

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### *The Demise of Exodus International*

Recent polls now show that a majority of major Christian denominations, including Catholics, support legalized same-sex marriage. This is a tectonic shift: In 2004, 36% of Catholics and 34% of mainline Protestants supported legalizing gay marriage; today 57% and 55% of mainline Protestants do so. Among evangelical Protestants, the shift has been less dramatic—11% in 2004 to 24% today. Molly Bull in *The Atlantic* writes that “[This shift] is the fruit of an aggressive campaign by a determined gay-rights movement that realized, particularly in the wake of the 2004 elections, that you cannot win politically in America if you are arguing against religious faith.” Until recently, religion was on one side, while gay rights was on the other. Central to this strategy was the effort to redefine the issue. Where it had always been an issue centered on what used to be called “family values,” the various leaders of the LGBT community shifted the emphasis to compassion, tolerance and humility. This was the way President Obama defended his shift on gay marriage about a year ago, so it has been an effective strategy. Even evangelical leaders such as Jim Daly, the new leader of Focus on the Family, and Russell Moore, the new head of the Southern Baptist Convention, are stressing forgiveness, while they lower the intensity of their talking points on gay marriage.

This shift is part of the context for a momentous development earlier this summer—the demise of Exodus International. On 19 June 2013, the leader of Exodus, Alan Chambers, announced that after 40 years of operation, Exodus International was shutting down all of its operations. The public reason for this decision focused on Exodus being too judgmental and, according to Chambers, “I do not have any desire to fight you on your beliefs or the rights you seek.” Chambers also issued an online apology to homosexuals, especially that Exodus has promoted reparative therapy—“a method that focuses on relationships between homosexuals and their parents when examining causes for homosexuality.” He likewise apologized for concealing his own ongoing struggle with same-sex attraction. Exodus helped him 20 years ago; he later married and he and his wife adopted two children. Marriage, he contends, does not “cure” homosexuality or eliminate same-sex attractions. Chambers still retains the belief that homosexuality is sin, but is not convinced that children are in any way harmed by living with same-sex parents.

Dorothy and Christopher Greco, who were former leaders of Exodus International, have written a most helpful perspective on the demise of Exodus International. They identify several important reasons for its collapse.

1. There was a failure of leadership development and supervision at Exodus. Christopher helped found an Exodus ministry in the mid-1980s but resigned after two years because “I hadn’t yet experienced the relational wholeness that I both longed for and promised to others. A co-leader simultaneously initiated a sexual relationship with one who had come to us for

help. It was textbook bad leadership.” The promotion of immature, earnest leaders, who were not held accountable for failing to practice what they preached, was destructive for Exodus.

2. Exodus chose to focus exclusively on homosexuality and thereby lacked meaningful engagement with the “diverse Body of Christ.” Greco writes: “This mono-focus may have reinforced the message that their brokenness was somehow more egregious because participants failed to hear how similar their struggles were to other non-same sex attraction members (SSA) of the church. Furthermore, excessive moral pressure was placed on those with SSA to attain measurable outcomes of healing (i.e., marriage), none of which were expected of non-SSA Christians. Actual sexual sobriety is not a priority in most Christian churches, and yet they demand it of any member of the LGBT community almost as soon as they shake hands with the greeters.”
3. There is arguably a double standard in many evangelical churches when it comes to sexuality. Many almost “wink” at heterosexual promiscuity and even pornography, but come down hard on LGBT members, who are struggling.
4. The Greco’s also argue that Exodus perpetuated a “faulty theology of suffering.” In so many areas of our struggle, we ask God to take away our suffering—with disease, with temptation, with obesity, with alcohol, etc. When it seems that God has not answered, what are our options then? They write quite perceptively that, “To be transformed into the image of Christ, we must suffer as Christ did; a suffering too great for any individual to bear alone. The suffering of the woman with unshakeable lesbian longings who decides to live a chaste life is no less intense or noble than that of the single, middle age, heterosexual woman who longs for a husband and children. Nor is it any less real for those of us who have prayed repeatedly for God to take away cancer or some other pernicious disease, even as we watch our bodies betray us.”

What the Bible declares then is true: Transformation is difficult and suffering is often a dimension of that, for this is how God refines, hones and sharpens His children. Listen to Chambers at the conference where the death of Exodus was announced: “We’re not going to control people anymore. . . We’re not going to tell them how they should live. We’re not going to be responsible for what they’re doing . . . [We] are not the Holy Spirit. . . We are called to proclaim. . . the riches of his grace and mercy. . . I don’t care what you’re doing—as long as they’re inside the community.” One certainly understands what he is trying to say, but is not Alan Chambers actually declaring that the power of God to transform is not so great, not so powerful, and not so adequate? I believe that the Greco’s are absolutely correct: The evangelical church has a “faulty theology of suffering.” After all did not James declare, “Consider it all joy when you encounter various trials”? James argues that this is how God transforms us, how He shapes and molds us. That is true for every person who has made a faith commitment to Jesus Christ, including those who are struggling with SSA.

Rosaria Butterfield, who has publically shared her journey from a lesbian professor of queer theory to a Christian, homeschooling her children and the wife of a pastor, says that parachurch ministries come and go, but the local church must seize the opportunity to reach out to those in

need, including SSA, LGBT human beings. She writes: “I hope the church can now be more intentionally ready. We appeal to a great God who in His sovereignty knows better than we do what we need and where we are.” No one could say it better!

See Molly Bull, “The Quiet Gay-Rights Revolution in America’s Churches” in [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com) (15 August 2013); Jamie Dean, “Leaving Exodus” in *World* (13 July 2013); Andree Seu Peterson in *World* (27 July 2013); and Dorothy and Christopher Greco “Our Eulogy to Exodus International” in [www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com) (25 June 2013).