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Gay and Evangelical, Seeking Paths of Acceptance

By NEELA BANERJEE

Justin Lee believes that the Virgin birth was real, that there is a heaven and a hell, that salvation comes through Christ alone and that he, the 29-year-old son of Southern Baptists, is an evangelical Christian.

Just as he is certain about the tenets of his faith, Mr. Lee also knows he is gay, that he did not choose it and cannot change it.

To many people, Mr. Lee is a walking contradiction, and most evangelicals and gay people alike consider Christians like him horribly deluded about their faith. "I've gotten hate mail from both sides," said Mr. Lee, who runs gaychristian.net, a Web site with 4,700 registered users that mostly attracts gay evangelicals.

The difficulty some evangelicals have in coping with same-sex attraction was thrown into relief on Sunday when the pastor of a Denver megachurch, the Rev. Paul Barnes, resigned after confessing to having sex with men. Mr. Barnes said he had often cried himself to sleep, begging God to end his attraction to men.

His departure followed by only a few weeks that of the Rev. Ted Haggard, then the president of the National Association of Evangelicals and the pastor of a Colorado Springs megachurch, after a male prostitute said Mr. Haggard had had a relationship with him for three years.

Though he did not publicly admit to the relationship, in a letter to his congregation, Mr. Haggard said that he was "guilty of sexual immorality" and that he had struggled all his life with impulses he called "repulsive and dark."

While debates over homosexuality have upset many Christian and Jewish congregations, gay evangelicals come from a tradition whose leaders have led the fight against greater acceptance of homosexuals.

Gay evangelicals seem to have few paths carved out for them: they can leave religion behind; they can turn to theologically liberal congregations that often differ from the tradition they grew up in; or they can enter programs to try to change their behavior, even their orientation, through prayer and support.

But as gay men and lesbians grapple with their sexuality and an evangelical upbringing they cherish, some have come to accept both. And like other Christians who are trying to broaden the definition of evangelical to include other, though less charged, concerns like the environment and AIDS, gay evangelicals are trying to expand the understanding of evangelical to include them, too.

"A lot of people are freaked out because their only exposure to evangelicalism was a bad one, and a lot ask, 'Why would you want to be part of a group that doesn't like you very much?' " Mr. Lee said. "But it's not about membership in groups. It's about what I believe. Just because some people who believe the same things I do aren't very loving doesn't mean I stop believing what I do."

The most well-known gay evangelical may be the Rev. Mel White, a former seminary professor and ghostwriter for the Rev. Jerry Falwell. Mr. White, who came out publicly in 1993, helped found Soulforce, a group that challenges Christian denominations and other institutions regarding their stance on homosexuality.

But over the last 30 years, rather than push for change, gay evangelicals have mostly created organizations where they are accepted.

Members of Evangelicals Concerned, founded in 1975 by a therapist from New York, Ralph Blair, worship in cities including Denver, New York and Seattle. Web sites have emerged, like Christianlesbians.com and Mr. Lee's gaychristian.net, whose members include gay people struggling with coming out, those who lead celibate lives and those in relationships.

Justin Cannon, 22, a seminarian who grew up in a conservative Episcopal parish in Michigan, started two Web sites, including an Internet dating site for gay Christians.

"About 90 percent of the profiles say 'Looking for someone with whom I can share my faith and that it would be a central part of our relationship,' " Mr. Cannon said, "so not just a life partner but someone with whom they can connect spiritually."

But for most evangelicals, gay men and lesbians cannot truly be considered Christian, let alone evangelical.

"If by gay evangelical is meant someone who claims both to abide by the authority of Scripture and to engage in a self-affirming manner in homosexual unions, then the concept gay evangelical is a contradiction," Robert A. J. Gagnon, associate professor of New Testament at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, said in an e-mail message.

"Scripture clearly, pervasively, strongly, absolutely and counterculturally opposes all homosexual practice," Dr. Gagnon said. "I trust that gay evangelicals would argue otherwise, but Christian proponents of homosexual practice have not made their case from Scripture."

In fact, both sides look to Scripture. The debate is largely over seven passages in the Bible about same-sex couplings. Mr. Gagnon and other traditionalists say those passages unequivocally condemn same-sex couplings.

Those who advocate acceptance of gay people assert that the passages have to do with acts in the context of idolatry, prostitution or violence. The Bible, they argue, says nothing about homosexuality as it is largely understood today as an enduring orientation, or about committed long-term, same-sex relationships.

For some gay evangelicals, their faith in God helped them override the biblical restrictions people preached to them. One lesbian who attends Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh said she grew up in a devout Southern Baptist family and still has what she calls the "faith of a child." When she figured out at 13 that she was gay, she believed there must have been something wrong with the Bible for condemning her.

"I always knew my own heart: that I loved the Lord, I loved Jesus, loved the church and felt the Spirit move through me when we sang," said the woman, who declined to be identified to protect her partner's privacy. "I felt that if God created me, how is that wrong?"

But most evangelicals struggle profoundly with reconciling their faith and homosexuality, and they write to people like Mr. Lee.

There is the 65-year-old minister who is a married father and gay. There are the teenagers considering suicide because they have been taught that gay people are an abomination. There are those who have tried the evangelical "ex-gay" therapies and never became straight.

Mr. Lee said he and his family, who live in Raleigh, have been through almost all of it. His faith was central to his life from an early age, he said. He got the nickname Godboy in high school. But because of his attraction

to other boys, he wept at night and begged God to change him. He was certain God would, but when that did not happen, he said, it called everything into question.

He knew no one who was gay who could help, and he could not turn to his church. So for a year, Mr. Lee went to the library almost every day with a notebook and the bright blue leather-bound Bible his parents had given him. He set up his Web site to tell his friends what he was learning through his readings, but e-mail rolled in from strangers, because, he says, other gay evangelicals came to understand they were not alone.

"I told them I don't have the answers," Mr. Lee said, "but we can pray together and see where God takes us."

But even when they accept themselves, gay evangelicals often have difficulty finding a community. They are too Christian for many gay people, with the evangelical rock they listen to and their talk of loving God. Mr. Lee plans to remain sexually abstinent until he is in a long-term, religiously blessed relationship, which would make him a curiosity in straight and gay circles alike.

Gay evangelicals seldom find churches that fit. Congregations and denominations that are open to gay people are often too liberal theologically for evangelicals. Yet those congregations whose preaching is familiar do not welcome gay members, those evangelicals said.

Clyde Zuber, 49, and Martin Fowler, 55, remember sitting on the curb outside Lakeview Baptist Church in Grand Prairie, Tex., almost 20 years ago, Sunday after Sunday, reading the Bible together, after the pastor told them they were not welcome inside. The men met at a Dallas church and have been together 23 years. In Durham, N.C., they attend an Episcopal church and hold a Bible study for gay evangelicals every Friday night at their home.

"Our faith is the basis of our lives," said Mr. Fowler, a soft-spoken professor of philosophy. "It means that Jesus is the Lord of our household, that we resolve differences peacefully and through love."

Their lives seem a testament to all that is changing and all that holds fast among evangelicals. Their parents came to their commitment ceremony 20 years ago, their decision ultimately an act of loyalty to their sons, Mr. Zuber said.

But Mr. Zuber's sister and brother-in-law in Virginia remain convinced that the couple is sinning. "They're worried we're going to hell," Mr. Zuber said. "They say, 'We love you, but we're concerned.' "