

The Top Five Myths About Ex-Gay Ministry by Bob Davies

Editor's note: presented at the 2001 GA OneByOne dinner

INTRODUCTION

In thinking about this presentation, one of the biggest problems that I had was deciding which of the hundreds of myths about ex-gay ministry to select for the "top five"! Over the past 25 years that Exodus has been around, we have been the subject of endless speculation and gossip over what we really do, and what really goes on behind closed doors.

All of this speculation has led to some larger-than-life rumors, which I have found to be an endless source of amazement--and even humor. For example, back in the 1970s, there were picketers who would attend our seminars and conferences. They would hold up the most outrageous signs. One of my all-time favorites was the accusation that we were a "fertility cult," I guess because some of the single guys in our ministry eventually went on to become married and have children!

Then, around the same time, there were leaflets being circulated around San Francisco that our local ministry was infiltrated by "Nazi's and fascists"! I think that the picketers seized upon any unpopular group that they could come up with, then accused us of being linked with them!

One of the recent rumors circulating about Exodus is that we run secret camps for teens, whose parents force them to go to these "de-programming camps" and get brainwashed out of homosexuality and into heterosexuality! We have had several calls from the media, asking us for details on these camps so they can include some information in an upcoming program on ex-gay ministry!

In order to try to narrow down my subject here to the "top five" myths, I decided to do some up-to-date research from recent pro-gay articles and news reports. Some of you may have heard of the study released last month at the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) by Dr. Robert Spitzer of Columbia University in New York City. In his study, Dr. Spitzer interviewed about 200 men and women who claimed to have experienced a significant shift in their sexual orientation from predominantly gay to predominantly heterosexual.

Because Dr. Spitzer was one of the key figures behind the 1973 APA decision to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual, his new study attracted a huge amount of media attention. It was featured on the front page of the Seattle Times, my local paper. I also saw reports in USA Today, The New York Times, and The Washington Post. The Associated Press released the story to thousands of newspapers worldwide. Virtually all the on-line news sites (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and others) posted reports. And many major gay news sites, of course, wrote their own stories about this event.

I was most interested to see how these various news sites talked about the study--and about Exodus or ex-gay ministry as well. I found that these reports were filled with inaccurate statements about the "change" process and ministries which promote it.

"I'm appalled--absolutely appalled--it's not scientific, it's not valid, it's what is known as anecdotal data," said Dr. Barbara Warren of the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Manhattan. Note that she

does not say what exactly is wrong with the survey technique, which is very commonly practiced and accepted in psychiatric studies. It's an emotional response--not based on facts!

Here another quote from the Toledo Blade (an editorial) "Unsubstantiated claims that gays can become straight if only they really want to have long been used by fanatical groups to justify discrimination and repression against homosexuals" (Toledo Blade, May 14, 2001; editorial on Spitzer study).

In analyzing these news reports, it was easy to come up with the "top five" current myths about ex-gay ministry. Let's take a look at them, and see if they really hold up under closer scrutiny.

MYTH #1 -- "EX-GAY MINISTRIES ARE A FRAUD."

This is closely linked to the statement, "Gays can't change." In other words, homosexuality--whether genetic or caused by some other inborn factors--is a lifelong condition which cannot be altered. "One gay, always gay." "If you're gay, just accept it, embrace it, celebrate it as God's gift to you."

Now, I'm the first to admit that I am not a geneticist, and I don't know anyone in Exodus who has a Ph.D. in that discipline. I also continue to read many varied studies on exactly what causes homosexuality, although I find it very interesting that an increasing number of leading researchers are becoming more and more cautious in embracing any one theory, such as a "gay gene" theory of causation.

As the director of Exodus since 1985, I have never claimed to know all the answers on this question. However, at the same time, most gay activists are also not trained in genetics, so they know as much or as little as many of us Exodus leaders. I am also very cautious about accepting the claims of scientists who admit that they are gay and heavily invested in the results of their "gay gene" studies--and whose studies have never been replicated by other reputable researchers.

In other words--and this may surprise you to hear me say so--there are a lot of questions about the origins of homosexuality. I don't believe anyone has ALL the final answers.

However, with that said, I still maintain that change is possible. In other words, I know for a fact that many people in Exodus have experienced a significant shift in their sexuality--both in behavior AND desires, in their actions AND their thoughts, in their OUTWARD behavior and in their INNERMOST identity.

How do I know this? Because I have experienced it myself--and (for the past 22 years) I have worked closely with hundreds of others who have also experienced it.

I find it most irritating to read the claims of gay activists who casually dismiss all Exodus leaders as frauds, as liars. "They are brainwashed." "They are in denial." "They are out of touch with who they really are!"

Until recently--I have rarely (if ever) seen a genuinely balanced and truthful article profiling an "ex-gay" man or woman in a gay publication or on a gay website. Usually, there is a one-dimensional caricature--a self-deluded and ridiculous profile of some hapless man or woman

My challenge to the gay activists: Deal honestly with the evidence! Tell the truth about our stories. Get to know us and face the truth about ex-gay testimonies! Ultimately, you are not proving your point-of-view by falsely presenting ours to your constituents.

MYTH #2 - "EX-GAY MINISTRIES FORCE PEOPLE TO CHANGE."

There is a whole class of myths about the "methods" used in Exodus ministries. These myths are found in such statements as "Exodus forces people to change" and "Exodus gives shock treatments to people." These wild rumors about methodology are hard to track down. Anyone can say virtually anything about Exodus. Unfortunately, some of these claims are written down as "fact" in even reputable newsmagazines but, of course, no evidence is ever presented to document them.

One ministry leader told me last week that a gay reporter sounded genuinely surprised when he was told that this director would NOT counsel a gay teen unless the teen wanted it. In other words, if he was brought in by his Christian parents, the director would refuse to proceed with any type of counseling unless the teen wanted it.

I interact with reporters a lot, and one of the most common questions is, "What exactly does Exodus DO to help people change?" I think that some of them are probably disappointed when they hear of such "ordinary" and "boring" techniques as prayer sessions, accountability groups, Bible studies and teachings about the psychological "roots" of homosexuality. More bizarre and sensational techniques like jolts of electricity to the right front lobe of the brain sound much more exciting!

Some reports are simplistic. Here's a quote from the National Review: "Dr. Robert L. Spitzer released a study which he says indicates that 'highly motivated' gay people can become heterosexual through support groups, mentoring and even by reading certain books."

TIME magazine (4/21/01) used phrases like "questionable science," "a troubling step [away from good science]", "subjective standards." "The new work, however, does feel oddly out of step with mainstream thinking" (so are many biblical concepts!)

MYTH #3 - "EX-GAY MINISTRIES PROMOTE GUILT AND CONDEMNATION."

There are a lot of rumors and myths about why people want to change. In other words, "Why do people come to Exodus?" Is it because of guilt from society? Manipulation from "right wing" family members? Condemnation from the church?

Is change freely chosen--or coerced? Quote: "[Because of] anti-gay prejudice ... people will feel compelled or can be coerced into attempting to change" (Wayne Besen, Assoc. Dir. of Communications, Human Rights Campaign).

QUOTE: Dr. William Byne, psychiatrist at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York: "There must have been tremendous internalized homophobia as well as tremendous external pressure for them to convert" (SF Chronicle, 5/13/01).

But I find this is wrong. People usually come to Exodus due to their own desires--not someone else's. Shouldn't they have the right to do so?

Here's how I explain it to reporters in one sentence: "The majority of people contact Exodus because of an internal conflict between their religious/moral convictions and their sexual desires." In other words, ultimately the motivation is INTERNAL--not something imposed on them by OUTSIDE FORCES like family/friends and society at large.

Basically, people experiencing this type of inner conflict have three choices to resolve it: (1) abandon Christianity and embrace homosexuality as a "secular gay;" (2) attempt to combine their Christianity and homosexuality as a "gay Christian;" (3) attempt to abandon homosexuality while holding onto traditional Christianity as an "ex-gay."

One of the many amazing things I learned when I first became involved in Exodus was how many men in gay bars have a Christian past. Back in the late 1970s, we used to pass out literature about our ministry on the streets of San Francisco in the "gay" areas of town, such as the Castro. I was amazed at how many of the men could finish Bible verses that I would start quoting. They had grown up in Christian homes and then abandoned their faith when they realized they were gay!

Many others--especially in the past 20-30 years--have chosen to hold onto their Christianity but revise their understanding of homosexuality so that there is NO CONFLICT in their mind between their sexual practices and what they Bible says about homosexuality. The "pro-gay Christian movement" has grown exponentially since I began with Exodus back in 1979. MCC was 11 years old, and still in its relative infancy at that point. Today, it has grown into a major "denomination" with over 44,000 members involved in 300 churches in 16 countries, according to their own website.

Then there are the thousands--we hear from hundreds of them every month--who want to hold onto their traditional moral and spiritual beliefs and do NOT want to pursue their same-sex attractions and desires. If homosexuality is something that can be overcome, they want to abandon it. They are convinced that homosexuality is NOT God's will for them, and they want reinforcement and support as they bring their sexual behavior and self-identity into line with their understanding of the biblical mandate for Christians who seek God's very best.

This is exactly where I found myself late in 1978. I had been a Christian for 15 years. I had graduated from one of the largest Bible colleges in Canada. I had been overseas with one of the world's largest mission agencies, and was preparing for long-term service in missions.

At the same time, I was silently battling homosexuality and, based on years of study and reflection, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that homosexuality was never going to be a biblical option for me.

So I contacted Exodus for help. I had already talked to friends and even pastors, seeking help and counsel. No one knew what to say or do! Finally, in desperation, I moved 1,000 miles away from home for one reason: To seek counsel from another Christian who had also struggled--and overcome--homosexuality in his life. I didn't find any "magic solutions" when I came to Exodus--but I did find a

whole network of other believers who were walking down the same difficult and often lonely path as myself. It was the beginning of a whole new chapter in my life--the doorway into an exciting and fulfilling walk with Christ and ministry career which I could never even dream of!

Today, I look back on 22 years of exciting ministry. My wife and I celebrated our 15th wedding anniversary last summer with a thrilling trip to the Swiss Alps--one of our favorite places on earth. God has totally changed my life! I would have experienced a huge, huge loss if I had been told 22 years ago: "You can't change--so don't even try!"

MYTH #4 - "EX-GAY MINISTRIES CAUSE DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE."

There is a multitude of myths about all the horrifying things that happen to gays who attempt to change. They become depressed, suicidal--maybe even kill themselves. Their sexual desires don't change, of course. And they end up in a much worse place than before they even began.

I'd like to quote from a couple of ex-gays who were suicidal before they came to Exodus--but not for the reasons that are commonly assumed. Bill Hernandez: "Over time I drank more alcohol and took more drugs. I became so emotionally unstable that I began to contemplate suicide. My gay relationship was drudgery; work was drudgery; life was drudgery. Everything seemed futile. I had a luxurious apartment, a

steady job and a committed lover. I had reached the 'top' of the gay world, but I was still lonely and unhappy" (PORTRAITS OF FREEDOM: 14 People Who Came Out of Homosexuality, by Bob Davies with Lela Gilbert; IVP, 2001, p. 53)

Jim Shores: "After a year [of living with Doug, his lover], however, I started to feel suffocated. Who was I? Was I just some projection of this man's ideals? Was I simply living out the expectations of the gay subculture around me? If I was gay, why was I so miserable? Over time a depression settled into my soul that was as dark and heavy as the grave. Somehow I had left God by the wayside. ... I increased my drinking and smoking pot to deal with the depression. I broke up with Doug and entered the gay fast lane: all-night parties plus lots of sex and chemicals. The depression only deepened. I knew it was only a matter of time before I would commit suicide" (PORTRAITS, p. 40).

The message "Once gay always gay" is a very depressing one for many gays! They are suicidal BECAUSE they have no hope. Pro-gay groups think they are suicidal because they need to accept their homosexuality. But many of them have done so--and are still as depressed as before!

We have never hidden the fact that attempting to change one's homosexuality is probably the most difficult challenge a Christian will ever face. The background issues which often seem to accompany same-sex desires (such as sexual abuse, problematic family dynamics, and difficult peer relationships) take much time and effort to overcome. People are often involved in ex-gay ministry for a period of 3-5 years before significant change is noticed.

There is also another important point about the "results" of change. In our literature, we do not claim that people arrive at a magical temptation-free level of living! There can be significant ongoing struggles

with temptation, memories of the past, flashbacks of past lovers, and all kinds of issues to deal with. But does this mean change has not happened? NOT AT ALL--it simply means that the change process is still going on!

This, of course, is where ex-gay ministries are ridiculed by pro-gay organizations. They say that, if we continue to experience ANY kind of gay thoughts or temptations, then we have not really changed. I find this to be totally unrealistic! I cannot think of any other kind of therapy where, if there are occasional thoughts of the past--or even behavioral lapses--the therapy is immediately said to be totally "unsuccessful."

Think about it for a minute. What about AA--do people give up because they have had one drink? Is the whole organization "trashed" in the media because they do not have a 100% success rate?

What about programs for those overcoming sexual addiction? Or drug abuse? Or weight control? Although these issues are not exactly parallel to homosexuality, I believe the general principle is the same: Finding "recovery" is an ongoing process which may indeed be lifelong.

Change is not immediate. Change is not total. But change is real and significant. Ask any of our leaders, for example, who were once firmly entrenched in the gay community and today are happily married and raising their families! They may occasionally be tempted by their past. But they have still experienced genuine change!

Kevin Oshiro: "Today I'm experiencing security, purpose and genuine love through Jesus Christ. He has become the true friend I looked for--but never found--in the gay community" (PORTRAITS, p. 179).

MYTH #5 -- "EX-GAY MINISTRIES ARE POLITICALLY MOTIVATED."

The last myth I'd like to address today is that underlying motivation of why Exodus even exists. We are often accused of being "political," even though we routinely tell reporters that we're non-political, and therefore we "have no comment" on some new law on gay parenting, gay marriage, gay rights, same-sex benefits, and 101 other news stories which come across our desks every day.

QUOTE: Disinformation.com -- "[ex-gay ministries are] not motivated by human concern but instead of political power." This website is appropriately named!

I believe this accusation got some "fresh wind" when we were featured in some full-page newspaper ads about two years ago. These ads appeared in the New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, and other major papers across the country. The text of the ads was strictly non-political. However, the ads WERE co-sponsored by about 15 Christian organizations, some of which ARE involved in political issues, such as the Family Research Council, Christian Coalition, Colorado for Family Values, and others.

I have a couple of comments about this. First, although we say "I am ex-gay" as a Christian witness of what God has done in our lives, that claim has become loaded with political implications. And we recognize that. However, our main motivation is NOT political. We are simply giving witness to the truth.

Number two, we recognize that--because the term "ex-gay" has political implication--we know that our lives can be a powerful tool in the political arena. And there are many churches and Christian organizations which desire to use our witness to further their own political goals. I don't deny this--but why does the gay community accuse us of "being political" as if it's an evil thing--when they are deeply involved in local, regional, and national politics? Why is it OK for them--but not for us?

As an organization, we don't pursue political strategies and goals. However, we also don't "police" our local leaders and ministries. If they want to offer testimony for a local bill, they are free to do so. And some of them ARE involved in these types of activities.

However, as a national and international organization, Exodus does not participate in these types of debates. We have never done so--and so to accuse us of being "political" in motivation prompts one question from me: "How did you arrive at that conclusion?" Show me the evidence of where Exodus has taken a "political" stand on a local or national bill or law. I don't think you can find any!

There are a couple of other motives commonly ascribed to Exodus. That we are "hateful" and "bigoted." That we are primarily about "condemning" people.

QUOTE: "We believe such attempts [to change homosexuality] originate from cultural bias based on myth, misperception and misunderstanding." (PFLAG press release on Spitzer study, May 9, 2001) "Cultural bias?" Hardly! How about biblical revelation?

I have a simple challenge to people who throw out these kinds of accusations. Read our literature! Show me one example of where we are hateful. Yes, we take a clear stand on the sinfulness of homosexual behavior. If that is "hateful," then the Bible is full of "hate" and I wonder how you could even claim to be a Christian if you reject the Scriptures.

The truth is this: We CAN take a stand against immoral behavior without hating people. We can still LOVE them, just as Jesus did. He did not hesitate to confront wrong behavior. "Go and sin no more" he told the woman caught in adultery (John 8:11). He also had strong words of warning for the "religious" people of His day who thought they were better than others around them--doesn't that sound like today's Church?!

One of the problems we face is that today's gays have wrapped their identity around a behavior that God condemns. They refuse to separate their personhood from their moral actions. So if we say, "Your behavior is wrong," they take that as a statement against their personhood! But this is a deception. The Bible never talks about homosexuals, only men and women who perform homosexual acts. The Bible clearly says "no" to these acts, but it also says, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" and "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son..."

God loves gay people unconditionally. The pro-gay Christian movement has that one "down" correctly. But that doesn't mean that He accepts all types of sexual behavior.

I find it curious that the pro-gay Christian movement NEVER seems to speak out against "immorality," such as having sex outside your "holy union" or having promiscuous sex prior to your holy union. Why not? And what sexual behaviors--if any--are unbiblical and therefore unacceptable for Christians?

CONCLUSION: MOVING TOWARD A "FAIR FIGHT"

Many marriage manuals talk about "fighting fair." They recognize that disagreements WILL come. And when they come, they can be ultimately fruitful if they are done correctly.

Maybe the church at large could learn some lessons from this type of insight. Obviously, we have a lot of "fighting" or disagreements going on, even within our own denomination. Can we learn to "fight fair"? Can we learn the principles of fruitful dialogue?

Two of the most powerful principles, I think, are "walking in the light" (1 John 1:7) and "speaking truth to one another" (Eph. 4:25).

QUOTE (USA TODAY letter to editor, 4/15/2001): "I admire those willing to let research speak for itself, instead of designing research to conform to politically correct theories of human behavior."

Let's not engage in warfare over this issue by misrepresenting what the other side says and believes. I challenge church reporters to get accurate statements from BOTH sides of the debate. Don't let gays, for example, tell you what ex-gays think and do---ask the ex-gays! In all things, let's be known by our love, not our intolerance. Let's engage in a dialogue marked by honesty and respect. Let's not fear the truth. The truth sets us free.

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