

Formerly gay?

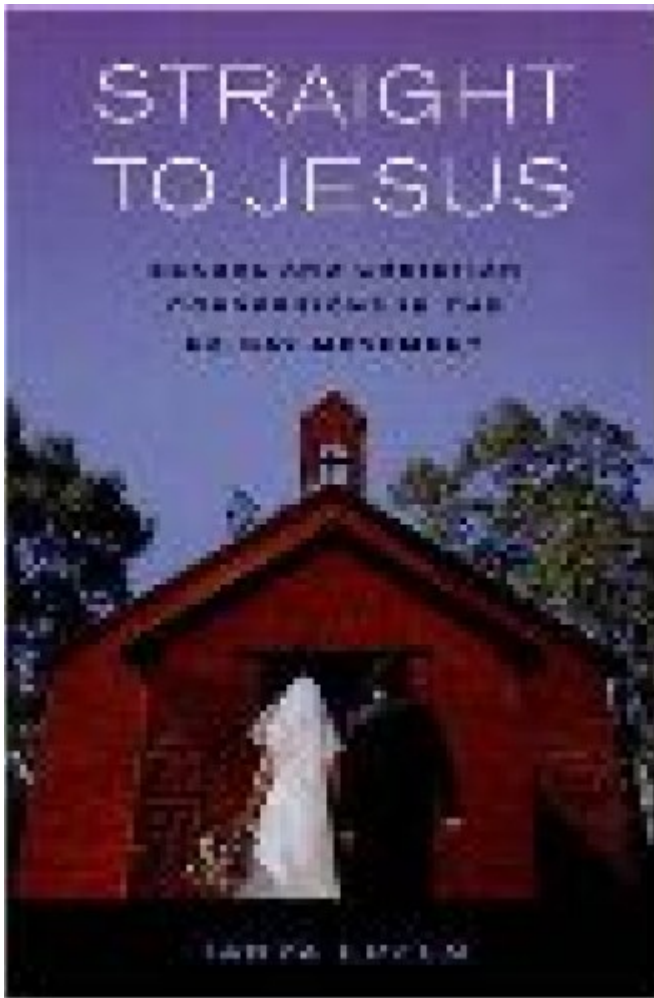
By [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 15, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men

Michelle Wolkomir
Rutgers University Press



Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement

Tanya Erzen

University of California Press

In the aftermath of New Life Church pastor Ted Haggard's fall from grace amid allegations of gay sex and drug use, a subtle controversy emerged among conservative Christians.

Three weeks after the Colorado Springs pastor left for an undisclosed treatment center to grapple with his sexuality, pastor Tim Ralph announced that Haggard had emerged from those meetings "completely heterosexual." Among those who questioned this pronouncement was Alan Chambers, president of Exodus International, an umbrella organization for what is called the ex-gay movement. Chambers politely contended that Ralph had possibly misunderstood the dynamics

of sexuality involved in the Haggard case. He was quick to caution that Haggard's story is not typical of people involved in ex-gay therapy and that "recovery" from homosexuality is a long process.

The ex-gay movement is controversial and misunderstood. Essentially, ex-gay leaders argue that homosexuality is caused by a particular kind of home environment and that homosexuals can change their behavior with the help of therapy and through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Two recent books help make sense of the ex-gay movement and its complexities through careful research. Tanya Erzen wrote *Straight to Jesus* after spending a year at New Hope Ministry in California, a residential treatment program for men who hope to change their homosexual behavior. Erzen interviewed both participants and leaders, attended group meetings, worked in New Hope's office and helped design the ministry's Web site. Her book draws on a wealth of personal relationships.

At the heart of Erzen's analysis is a point about ex-gay ministries that the media often miss: most ex-gay ministries are skeptical about their ability to "cure" homosexuality. While many people involved in these ministries have heterosexual marriage and biological children as their ultimate goal, and while they idealize heterosexual relationships, most ex-gay people find themselves part of a third category.

Ex-gay people believe that they will still experience homosexual desire and maybe even occasionally "fall," but that through gradual religious conversion, sexual conversion can happen as well. "Sexual identity is malleable and changeable," Erzen writes, "because it is completely entwined with religious conversion." Religious conversion and sexual conversion are so linked that participants don't change their sexual orientation so much as commit to a life of "following Jesus." As one ex-gay woman put it, "First I considered myself a lesbian, then a woman who struggles with lesbianism; now I consider myself a woman of God."

Erzen offers some of the nuances that we miss when we are focused on the black-and-white politics and the pronouncements of organizational spokespeople. One such nuance is that while heterosexual marriage and biological children are touted as the ideal by many in conservative Christian politics, ex-gay communities actually provide alternative family structures. Ex-gay people build networks of relationships within the ex-gay community, and these relationships provide the friendship,

encouragement and spiritual support that many ex-gay people long for.

Another important nuance is that a repeated pattern of “fall” and “redemption” is considered a normal part of the recovery process. People involved in ex-gay ministries accept accountability for such private parts of their lives as sexual fantasy, crushes and fleeting sexual feelings. While the media seem scandalized by the failings of ex-gay people, publishing reports of members being discovered in gay bars or returning to “the gay lifestyle,” many ex-gay people take such happenings as part of the reality of their attempt at “recovery.” Within the social and religious system to which they are committed, homosexuality is just one sin among others. They expect failings, confession and return as part of a lifelong process.

Erzen not only makes possible a better understanding of the ideas that motivate the ex-gay movement, she also offers important portraits of ex-gay individuals. We meet a young man for whom New Hope provides an opportunity to explore his identity and eventually to choose to live as a gay man. “New Hope taught me how to think, how to look inside myself,” he says. We meet a much older man, “Paul,” who lived with the house leader “Hank” as his lover for many years. Paul calls New Hope his refuge and tells Erzen that he will die outside of the program. During the year that Erzen spends at New Hope, Paul goes to Ohio on a business trip, and news reaches the house of his death. These portraits give a compassionate picture of ex-gay people that could perhaps be attained in no other way than through engagement with their stories. Disagreements with New Hope’s methods, ideology, theology and practice are complicated by an encounter with ex-gay people’s experiences.

The richness of Erzen’s research is not matched in Michelle Wolkomir’s *Be Not Deceived*, but the latter has a significant story to tell as well. Wolkomir documents the theological and practical methods of two men’s Bible study groups. One group is a part of the Metropolitan Community Church and helps men to live as gay Christians. The other is an Exodus International group that tries to lead men out of homosexuality. Wolkomir is primarily focused on these more limited contexts, and she does not bring individual men’s stories to life in the same way as Erzen.

Her important contribution is to take us beyond the two groups’ oppositional political positions. She underscores their common religious heritage, a version of Christianity that emphasizes personal salvation and the centrality of testimony. Both groups retrain men in their understanding of what it means to be a good Christian, and they direct participants’ emotional lives in very focused directions—one toward openness

and acceptance, the other toward a particular understanding of morality that includes falls and redemption. Moving between these two different perspectives helps to overcome the simplistic and divisive language that we often use to discuss homosexuality.

Wolkomir also includes a fascinating chapter on the experiences of women whose husbands are involved in ex-gay ministries. She attempts to understand how these women make sense of their marriage, their religious commitment, and their husband's attraction to other men. Wolkomir's approach and her subsequent account are both compassionate and dispassionate, providing much vital material for challenging stereotypical assumptions.

Books like Erzen's and Wolkomir's are increasingly important as Christians struggle with questions of sexual identity. They should be widely read by people who want to understand the political positions not only in the light of theological pronouncements, but also through the textures of individual lives and experiences.