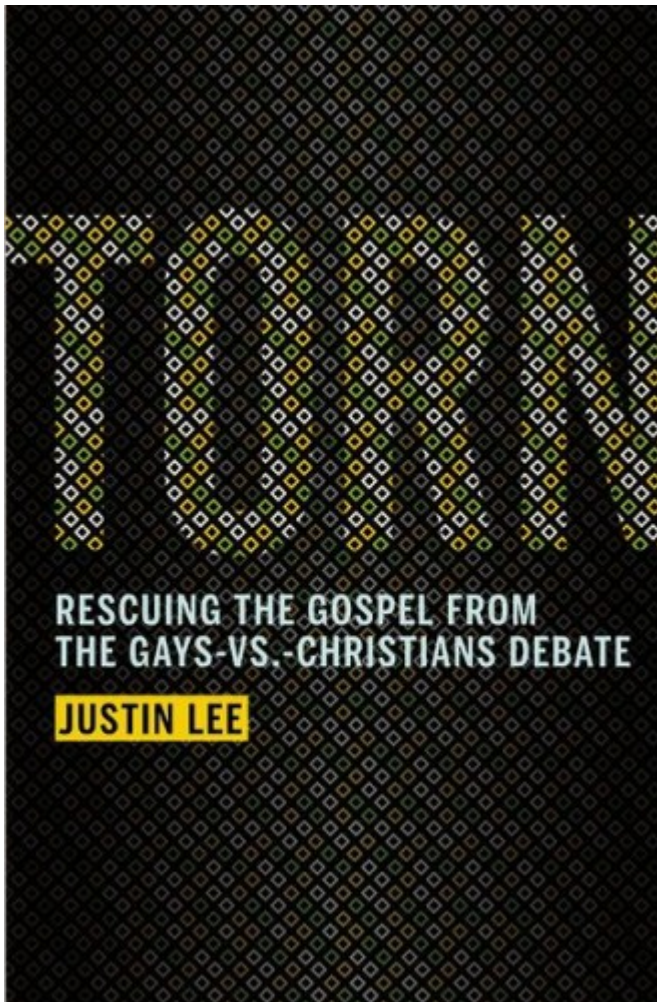


Evangelical and gay

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [March 20, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Torn

By Justin Lee
Jericho Books

Raised a Southern Baptist, with two loving parents, Justin Lee didn't want to be gay. But when he revealed that he was attracted only to people of his own gender, the church he loved acted like he had chosen to be that way. When he searched for

understanding in high school and college, he was essentially told to cut it out and stop being gay, with Jesus' help.

At the advice of his pastor, Lee threw himself as a teenager into the ex-gay movement. He listened to national speakers testify about having turned their sexuality around with Jesus' help. But away from the speaker's podium, the ex-gays told him a different story. Their behavior had changed but the attractions remained. Whether or not they were truly ex-gay depended on the definition of what makes someone gay—the inclination or the act.

This distinction would later become a linchpin in Lee's work with the LGBT Christian community; it is something that sets him apart in a noisy and crowded battlefield.

At his conservative Christian university, Lee joined a campus ministry group, hoping that it would be a safe place to connect with God and share his inner life with the church. He also joined the gay students group, whose numbers increased with his enthusiastic involvement. But as a gay Christian who was not sexually active, he felt alone in both groups, unable to be himself.

When he was with the Christians, he worried about being gay. When he was with the LGBT crowd, he worried about not being gay enough. Apparently it was not easy to be a nondancing, nondrinking, young gay Christian who was willing to wait to have sex but unwilling to deny wanting it.

In this book for our age, the Internet plays a key role. It was through chat rooms, e-mails and blogs that the Gay Christian Network—which Lee leads—was born. The Internet is also where Lee found community, both loving and hurtful. In one heart-wrenching story, he describes being abruptly banned from his favorite Christian Internet chat room simply for being gay. Left with no way to communicate with the confidants he had met online, he fell into despair.

Lee is beyond charitable throughout this work. He's written a book that your Southern Baptist grandmother could read and then sigh at the end, "Well, bless his sweet heart." Careful to throw in plenty of good-natured comments like, "I am sure they meant well," he often writes like the scrupulous "God boy" he wanted to be as a child. But the stories speak for themselves. By the time he tells us that Christians, not gays, are destroying the church, we have enough evidence to convict.

But I didn't need Lee to get me riled up or to tell me that the ex-gay movement doesn't work. I pastor a relatively liberal church in the middle of the conservative western suburbs of Chicago, where dreams of megachurches dominate the ecclesiastical imagination. On the cover of each Sunday worship bulletin, my congregation welcomes everyone, with a specific reference to sexual orientation. We do that because we are surrounded by churches that claim to welcome everyone but then lead gay people to the ex-gay movement, which offers bad therapy at best and soul-scathing injury at worst. Sometimes those refugees limp into our church. But more often, they end up nowhere.

So in the liberal Protestant waters in which I swim, it is not uncommon to hear this plaintive question, asked with a sigh and perhaps also a touch of condescension, "Why don't they just come to our churches instead?"

Why don't they come to my church? We'll perform a gay marriage. In Illinois we can't yet make it legal, but not for lack of trying. Our children take it for granted that every church welcomes gay people, until they hit prejudice in schools and playgrounds, and they realize that ours is the minority opinion within Christianity. But the teenagers are proud of our countercultural stance in conservative DuPage County. As one snarky senior high fellowship member put it, "Our church put the *bi* in Bible."

Having never been a member of a conservative church, I scratch my head at the gullibility of Christians who line up to hear the next ex-gay phenom doing victory laps on the Christian speaking circuit, touting how he's changed. I marvel at these guys' ability to reproduce themselves each time another speaker gets caught with his pants down. But my world is not Lee's world.

And Lee loves his church. So much that he wants to change it.

His memoir makes it clear that he delights in praise songs and evangelical worship. He is no fan of the ultra-open churches, which he characterizes as light on doctrine and too quick to sacrifice a relationship with Jesus on the altar of inoffensiveness. That's not how I would describe my church, but I do understand the ways in which people love the worship practices that have shaped them, even when they have been hurt.

Having experienced prejudice in the evangelical world, Lee is still passionate about its many strengths. And it's that evangelical world he seems to be talking to the

most in *Torn*. At first, this book seems to be aimed at LGBT evangelical Christians, but by the end it feels like it was written more for their parents, their grandparents and, most of all, their pastors.

Because of that, the book has a sweet tone. Lee bends over backward not to shock or to be strident. His prose on the subject of sexual attraction is so wholesome you could read it with a glass of milk and cookies while listening to Karen Carpenter sing “Close to You.” He lays out his dream of lifelong companionship so tenderly you’d think he was a middle-aged marriage enrichment leader instead of the college boy of the story. I have to admit, I kept wondering if the kid was ever going to get to have sex.

But Lee came early to a mature understanding that eludes the average college student: sexuality is so much more than the sexual act. His exploration of celibacy (his own in college and that of other adults he knows now) is respectful and serious, and it comes out of his evangelical tradition.

Lee is a spiritual leader who makes a compelling case for setting aside the language of the culture wars. He is determined to keep two key groups of Christians within the Gay Christian Network by avoiding polarizing terms. One group, which he calls “side A,” is composed of people open to being in gay sexual relationships and the other, “side B,” of people who are gay but choose to remain celibate. Surely I am not the first to note that side A gets a much better grade than side B when it comes to matching principle and practice. But Lee’s desire to keep these two groups in conversation sets his project apart from others, as does his consistently gentlemanly tone.

His gentle analysis convicted me—a reader from outside his tradition and another sinner prone to smugness. I recall with some chagrin a conversation I once had with a Catholic feminist nun I worked with on social justice issues. As we grew closer, she told me she was gay, which I immediately interpreted to mean she had a partner. After all, why else would she tell me? When I said something that revealed my assumption, she was clearly offended. She took her celibacy seriously, even if I had not. I now see that she was a side B Christian. And I was a liberal Protestant who didn’t get it.

The beauty of this book is that Lee wants to challenge all kinds of Christians on the ways we don’t get it. It’s not enough for liberals to sit comfortably in their own little

swimming pools and say, "Come on over and jump in! The water's fine." And it's not enough for evangelicals to throw up their hands and say to their gay members, "Love the sinner, hate the sin. If you don't like it, go somewhere else." It's not enough for openly gay Christians to rejoice in their relationships and see everyone else as repressed. And it's not enough for celibate gay Christians to see themselves as more pure.

These self-righteous polarities are not working for us, in the church or outside it. Hence, Lee's conciliatory and generous tone.

But if it were not for the battles waged thus far, would there even be room in our culture for a gracious book like this? In last year's election more states legalized gay marriage. Public opinion is turning, even in the evangelical church of Lee's upbringing. None of that happened by accident.

Torn, with its gentle tone, would calm troubled waters that have been troubled for good reason. Perhaps it is because of so many fights hard won that Lee is now able to move into more nuanced territory with this gracious and grace-filled memoir.