “We did that very successful newspaper campaign last year...the Christian Coalition didn't send us a dime...all we are asking for is possibly some money to pay for postage stamps.”

With the two biggest male stars of the 1998 effort revealed as frauds and the third loudly condemning the ad sponsors, the right wing was humiliated and tiptoed away from the ex-gay message for several years.

Out of Exile

The reelection of George W. Bush greatly emboldened social conservatives, who the media credited with the president's victory, because they brought so-called “values voters” to the polls droves. As a result, they expected Bush to spend his political capital on passing the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would rewrite the U.S. Constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage.

Looking ahead at the marriage battle, right wing organizations were confronted with some harsh numbers:

- A May 2007 Gallup Poll found that an increasing percentage of Americans believe homosexuality is something a person is born with. The poll showed 42 percent express such a view compared to 13 percent in 1977. And the percentage of Americans who believe homosexuality is due to factors such as upbringing and environment fell from 56 percent in 1977 to 35 percent today.
- A November 2004 Lake, Snell, Perry and Associates poll shows that 79 percent of people who think homosexuality is inborn support civil unions or marriage equality. Among those who believe sexual orientation is a choice, only 22 percent support civil unions or marriage rights.

Such consistent numbers don't lie. Nature vs. Nurture is clearly the defining question in the battle over gay and lesbian equality. Right wing groups knew that the key to passing the Federal Marriage Amendment was turning these numbers around by fooling as many Americans as possible into believing homosexuality is a learned behavior that could be overcome through prayer and therapy. They had no choice but to return to promoting the ex-gay ministries.

To insulate them from another potential meltdown, the right shifted its rhetoric. They now claimed that people did not choose their attractions, but they could still choose to change their orientation through prayer and examining the “roots” of their homosexuality – which is mostly blamed, without evidence, on poor parenting. Casting homosexuality as chronic

malady, rather than something that could be miraculously cured, made embracing the ex-gay strategy a bit less risky.

Conservatives also needed the ex-gay ministries because their own children were coming out at unprecedented rates and they needed a way to cope. In the past several years we have seen the coming out of Dick Cheney's daughter, Alan Keyes's daughter, Phyllis Schlafly's son, and Randall Terry's stepson – among others. With ex-gay ministries, conservatives could claim to love their gay children, while condemning their “sinful” behavior. In essence, it was a compromise position that allowed many of these leaders to retain their status in social conservative circles without abandoning their offspring.

Suddenly, ex-gays were back on the scene and, once again, the main weapon used to fight against gay and lesbian equality. In one ad opposing federal hate crimes legislation, four ex-gay leaders stood, arms crossed, under the headline, “Hate Crime Laws Say We Were More Valuable As Homosexuals Than We Are Now As Former Homosexuals.” The ad also urges readers to call a U.S. Senator to demand he votes against the legislation.

In another ad, Alan Chambers is embracing his wife, Leslie, under the headline, “I Questioned Homosexuality.” The sub-headline reads: “By finding my way out of a gay identity, I found the love of my life in the process. Gay marriage would only have blinded me to such an incredible joy.”

What conversion therapy has to do with either opposing hate crimes legislation or same-sex marriage is unclear. However, Chambers summed best summed up why ex-gays are so crucial to efforts against GLBT equality: “Our existence as ex-gays is additional proof that homosexuality is not an immutable trait and therefore, marriage is not a civil right to be extended to any group of individuals who demand it.”

By June 2006 the ex-gay message had become so central to the anti-gay industry, that President Bush invited Chambers and his deputy Randy Thomas to the White House to lobby in favor of the Federal Marriage Amendment. Thomas also posted pictures on his website where he is posing with both Newt Gingrich and Bush strategist Karl Rove.

Exposing the Ex-Gay Myth

With the support of Focus on the Family's fundraising machine, Exodus has grown into a million dollar a year operation and has a twelve staff. It has also extended its operations across the globe and expanded Exodus Youth, its teen program. This summer Exodus has teamed up with Ignite Student Outreach to launch camps to impart the ex-gay message to Christian youth leaders.

In response to the mounting ex-gay threat, a vibrant new infrastructure has finally arisen to fight back. The day that Chambers appeared at the White House, Truth Wins Out was founded (www.TruthWinsOut.org), a nonprofit organization that debunks the ex-gay ministries and counters right wing disinformation campaigns. A daily blog, Ex-Gay Watch, monitors these groups and serves as a daily news service. Additionally, a new website, www.BeyondExGay.com, tells the stories of former ex-gay victims and helps them heal from the trauma.

Battling the underlying misuse of science are groups such as the Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists and The Rockway Institute, which brings together scientific and professional expertise to counter antigay prejudice.

Fortunately, these efforts are made easier by ex-gay organizations themselves, which often expose their true nature. For example, Chambers professes he loves homosexuals, then betrays his words in his newsletter, Exodus Impact.

“One of the many evils this world has to offer is the sin of homosexuality,” writes Chambers. “Satan, the enemy, is using people to further his agenda to destroy the Kingdom of God and as many souls as he can.”

The main ex-gay therapy group, the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), virtually imploded in 2006 after two major controversies. In the first, psychiatrist Joseph Berger, M.D., a member of their "Scientific Advisory Committee" wrote a paper encouraging students to "ridicule" gender variant children.

"I suggest, indeed, letting children who wish go to school in clothes of the opposite sex -- but not counseling other children to not tease them or hurt their feelings," Dr. Berger wrote on NARTH's website. "On the contrary, don't interfere, and let the other children ridicule the child who has lost that clear boundary between play-acting at home and the reality needs of the outside world. Maybe, in this way, the child will re-establish that necessary boundary."

In the second controversy, Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D., also a member of NARTH's "Scientific Advisory Committee," wrote a polemic on the group's website that seemed to justify slavery.

"With all due respect, there is another way, or other ways, to look at the race issue in America," wrote Schoenewolf. It could be pointed out, for example, that Africa at the time of slavery was still primarily a jungle, as yet uncivilized or industrialized. Life there was savage, as savage as the jungle for most people, and that it was the Africans themselves who first enslaved their own people. They sold their own people to other countries, and those brought to Europe, South America, America, and other countries, were in many ways better off than they had been in Africa. But if one even begins to say these things one is quickly shouted down as though one were a complete madman."

The reaction to the essay from the National Black Justice Coalition and the Southern Poverty Law Center led to an article in the *Los Angeles Times*. The fallout from this controversy helped cause NARTH's co-founder and President, Dr. Joseph Nicolosi to be voted out of his job at the group's annual meeting.

However, the most potent way to highlight the inanity of the ex-gay myth is simply putting their odd spokespeople on television. In March, the International Healing Foundation's Richard Cohen appeared on Comedy Central's, *The Daily Show With John Stewart*.

To prove he was heterosexual, Cohen belched and cursed and when he was feeling the heat, he got up in the middle of the interview to "shake it off." Then he proceeded to bang a pillow while yelling his mother's name, to supposedly heal him from old wounds. The display looked so utterly ridiculous that even the other ex-gay organizations, such as Exodus, distanced themselves from him.

However, this was somewhat disingenuous, in that some Exodus ministries tell clients to wear a rubber band on their wrists and snap it when they see someone attractive. One ministry, Love in Action, times clients in while they are in the bathroom to ensure they are not masturbating and repossesses their underwear if the undergarments appear too gay.

Even more psychologically damaging are the mind games employed by Love in Action to maintain the façade of heterosexuality.

"I'm looking at that wall and suddenly I say it's blue," Love in Action's leader John Smid once told the *Memphis Flyer*, while pointing to a yellow wall. "Someone else comes along and says, 'No, it's gold.' But I want to believe that wall is blue. Then God comes along and He says, 'You're right, John, [that yellow wall] is blue.' That's the help I need. God can help me make that [yellow] wall blue."

The requirement of such denial is why every mainstream medical and mental health organization in America rejects attempts to change sexual orientation.

Psychology

Every respected medical and mental health organization in America rejects conversion therapy on the grounds that it can hurt clients and there is no evidence of its efficacy. Here is what the major health organizations have to say about the issue:

American Psychiatric Association

- "There is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of 'reparative therapy' as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation. It is not described in the scientific literature, nor is it mentioned in the APA's latest comprehensive Task Force Report, *Treatments of Psychiatric Disorders* (1989).
- "Clinical experience suggests that any person who seeks conversion therapy may be doing so because of social bias that has resulted in internalized homophobia, and that gay men and lesbians who have accepted their sexual orientation positively are better adjusted than those who have not done so."

American Psychological Association

- For over three decades the consensus of the mental health community has been that homosexuality is not an illness and therefore not in need of a cure. The APA's concern about the position's espoused by NARTH and so-called conversion therapy is that they are not supported by the science. There is simply no sufficiently scientifically sound evidence that sexual orientation can be changed. Our further concern is that the positions espoused by NARTH and Focus on the Family create an environment in which prejudice and discrimination can flourish. **(August 10, 2006)**
- "In 1990, the American Psychological Association stated that scientific evidence does not show that conversion therapy works and that it can do more harm than good. Changing one's sexual orientation is not simply a matter of changing one's sexual behavior. It would require altering one's emotional, romantic and sexual feelings and restructuring one's self-concept and social identity.

American Medical Association

- "Most of the emotional disturbance experienced by gay men and lesbians around their sexual identity is not based on physiological causes but rather is due more to a sense of alienation in an unaccepting environment. For this reason, aversion therapy (a behavioral or medical intervention which pairs unwanted behavior, in this case,

homosexual behavior, with unpleasant sensations or aversive consequences) is no longer recommended for gay men and lesbians. Through psychotherapy, gay men and lesbians can become comfortable with their sexual orientation and understand the societal response to it.”

American Academy Of Pediatrics

- “The psychosocial problems of gay and lesbian adolescents are primarily the result of societal stigma, hostility, hatred and isolation. The gravity of these stresses is underscored by current data that document that gay youths account for up to 30 percent of all completed adolescent suicides. Approximately 30 percent of a surveyed group of gay and bisexual males have attempted suicide at least once. Adolescents struggling with issues of sexual preference should be reassured that they will gradually form their own identity and that there is no need for premature labeling of one’s sexual orientation.”

National Association Of Social Workers

- “Social workers are guided by the NASW Code of Ethics which bans discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. . . NASW believes that non judgmental attitudes toward sexual orientation allow social workers to offer optimal support and services to lesbian and gay people. NASW affirms its commitment to work toward full social and legal acceptance of lesbian and gay people. The profession must also act to eliminate and prevent discriminatory statutes, policies, and actions that diminish the quality of life for lesbian and gay people and that force many to live their lives in the closet.”

American Counseling Association

- “The American Counseling Association has adopted a resolution that states that it: “opposes portrayals of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and adults as mentally ill due to their sexual orientation; and supports the dissemination of accurate information about sexual orientation, mental health, and appropriate interventions in order to counteract bias that is based on ignorance or unfounded beliefs about same-gender sexual orientation.” [Resolution adopted by American Counseling Association Governing Council, March 1998.] Further, at its 1999 World Conference, ACA adopted a position opposing the promotion of “reparative therapy” as a “cure” for individuals who are homosexual. [Action by American Counseling Association Governing Council, April 1999.]”

Biology

Over the past twenty years, the burgeoning field of sexual orientation research is offering revolutionary findings and insight into the origins of sexuality. Here is a snapshot of several key studies:

* A June 2006 Canadian study published in the journal, “Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences,” said that nature, instead of nurture, explains the origins of homosexuality. The study’s author, Prof. Anthony F. Bogaert, at Brock University in Ontario, explored the causes behind what is known as the fraternal birth order. The research showed a correlation between the number of biological older brothers a man has and his sexual orientation. Dividing his sample of more than 900 heterosexual and homosexual men into four groups, Bogaert examined the impact of all types of older brothers, including step and adopted siblings, and the amount of time brothers spent

together while growing up. His research found that only the number of biological brothers had an impact on sexuality, regardless of whether the boys were raised together.

* A study released in May 2006 by Swedish scientists demonstrates that biology plays a key role in determining a person's sexuality. The research shows that the portion of the brain that helps regulate sexuality – the hypothalamus - reacted the exact same way in straight women and gay men when exposed to male pheromones, which are chemicals designed to provoke a behavior, such as sexual arousal. The same area of the brain only became stimulated in heterosexual men when introduced to female pheromones.

* In 2005, Dr. Brian Mustanski of the University of Illinois at Chicago published a study in the esteemed biomedical journal *Human Genetics*, claiming he identified three chromosomal regions linked to sexual orientation in men: 7q36, 8p12 and 10q26.

* In 2003, University of Texas psychoacoustics specialist Dennis McFadden found that when measuring the way the brain reacts to sound, lesbians fell in between heterosexual men and straight women, suggesting they might be exposed to higher than normal levels of male hormone in utero.

* In 2003, University of Liverpool biologist John T. Manning found that the lesbians whom he studied have a hand pattern that resembles a man's more than a straight female's. Manning concluded from his study that this “strongly tells us that female homosexuals have had higher levels of exposure to testosterone before birth.”

* In 1993, the National Institute of Health's Dean Hamer illustrated that homosexuality might be inherited from the mother by her sons through a specific region of the X chromosome (Xq28). Hamer demonstrated this by noting that 33 out of 40 pairs of homosexual brothers whom he studied showed the same variation in the tip of the chromosome.

* A 1991 study by Dr. Simon LeVay found that the hypothalamus is twice as large in heterosexual men as it is in women or gay men. This strongly points to biological influences on sexual orientation.

* Another 1991 study by scientists Richard Pillard and John M. Bailey studied homosexuality among brothers and found that 53 percent of identical twins were both gay. In adoptive brothers, 11 percent were both homosexual. Of non-twin biological siblings, 9 percent were gay. Again, this points to solid evidence that homosexuality is a matter of nature.

These inconvenient new facts drive right wing ideologues crazy. They rely on ignorance of basic biology to distort these findings and undermine their significance. For example, they falsely claim that Pillard's and Bailey's study proves homosexuality isn't genetic because if it were, the identical twins would all be gay. But the right fails to point out that identical twins are not identical in every way. For example, handedness is not always shared by identical twins – but no one claims that left-handedness is a moral choice that can be changed through prayer.

The right also claims that there is no gay gene, because none has specifically been found and isolated to definitively solve the mystery of sexual orientation. As Chandler Burr, author of *A Separate Creation*, points out, this is a sophistic argument.

“No one questions that blue eyes occur more frequently in Caucasians than in Asians, but we don't know this by finding genes for eye color; we know it by clinical

observation of the distribution of eye color in people all over the world,” wrote Burr. “No one questions that about 7.8 percent of all human beings are left-handed, but we don’t get that information from genes - in fact, as of yet, we have no idea where the genes for handedness are - we get it, again, from clinical observation.”

Scientists who have studied the issue are certain that the ancient puzzle of sexual orientation will be solved sooner than later. “It’s not a matter of whether we’ll find homosexuality’s basic mechanisms, it’s a matter of when,” researcher Dennis McFadden told the *Los Angeles Times*.

The Anglican Church should thoroughly examine what the experts have to say about this issue, as well as the empirical evidence when hearing tales of “change” from ex-gays. The truth is, history, observation and modern medicine all agree that attempts to change sexual orientation are a bad idea that causes anxiety, depression, and self-destructive behavior, including suicide.