

Are Sexual Preferences Changeable?

By Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.

"(Wayne) Besen tracks down a dizzying array of former ex-gay leaders who later came out of the closet for good, including the two founders of Exodus."

-- from an article by Mark Benjamin on Salon.com, July 18, 2005.

The article containing the above quote is entitled, "Turning Off Gays" and is the first of a four part series on the Internet site, *Salon.com*. The series is billed as "an investigation into the Christian netherworld of 'reparative therapy,' a disputed practice to convert gays and lesbians into heterosexuals." The topic is important to many due to the current curiosity, both scientific and popular, regarding the nature of sexual orientation.

Are sexual preferences changeable? Activist Wayne Besen, quoted above, has made a career out of claiming that such change is impossible. As evidence, the *Salon* article, referencing Mr. Besen, claims that there were two founders of a prominent organization of former homosexuals, Exodus International, and that both of them reverted to homosexuality.

The Facts

Are these claims accurate? Let me cut to the chase. Mostly, they are not true. In fact, after investigating the matter, I found that there were more than two people on the founding board of Exodus. Of these founders, only one reverted to homosexuality. Furthermore, one of the two men referred to by Mr. Besen was never in leadership with Exodus. Here are the details.

Exodus International is a distinctly religious organization offering services and referrals to people who experience conflict between their sexual feelings and Christian beliefs. However, detractors, such as Mr. Besen, often say that the message and mission of Exodus is compromised due to the failure of the co-founders of the organization to remain heterosexual. Mr. Besen claims that Michael Bussee and Gary Cooper were the co-founders of Exodus International but left the organization to become gay partners.

The second claim is true. As documented in the 1992 film *One Nation Under God*, these two men did indeed leave their families in 1979 and participated in a commitment ceremony in 1982.

However, the first claim is false. Mr. Cooper and Mr. Bussee were not the co-founders of Exodus International.

Concerning Gary Cooper, in no way can he be considered a founder of Exodus. Mr. Cooper, who died of complications from HIV/AIDS in 1989, was a volunteer with Mr. Bussee's ministry, called Exit (Ex-gay Intervention Team) based in Anaheim, CA. By all accounts, he was never on the Exodus Board.

Mr. Bussee, however, did help arrange a meeting of ex-gay lead-

ers that eventually came to be considered the first Exodus conference and which led to the formation of the Exodus organization in 1975.

The original board of Exodus included five formerly gay identified people, including Mr. Bussee. The incorporators of the group included Frank Worthen, Ron Dennis and Greg Reid. None of these men have returned to homosexuality and two of the three are still in ex-gay ministry. One other original board member, although still straight, requested his name not be included in this article. *Let's do the math: four out of five of the founding board have not returned to a gay identity.* It seems to me that fair reporting about ex-gay organizations requires an examination of such details.

Inquiring Minds Want To Know

In contrast, the *Salon* article depicts a situation in crisis. Jack Drescher, chair of the American Psychiatric Association's Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues claims that, "We are finding that the numbers of people claiming to be harmed by reparative therapy are increasing." Although I agree that some people leave ex-gays programs feeling disillusioned, the available research does not support Dr. Drescher's dire assessment. For instance, in a recent study of 2000 episodes of counseling with 600 gays, only 13 episodes were identified as involving sexual reorientation therapy. *The floodgates appear to be safe.*

In Summary

Just so this is clear, let's re-cap. **Gary Cooper was not one the co-founders of Exodus. Michael Bussee was on the original board. These married men were involved in an ex-gay ministry in Anaheim, then left their wives and children and returned to a public gay identity. Of the five formerly gay men on the original board of Exodus International, four have not reverted to homosexuality. Frank Worthen and Ron Dennis continue to lead ex-gay organizations. The other two original board members were rumored to have returned to a gay identity but according to both men, this is not true. Thus, 80% of the original Exodus board members are still ex-gay after 30 years.**

What is the importance of these observations? If studied objectively, the longevity of change reported by these Exodus leaders could be an important contribution to our understanding of sexuality. While such understanding may not be the result Mr. Besen seeks, inquiring minds may want to know more.

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