

***Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-Vs.-Christians Debate*, Justin Lee (2012)
A review by Rowland Croucher**

Justin Lee founded the Gay Christian Network, which is quite unique: it actually offers 'pro and con make up your own mind' approaches to all of the relevant questions. And it has spawned small groups of like-minded Christian LGBTI people around the world. (I had the privilege of speaking to one of their Melbourne meetings: people were there from other Australian states and NZ).

Justin has an interesting background. He was (is?) a Southern Baptist. His family was so conservative that there was never any alcohol in their home – not even for cooking! He and his siblings had a secure and loving relationship with their committed Christian parents. (This created a problem for advocates of 'ex-gay ministries' who tried to probe into his past to rationalize his gayness with their dysfunctional parent/child theories. And, by the way, do you know any other gay people who dedicate their book to their Christian parents?).

The flavour of the book is predominantly respectful and irenic. He's a 'soft apologist' using phrases like 'it seems to me', 'I don't have all the answers on this' etc. – which I hope will challenge those on the 'hard edges' of this debate.

But I note that towards the end he's uncompromising about his position on the dangers of 'ex-gay ministries' and his strong doubts that they have turned *any* gay person towards heterosexuality from a same-sex orientation. He strongly suggests that we distinguish between same-sex *attraction* and *behaviour*: a gay person who marries someone of the other gender is not 'healed' of their same-sex orientation. Not ever? Hardly ever? Justin says 'In my experience talking to hundreds of these people, *never!*'.

He's also strident about conservative churches shooting themselves in the foot in terms of their antipathy towards 'the gay lifestyle'. There's a popular bumper-sticker in America: 'Lord, save us from your followers!' Justin cites Evangelical author Philip Yancey, who in his excellent book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* writes: 'Recently I have been asking a question of strangers – for example, people sitting next to me on an airplane: "When I say the words 'Evangelical Christian' what comes to mind?" In reply mostly I hear political descriptions of strident pro-life activists, or gay-rights opponents, or proposals for censoring the Internet. I hear references to the Moral Majority, an organization disbanded years ago. Not once – *not once* – have I heard a description redolent of grace. Apparently that is not the aroma Christians give off in the world.'

He also cites the Barna Group's research about why young adults are leaving the church in droves: 'In our research, the perception that Christians are "against" gays and lesbians... has reached critical mass. The gay issue has become "the big one", the negative image most likely to be intertwined with Christianity's reputation... Outsiders say our hostility towards gays – not just opposition to homosexual politics and behaviours but disdain for gay individuals – has become virtually synonymous with the Christian faith'.

Two days after the horrifying 9/11 terrorist attacks Evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell blamed gays in part for what he viewed as a sign of God's wrath on America: 'I point the

finger in their face and say, “You helped this happen!”.’ His Evangelical friend Pat Robertson agreed: ‘I totally concur’.

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If I post something on my Facebook page about LGBTI issues, I can always guarantee 100+ pro-and-con comments.

This polarization is world-wide. Justin tells us about the Church of Sweden – the largest denomination in that country – making headlines in 2009 for voting to begin performing same-sex wedding ceremonies. But at about the same time some Christian leaders in Uganda backed a bill to execute gay people.

Growing up, Justin Lee was nicknamed ‘God boy’. His sole purpose was to serve God. He didn’t know any gay people and was quite sure that if ‘homosexuality was a sin’ God wouldn’t have made them that way. He had a girlfriend in his teens, and wondered why he wasn’t sexually attracted to her, but was attracted to other guys... His foray into a ‘support group for gays’ run by his pastor was short-lived. ‘These men were living in constant turmoil. They were trying their best to live as they believed God wanted them to, but they weren’t happy’.

When he finally ‘came out’ to his parents, they ‘listened and tried to understand...’ [but] there ensued ‘difficult, heated arguments sometimes’. But, Justin says, ‘I know many other kids who had it much worse. Some parents have kicked their kids out, disowned them, and written them out of their wills. Some have even told their kids they wished they were dead’.

So what are we asking gay kids to do? ‘Asking children to keep such a thing a secret isn’t just asking them not to reveal information; it is often asking them to lie deliberately or otherwise deceive people in order to prevent the truth from being uncovered. That kind of behaviour tends to wear at one’s moral fiber over time’.

And gay people differ from one another in terms of their lifestyle. On this point no universal generalizations fit. Tony Campolo’s wife Peggy often says she and Madonna are both straight women, but they live very different lifestyles. There are gay sex offenders, and straight sex offenders out there...

Justin’s advice to parents: ‘Resist the temptation to make it about you. Focus on being there for your child.... I don’t believe there’s anything parents can do to prevent their children from being gay.’

So Why Are People Gay?

Justin makes the point (again) that he’s talking about same-sex *attraction* not *behaviors*. A gay person is attracted to someone of the same sex; ‘straight’ people are attracted to people of the opposite sex; someone who is ‘bisexual’ is attracted to both sexes. Further: ‘Most people can agree that while we do choose our *behaviors*, we don’t get to choose to whom we are *attracted*’ (italics his). ‘I know lots of kids who were horrified when they realized they were gay, either because of their moral beliefs or because of prejudice against gay people

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among their family and friends. Like me they would never have chosen to be gay, but they were anyway’.

Were gay people abused in the past? ‘My short answer is that I wasn’t sexually abused, and studies show the majority of gay people weren’t either.’

The ‘reparative drive’ model says people are gay because of problems with their parents. Freud provided the theoretical foundation for this idea, which became popular in the early 1960s by a psychologist named Irving Bieber. He reckoned male homosexuality was *always* the result of poor parenting...’ He claimed that ‘a constructive, supportive, warmly related father *precludes* the possibility of a homosexual son’.

In Christian circles Bieber’s model was popularized by Elizabeth Moberly, a theologian and psychologist. In her book *Homosexuality: A New Christian Ethic* she ‘theorized that if a child had a distant same-sex parent, he or she was left with an emotional deficit... a subconscious drive would kick in to try to repair’ that need.

So are gays born not made that way? Some Christians ‘have argued that if gay sex is a sin God wouldn’t have allowed people to be born with a biological attraction to the same sex... That doesn’t seem to be a very good argument to me. Just because an attraction or drive is biological doesn’t mean it’s okay to act on, so whether behavior is sinful or not doesn’t tell us anything about whether the related attraction has biological roots.’ My – Rowland’s – comment: Justin has a minority view on this compared with that of other Christian gays I’ve spoken to.

Further, says Justin: ‘There is evidence that gay people’s brains are built differently from straight people’s of the same sex.’ More: ‘On the average, gay men have more older brothers than straight men.’ Based on all the studies, many scientists now believe that sexual orientation is related to the hormone levels a baby experiences during its development in the womb... In his 2011 book *Gay, Straight and the Reason Why* esteemed researcher Simon LeVay reviews the many different theories and studies on the subject, concluding that “Sexual orientation is an aspect of gender that emerges from the prenatal sexual differentiation of the brain. Whether a person ends up gay or straight depends in large part on how the process of biological differentiation goes forward, with the lead actors being genes, sex hormones, and the brain systems that are influenced by them.’ [2]

But, Justin notes, to end this explosive chapter (5: *Why Are People Gay?*):

There are still many unanswered questions. and

No ‘gay gene’ has yet been found, and

Bisexual attraction (which is barely explored in the research) is much more common
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among women than among men, and

‘It’s tempting to choose a theory that we think will fit better our political or theological worldview. If you believe that gay relationships are sinful, it’s more appealing to assume that gay feelings result from childhood trauma – because if people are born with them,

that leads to the uncomfortable thought that God might have *created* people with a deep longing for intimacy and no legitimate means to fulfil it. Conversely, if you are an advocate for gay rights, it might be much more appealing to assume that sexual orientation is inborn; research shows that people are more likely to be sympathetic to gay rights measures if they believe people are born gay or straight... My own personal guess is that biology plays at least a significant role in all this... The important thing is to keep an open mind and listen compassionately to people's stories'.

In Ex-Gayland

Justin: 'What kind of ministry takes a person who thinks he has a wonderful relationship with his father and convinces him that he actually had a bad one? This was feeling less and less like the work of God to me'... 'I thought that "ex-gays" were people who used to be gay but now were straight – attracted to the opposite sex. That turned out not to be true.' In terms of the people who have been through 'ex-gay' reparative therapies: 'There was one thing missing in all of their testimonies. None of them seemed to be becoming straight. They had changed their behaviours, sometimes in dramatic ways. Some had not had any sexual contact in years. Others had gone so far as to date and marry a member of the opposite sex. But almost universally, when I asked, they confessed that they still had the same kind of same-sex attractions I did... Instead of using "gay" to mean "attracted to the same sex," [these ministries] redefined it to refer to sexual *behaviours* they were no longer engaging in... For all the ex-gay talk of this journey towards becoming straight, no one ever seemed to actually get there.'

Then there were the charlatans, the most publicized of whom was the self-described 'recovered homosexual' Colin Cook, who for years engaged in sexual contact and phone sex with his male counselees. [3] The founders of the largest ex-gay ministry, Exodus International, Michael Busse and Gary Cooper, after confessing they were in love with each other saw their marriages disintegrate. Then there was John Paulk, cited by James Dobson in his book *Bringing Up Boys* as the best proof that gay people can become straight, quoting psychologist George Rekers – 'the same man who would find scandal in 2010 for hiring a male escort as a travel companion'. And: 'Alan Chambers, Exodus's current president, has openly admitted that he continues to be attracted to men even though he's married to a woman.'

Conclusion at this point: '[So-called] "ex-gays" haven't actually become straight. They are still attracted to their own sex. By most people's definitions, they're still "gay".'

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We were not meant to be alone.

'Seeing that Adam was alone, God did not simply say, "I am sufficient for you"; nor did God expect Adam to meet those needs with a *friend*... [And] I knew I would never feel comfortable in my own home trying to "play marriage" with someone I felt nothing for... When I became close friends with a guy I really cared about, I felt all kinds of happy, intoxicating, silly, tender, exciting feelings bubbling to the surface, feelings I had to suppress because I knew he could never return them... I had never considered that someone might some day return them. Just considering this possibility made my heart leap for joy like almost nothing I had ever experienced. I began imagining what it might

be like to fall in love with someone who loved me back. For a moment I felt amazing, like nothing in the world could touch me.'

Attitudes of Christians

'The Christians I knew typically assumed it was all a matter of choice, so admitting the truth about my feelings only subjected me to ostracism, misunderstandings, and the brand of "unrepentant sinner".'

The pastor said 'If you did enter a relationship, we'd have to ask you to leave. But that's the same way we would respond to, say, a heterosexual man in an adulterous relationship.'

When Justin 'came out' to friends in his favourite Christian chat room, insisting that he was not there to 'recruit' anybody or start any debates 'but [I am] pursuing God with my whole heart... [he was told] "Sorry, we don't allow gay people in the chat".' That was the last time he visited that Christian chat room.

Proverbs 18:13: 'To answer before listening – that is folly and shame'. Justin writes: '[I learned] Christians weren't such great people to be around if you were gay. They might lecture you, talk down to you, or quote the Bible at you, but they weren't very likely to make you feel loved. Quite the opposite. But all my close friends were Christians. I didn't have anyone else to talk to.'

Some weren't 'just saying that I should become straight, [but] it was *my fault* I was attracted to guys; that I had somehow made it happen; that even if I fought those temptations with every ounce of my being, never lusted in my heart and never had any kind of sexual or romantic relationship for the rest of my life, I was still sinning just by admitting I was gay... [even if they] acknowledged I might never be able to change.'

Conclusive proof?

An 'ex-gay leader' gave a talk at Justin's campus Christian group. Question time:

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Justin: 'You said in your presentation that we should reject the biological theories, because there's no conclusive proof that there's a biological link'.

Speaker: 'That's right'.

Justin: 'But then you told us that it's really because of distant fathers and overbearing mothers. Is there any conclusive proof of that?'

'He looked at me like a deer caught in headlights. I felt bad for asking the question. He looked genuinely shocked, like no one had ever asked him that before.'

“No,” he said simply.'

Later, over lunch, 'he [tried] to find something that made my childhood imperfect. I was a rarity, a happy kid raised in a two-parent Christian home by his biological mother and

father, with no divorce, adoption, abuse, or trauma, having plenty of one-on-one time with his father, bonding well with both parents – I was a minority within a minority, growing up in the kind of environment few children are privileged enough to experience. And that was driving him crazy!’

‘As the yeast of misinformation about gay people has spread through the church, it has turned the church not only into the perceived enemy of gays, but into its own worst enemy as well.’ (italics mine). In the words of author Bruce Bawer: ‘They [some gay people] think that their enemy is conscious oppression and that their salvation lies in the amassing of power, when in fact their enemy is ignorance, and their salvation lies in increased understanding.’

Which leads us to the issue of

‘Gay Lifestyle’

A common response to media images of gays cavorting with bare buttocks at ‘Mardi Gras’ events etc. runs something like this: ‘If that’s what homosexuality is about it’s utterly incompatible with Christianity/decency.’ Justin Lee would agree: ‘While admitting I was gay, I felt the need to constantly apologize or explain myself. I didn’t want to be associated with the kind of hedonistic, sex-obsessed lifestyle that was my only image of gay people.’ [But I discovered that] ‘millions of gay Americans didn’t fit the stereotypes... Thanks to books like Bruce Bawer’s *A Place at the Table* and Mel White’s *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*, I realized that there was more to being gay than the images I had seen.’

Further: ‘I was a people-pleaser. I was shy. I was uncomfortable with my sexuality. And I was terrified to be seen sitting at the same table as the president of the campus gay student group.’

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‘[But] I had a horrible choice: ... Condemn [my]self to a lifetime of faking it, or condemn myself to an eternity in hell... I didn’t drink. I didn’t smoke. I didn’t like to dance. I was just a sheltered Southern Baptist boy who wanted to serve God and couldn’t help being attracted to other guys... [And] the suicide daydreams got more regular and more vivid.’

Back to the Bible

‘My Christian friends believed I had chosen to be gay and that I could simply choose not to be – something I knew wasn’t true... [They quoted] Leviticus 18:22: “Don’t lie with a man as with a woman.” Period. End of story.’

‘[But] among other things Leviticus 18-20 also condemns shaving, wearing mixed fabrics, getting tattoos, sowing different crops in the same field, and sexual activity during a woman’s period.’

Were these commandments *moral* or *cultural*? Nowhere in the Old Testament was there any differentiation. ‘Nowhere in the entire Bible does it say that the commandment against wearing mixed fabrics is cultural. So how did I know it was cultural? Well, because Christians don’t follow that rule anymore. So why don’t we follow that rule? Presumably because it was a cultural command.’ ‘On Leviticus, [conservative authority]

Professor Robert Gagnon writes: "I do not doubt that the circles out of which Leviticus 18:22 was produced had in view homosexual cult prostitution". That made sense to me, since the rest of the passage was about keeping the Israelites separate from polytheistic cultures.'

Paul, in Romans 1, also connects idol worship and sexual behaviour. Twice. 'Cult temple prostitution... and same-sex rites in honor of popular goddesses were all well-known practices of the time...' Paul also uses the same Greek words – "shameful" and "unnatural" – for a man to have long hair (1 Corinthians 11:14).

'The Leviticus and Romans passages had a clear context of idolatry, not committed relationships.'

Further: 'I don't believe that women have to cover their heads or stop talking the moment they enter a church; I don't think... God approves of slavery, and I'm positive that the Christians who fought the Nazis are heroes' [4].

[My dilemma]: 'Studying the Bible brought me to a conclusion that was different from the one I learned growing up. If I was wrong and I spoke out, I could be sinning and leading others into sin. But if I was right and I *didn't* speak out, then I was allowing the church to be an active participant in a terrible sin, one that was not only destroying lives and families, but was also turning countless people away from the unconditional love of Christ... Jesus radiated grace and compassion in such a way that people came to *him* to hear his views on things. By contrast, we Christians were so focussed on preaching our

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views on things that we were driving people away, turning them off the church, Jesus and everything we had to say.'

Gay Christian Network

This online community founded by Justin is 'united by two things: our passion for Jesus Christ and our conviction that the church needed to do a much better job of supporting gay people.' The website is famous for its 'Side A' dialogue with 'Side B' discussions (on issues like the value of celibacy, for example).

Loving Sinners, Hating their Sin

The mantra 'Loving the sinner, hating the sin' caused/causes our LGBT friends to cringe when they hear it. It comes across to them as condescending and dehumanizing. And the 'sin' is almost always sexual - these days, mostly to do with Gay sex.

Tony Campolo: Jesus says 'Love the sinner and hate your own sin. After you get rid of the sin in your own life, then you can begin talking about the sin in another's life'.

Justin Lee: 'When other people were ready to stone a woman caught in adultery, Jesus stood in her defense. When he met another woman with a live-in boyfriend and a long string of husbands, he acknowledged her situation without lecturing her about it... Jesus saved his lecturing and anger exclusively for the self-righteous and those who put barriers in the way of others trying to come to God... Whenever Jesus addresses the

Pharisees, I think we Christians need to sit up and take notice'

So where should we begin?

(1) 'One of the most powerful ways of educating people is by sharing our stories.' (It is easy to skip this 'in the rush to get to the Bible debate').

(2) 'It's very clear that ex-gay ministries do not work for the vast majority of people, and from the evidence I've seen, I think it's doubtful that they have changed anyone's orientation... [Even if some] never act on their feelings, they remain attracted to the same sex... In spite of their claims, ex-gay ministries are often much more effective at taking away faith than at taking away attractions.'

(3) 'A lot of churches will say "Gay people should be celibate," but then leave you out in the cold to figure out what that means. Instead of offering support to gay people, most churches have focussed only on preaching at them.'

(4) 'The Bible never condemns gay people for who they are and what they feel'.

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(5) Please: 'Listen to their stories, and seek first and foremost to understand what they are feeling.'

(6) 'The term "homosexual" is widely considered offensive when used to describe people. Technically the word is accurate, but it was long used in a clinical context and has been mostly used by gay-rights opponents. Christians seeking loving dialogue with the gay community would be much better off to use the word "gay" – or the broader term "LGBT" – as a sign of respect... Gays, like straights, live many different kinds of lifestyles, so instead of "the gay lifestyle", it's usually better to be specific: "people in committed same-sex relationships".

Final note from Rowland: I'm waiting to hear about any/more churches who encourage empathetic listening to gay people's stories, without judging or condemning them.

The place to start on this journey: 'Listen!' (not 'Preach!').

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[1] See 'Homosexuality and the Bible: Six Articles' on the John Mark Ministries website – <http://www.jmm.org.au/articles/28630.htm> - for relevant links.

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_LeVay

[3] See the devastating critique of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church ('the first denomination to fund a "healing ministry" for homosexuals'), by SDA academic Ronald Lawson, pp. 3-39 ff. in David Ferguson, Fritz Guy and David Larson, *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-Day Adventist Perspectives*, Adventist Forum 2008.

[4] 1 Corinthians 11:6, 1 Corinthians 14:34, Titus 2:9, Romans 13:1.