

“Celibacy at Gay Christian Network: What’s That All About?” by Stephen Parelli, *Other Sheep Exec Site*, January 12, 2016; “Why this Christian Lesbian was Not at the Gay Christian Network Conference” by Kimberly Knight, *Progressive Christian Channel*, January 11, 2016.

The Gay Christian Network was founded in 2001 by Justin Lee, a young Southern Baptist who, since 1997, had been hosting online conversations on evangelical Christian faith and same-sex attraction. GCN’s first conference was held in 2005. With sensitivity, Lee has made room for those who are same-sex oriented and committed to celibacy (Side B) as well as for those aimed at a committed same-sex relationship (Side A). GCN presents conference speakers from both perspectives but has never supported “ex-gay” claims. Lee has been a keynoter for Evangelicals Concerned conferences in the east and west.

Founded in 1975, EC began our summer conferences in 1980 and, to date, we’ve had seventy-three. We’ve always been supportive of those on both Side A and Side B as it’s psychologically and spiritually unhealthy to violate conscience. However, we’ve always featured only Side A speakers. That’s because, back in those mid-70s, few evangelicals had “come out” and many of the openly gay men who came to our first EC Bible studies and conferences were only just beginning to explore Christian faith. Side B speakers would have been a discouraging distraction in their quest. By 2005, GCN conference folks were familiar with the Side B view from their conservative church backgrounds yet, out of this context, many have been able to move to Side A through GCN fellowship with solidly evangelical peers in committed same-sex relationship. Still, those who stay on Side B enjoy empathic, supportive fellowship with both Side A and Side B Christians.

In 1992, missionary Tom Hanks founded Other Sheep. Stephen Parelli now leads this LGBT group. Both men tried to overcome the homosexuality by “ex-gay” efforts and in heterosexual marriage. Both failed. Both now accept and embrace their homosexuality.

Parelli, a first-time attendee at a GCN conference, is upset and angry over the inclusion of Side B speakers. He claims he found it “a conundrum” that a Side B speaker “would expose the ‘ex-gay’ movement as a myth while defending celibacy, *the exact same practical outcome of the ‘ex-gay’ movement.*” Says Parelli: “I could see no real practical difference between [her] position on celibacy and the ‘ex-gay’ movement’s position.”

His “conundrum” is *his* confused conflation of a conforming to conscience and a conforming to “ex-gay” con jobs. To conform to conscience until one may see a way clear for changing one’s mind (and, hence, one’s conscience) is wise; to violate one’s conscience or set oneself up for the failure and guilt under “ex-gay” demands is not wise.

Parelli reports that another Side B speaker reminds him of a “*bait and switch*” title like the *Coming Out of Homosexuality* titled-book I own from the 1990s.” In 1994, I panned this cagey “ex-gay” book by Bob Davies and Lori Rentzel. But here Parelli, ridicules a group that’s *not* “ex-gay”. In fact, its leader commends Exodus for finally *shutting down*.

Parelli rightly calls “ex-gay” efforts and Reparative Therapy, “dead-end streets for me”. And, sadly, that’s what they’ve been for all their victims – as *ex-“ex-gay”* leaders admit in repentance with apologies. Yet Parelli strangely predicts that Side B will be “dead end streets ... for the church and the queer community”. This isn’t what Side B has been, is now or needs to be. Side B companionship has been a Godsend for Side B folks at GCN, whether they remain on Side B or move on to Side A and find a loving same-sex spouse. In fact, Parelli, himself, met *his* same-sex “spouse at an ‘ex-gay’ support group”.

Throughout his posting, Parelli is exasperated as he fails to resolve his confusion: “*How do Side B proponents not see their irrelevancy in the lessons of living history?*” He holds himself hostage to fantasies of otherwise scenarios, relaying that, “One former Side B person told me he

had adopted celibacy for four years. He said he was lonely.” That’s very easy to believe. But, of course, there are droves of *promiscuous* homosexuals and *promiscuous* heterosexuals who are lonely. There are droves of *partnered* homosexuals and *married* heterosexuals who are also lonely. Whether alone and feeling lonely or with a spouse and feeling lonely, much depends on what one is telling oneself. And telling oneself, for example, that those were “four years of life wasted”, as Parelli laments they were, is indulging in fantasies of roads not taken. Nothing can be said about roads not taken. But loads of self-deception get dumped along those roads of fantasyland. Certainly the context of conscience and fantasy in that man’s celibate years had an influence on his experience for the four years and beyond. But how much less lonely would that dreamer have been had he violated his conscience and had to live with his guilty feelings?

Someone “in his 50s” told Parelli that he’d “never met a same-sex married couple before me and that my marriage of 18 years told him it could happen”. Good. But Parelli complains: “Obviously, Side B won’t model marriage for him.” Actually, GCN folks on both Sides support this celibate man in doing what he thinks is right while he’s getting his bearings. And since the vast majority of the more than 1,500 at GCN conferences are Side A, this man has many opportunities to see role models of faithful same-sex couples.

Knight blogs that she is “passionately neck deep” in the progressive United Church of Christ, “deeply steeped in liberation, feminist and queer theology” and Minister of Digital Community for *Extravagance UCC*, an online outreach for the support of, among other *selectively* inclusive efforts, “the deeply enriching experience [of] interreligious worship” with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, et al. Yet she proudly boycotted the integration of Sides A and B Christians at GCN, sneering at what she scorns as Side B “shenanigans”.

She says she’s heard “truly wonderful news of love and warmth and transformative experiences” at the GCN conference she shunned. Still, she caricatures the GCN inclusivity, suggesting that what is preached is that the “truly faithful” would remain celibate [while those like her] are less faithful, sinful and bound for hell.” What? This does not describe a GCN conference nor what GCN is all about. She rants (her word): “Sure I hear ya, we need to stand in the gap with folks who are still struggling [but] I no longer have to make room for people to have an opinion or disagree ... not about my life. That is not my calling.” But we are called to make room for the “weaker in Christian liberty without passing judgment on disputed matters”. (Romans 14)

GCN is an oasis of Christian community similar to the early church, up against angry opposition from across religious and secular spectrums. That’s what I experienced with folks on both Sides when I keynoted GCN from my Side A perspective and then went sightseeing with a wonderfully mixed group, including a prominent and jovial Side B leader.

