
A Review of Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*.
New York: Jericho Books, 2012. 259 pp. \$21.99.

Samuel Emadi

Ph.D. Candidate in Biblical Studies
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky

Torn is an autobiographical account of Justin Lee's journey from being "God boy"—a conservative, Southern Baptist who was convinced the Bible condemned homosexual acts—to now believing that "God would bless gay couples" (206). Lee, the founder of the Gay Christian Network (GCN), recounts his personal and theological pilgrimage from a traditional understanding of marriage to his current convictions. In so doing, he proposes a way out of the current "gays-vs.-Christians" stalemate.

Premise of the Book

Lee argues that the "Gays-vs.-Christians" debate is ripping the church apart in an already polarized culture. As Lee notes, "each camp has an unflattering image of the other to promote," often intensifying the conflict and creating more heat than light (6). In addition Lee argues that the gay community and Christian young people are becoming more disenchanted with the American church as churches adopt a message that is more political than biblical. "Today's young people have gay friends whom they love. If they view the church as an unsafe place for them, a place more focused on politics than on people, we just might be raising the most anti-Christian generation America has ever seen, a generation that believes they have to *choose* between being loving and being Christian" (10).

The result is that evangelical churches and their members are *torn*. Christian parents are torn between showing "unconditional love for their children and their deep desire to follow God at all costs" (7). Young men and women in the church who experience same sex attraction (SSA) are torn between their convictions and their feelings. Worse yet are those whose lives have been "torn apart by this cul-

ture war, and far too often, the Christian in their lives either left them to fend for themselves or took an active role in making their lives worse" (227). Lee proposes that there is a way forward that is compassionate and fitting for those who follow after Christ.

Lee's Pilgrimage

Lee begins recounting his own journey in high school when—nicknamed "God boy" for his Christian devotion—he was asked by a peer, "What do you think about this big gay controversy?" (14). Lee's response, "love the sinner, hate the sin," is now something he regrets (17). While Lee was committed to what he perceived as the Bible's condemnation on homosexuality he had a "secret" he thought he would take to his grave; he was attracted to the same sex (19). Lee explains how over time he became more open and more accepting of his same-sex attraction. He describes how he first "came out" to his parents, his negative interactions with all types of ex-gay ministries and literature in college, and his seemingly incompatible involvement in two campus groups: Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues Awareness Group (GALBA) and Campus Christian Fellowship (CCF). The account ends with a brief description of the birth of Lee's Gay Christian Network (GCN), a ministry designed to provide encouragement and support for gay Christians and to help educate the church about how to respond to the "gays-vs.-Christians" debate.

A major theme of Lee's autobiography is his relentless pursuit to become straight and his continual frustration with the "ex-gay ministries" which did not work for him or, in Lee's estimation, for anyone else. Regrettably, theologically-anemic and emotionally-shallow Christians and churches

riddled Lee's journey. Lee recalls on one occasion a "well-intentioned Christian acquaintance" gave him a *Playboy* in an effort to turn him straight (110). He also tells about the time when the new leader of CCF took him to lunch just so that he could pull out a Bible and read Lee all the verses in the Bible that condemn homosexuality (121–122).

Torn also includes several non-autobiographical chapters. For example, chapter 5 tackles the question "why are people gay?" Chapter 12 examines all of the major passages from Scripture that discuss homosexuality. Chapter 13 provides Lee's theological exploration of the meaning *agape* love, which Lee believes ultimately provides the theological justification for affirming the validity of same-sex unions. In chapter 15 Lee encourages the American evangelical church that "the way forward" must include showing more grace in the midst of disagreement, shattering the myth that the Bible is anti-gay, allowing openly gay Christians their place throughout the church, as well as other solutions to the current "gays-vs.-Christians" predicament.

Appreciation

I appreciate several aspects of Lee's book. First, Lee's honesty and openness is helpful. His personal narrative is gripping and evangelical Christians would do well to read about Lee's experiences so they can understand more fully what some people struggling with SSA in their own churches might be experiencing. Second, I also appreciate Lee's tone throughout the book and agree that vitriolic sentiments, caricatures, and careless thinking (on both sides of this debate) need to come to an end. The church needs genuinely-loving, theologically-rich, emotionally-mature responses to the issue of homosexuality and to homosexuals themselves. Third, I agree with Lee's criticism that the church is too thoroughly engaged in culture wars. Certainly, Christians should be a voice in the public square, but if a church is identified more by its political activism than by its gospel proclamation than something is terribly awry.

The Main Problem

Appreciations aside, Lee's book left me uncon-

vinced that God blesses same-sex unions. The substance of Lee's biblical argument is in chapters 12 and 13. Lee's treatment of the typical passages which mention homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26–27; 1 Cor 6:9–11) is unpersuasive. Space does not permit addressing Lee's comments in any detail. Suffice it to say that I do not believe Lee has said anything about these texts that scholars supporting a traditional understanding of marriage have not already answered.¹

However, there is a much deeper problem with Lee's treatment of the Bible's teaching on homosexuality and marriage. Christianity does not—or at least should not—develop its view of marriage, gender, and sexuality simply based on a few passages sprinkled here and there throughout Scripture. Christians believe marriage is between a man and a woman because a whole-Bible theology of marriage indicates that is the case. Playing theological ping-pong where one side quotes verse A in condemnation of homosexuality and the other side quotes verse B in support of homosexuality is theologically insufficient. Lee's analysis is too myopic. If we are going to overturn the church's traditional understanding of marriage and sexuality, then what is needed is not simply a reconsideration of a few passages here and there, but a whole-Bible theology of marriage. The place we begin that discussion is Genesis 1, not Leviticus 18.²

Lee indicates that the "gays-vs.-Christians" debate is at an impasse. One side continually comments "more truth," while the other demands "more loving" (146). Lee has tried to pave a *via media*. He essentially lands on the side of "more loving." However, God's commands must define the character of that love. I appreciate Lee's honesty and willingness to share his story; however, his argument that God blesses same-sex unions is unpersuasive.

ENDNOTES

¹For a more detailed criticism of Lee's arguments see Christopher Yuan's excellent review, "Torn," *The Gospel Coalition*, accessed December 20, 2013, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/book-reviews/review/torn>.

²For a short treatment of the whole Bible's view of marriage, ironically from someone who has struggled with SSA, see Vaughn Roberts, *Life's Big Questions: Six Major Themes Traced Through the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 63–90.