

# Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical

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*This article examines the process by which persons reconstruct their Evangelical religious identity to include the formerly incongruent homosexual identity. Members of one conservative gay Christian organization, called Good News, are profiled in the way they come to desire, construct, and solidify a gay Evangelical identity. Through a process of socialization, they renegotiate the boundaries and definitions of their religious identity to include a positive valuation of homosexuality. This accommodated, but still distinctively Evangelical, identity enables persons to resolve the dissonance between their Christian beliefs and their homosexual feelings. The case study explores how a religious identity is accommodated to incorporate incompatible aspects of the self. It provides an interesting glimpse at religious socialization outside of radical conversion. This somewhat unique example offers a look at how individuals and groups are involved in negotiating religious identities in a modern world.*

I am a born-again Christian and sought help through prayer and the church, but I am still gay. Could it be possible God accepts me as I am? (letter to Good News)

Such disbelief is no surprise when a person's spiritual roots are grounded in a heritage that quite rightly emphasizes the Bible as the Word of God written, and not just a random collection of outdated writings. So when confronted with traditional cultural bound interpretations of supposed anti-gay passages, the Bible honoring gay is thrown into a whirlwind of spiritual confusion. It's a joy, then, to share with these people that they can indeed reconcile born-again faith with their lifestyle. (a leader of Good News in the newsletter)<sup>1</sup>

For many Evangelical Christians, a homosexual life-style and a conservative religious identity are simply incompatible. According to a majority of conservative Christians, there is no such thing as a gay Christian, nor a biblical justification for such a lifestyle.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for members of one gay Evangelical group, this option is not only a possibility, it is also a reality and an imperative. This group, called Good News, formed specifically for the purpose of helping persons reconcile their gay life-style with their Evangelical

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<sup>1</sup>All the quotes used in this without specific references are taken from Thumma (1987) and other field notes from this study.

<sup>2</sup>See the references below such as Hunter (1983:85), Ammerman (1985), and Roof and McKinney (1987:192, 212). There are a few Evangelical groups that do not hold this perspective, see Blair (1977), or a special issue of *The Other Side* (Olson, 1984) devoted to exploring the question of homosexuality and the Church.

religious identity. This task, while threatening for those with a traditional Evangelical religious identity, nevertheless is seen as one which must be attempted. Members accomplish this change through identity negotiation and socialization. In other words, they negotiate the traditional religious identity, in very selective areas, through interaction with Good News. Members are reconciled to their gayness, but still retain their Evangelical religious identity.

Religious identity change has been characterized primarily in traditional conversion language as a "radical reorganization of identity, meaning, life" (Travisano, 1970:594) or as an abandonment of one religious identity for a new and different one (Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989). This is the case because few researchers examine less dramatic identity changes that occur within a particular religious tradition, commonly known as "alternations" (Travisano, 1970). Through an analysis of the interaction between Good News, its members, and a traditional Evangelical identity, a complex and subtle process of identity negotiation comes to light.

Accommodation of discrepant identities does not always result in an either/or decision that destroys one of the identities. Rather, identity negotiation can be construed as a process in which much of these identities remains intact. Members of Good News come to accept themselves as gay Christians without giving up their Evangelical identity. Certain aspects of members' Evangelical religious identity are revised to incorporate incongruous, but perceived as essential, characteristics of their sexual identity into their total self-concept. For these persons, their core identity becomes a gay Evangelical Christian one.

### *A SOCIALIZATION PROCESS OF IDENTITY NEGOTIATION*

Identity negotiation can best be understood as a facet of adult socialization. The symbolic interactionist perspective (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959; Garfinkel, 1967; Berger and Luckmann, 1967) offers a description of the dynamics involved in socialization. It is through the interaction of self and society that meaning systems are created and sustained. Both self-concept, "what one thinks one is like" (Troiden, 1984), and identity, the content of the self-concept in relation to a social situation (Gecas, 1982), arise from this interaction. Socialization is the process by which the self internalizes social meanings, reinterprets them, and in turn, responds back upon society. As such, socialization can be viewed as the continual formation of self-concept over time (Gecas, 1986). From this perspective, identity negotiation, whether religious or sexual, is a part of the natural process in which people engage to create a more stable and coherent self-concept (Becker, 1963; Straus, 1976; Gecas, 1982). Conversion, from this point of view, is identity negotiation that involves a complete change in the "core identity construct" (Staples and Mauss, 1987).

Often one's self-concept becomes organized around a central or "core identity" construct (Hart and Richardson, 1981; Gecas, 1981), which gives some unity or consistency to the other identities of the person. The stability of the core identity (or "master status" in Becker, 1963) resides in the interplay between one's continual experience of the world, the relative meaning assigned to such experiences, the plausibility of these meaning systems for ordering existence, and one's interaction with

a significant "reference group" (Lofland, 1969). This is not to imply that all persons' self-concepts are directed by a strong core identity. Neither does this assume that all people strive to maintain complete self-consistency. Most people live with a great deal of inconsistency in their lives. The tendency to develop a strong core identity, however, is intrinsic to certain societal roles or contexts. Hart and Richardson (1981) have found that gays often organize their self-identity around their sexual identity. This is also very common for persons who hold stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1963). The ideologies and practices of many religious groups encourage a self-concept organized around one's religious identity (Ammerman, 1987; Peshkin, 1986). A particular view of the world becomes the sacred canopy which makes sense of all other experiences. The more a person is encapsulated and indoctrinated in a religious perspective the less likely he or she is to change (Gecas, 1981; Greil and Rudy, 1984a).

### *IDENTITY DISSONANCE AS MOTIVATIONAL MECHANISM*

A discussion of socialization is incomplete, however, without an examination of the question of motivation (Gecas, 1986). In symbolic interactionist writings the question of motivation has often been deferred to discussion of "motives," "legitimations," and "accounts," especially in terms similar to Mills's (1940), and Scott and Lyman's (1968) usages. The concept of motive is akin to attribution theory, both of which offer linguistic justifications for a particular act or pattern of behavior. Motives are the professed reasons or accounts of their motivations or impetus for change. This facet of socialization is essential; however, it does not address the internal mechanisms for change.

One way to approach the question of motivation is by considering what those who sought Good News had in common. In a majority of conversion studies this has been a problem. After-the-fact accounts about members' lives prior to conversion have been seen as colored by ritualized biographical reconstruction (Greil and Rudy, 1984b; Snow and Phillips, 1980). The present study, however, closely examined letters written to the group prior to ideological contact in order to evaluate the identity and motivation of those seeking interaction with Good News.

According to these observations, at first encounter with this organization 74 percent of potential members expressed a strong desire to resolve the felt tension between being a conservative Christian and having homosexual feelings. This tension can be understood best in terms of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957; Prus, 1984), which states that an amount of internal dissonance may be produced by holding two inconsistent cognitive elements. These need not be logically incongruent, nor do they necessarily require resolution. The motivational force of cognitive dissonance arises when the person perceives the inconsistency intolerable, thus seeking dissonance reduction in some form.

Generalizing the dynamics of cognitive dissonance may be useful in interpreting the condition of two incongruent identities being held by the same person. While many persons may hold incongruent identities in a workable tension, these identities seldom both function as organizing "core identities" of the self-concept. Those persons who contact Good News perceive both identities as crucial to their self-concept. The

identities, as originally construed, are mutually exclusive; however, they are also considered too important to surrender. This dissonance between the identities functions as a motive for change, or dissonance reduction, only if the person perceives this state as problematic. For most of those who came to Good News, the dissonance between their gay and Evangelical identities was intolerable and had to be resolved.

### *RELIGIOUS IDENTITY REVISION*

Many facets of religious identity revision have been explored by those studying conversion. Much of this work focuses on the acceptance a new religious identity (Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989) or a shift from one identity to another (Greeley, 1981). Often this change in identity is perceived to be an either/or alternative. The result is radical conversion or a segmented, compartmentalized self-concept. Using a socialization model, however, the individual variations within a particular religious identity become evident because the focus is on the dynamics of the social interaction. Religious identity revision can be equated with any other kind of socialization; it simply involves a different organizational context (Greil and Rudy, 1984b). The interaction between the social group and the active individual provides the crucial content and context for change.

There has been a movement in recent years to frame conversion in terms of a socialization process (Long and Hadden, 1983; Machalek and Snow, 1985; Kilbourne and Richardson, 1989). This has enabled theorists to tie religious identity change to a larger body of literature on human development. This perspective frames the convert as actively engaged in the search for meaning and fulfillment. It makes possible a greater appreciation of the dialectical relationship between the individual and the group. The social group is still seen as having a formative function, but it is no longer perceived as the only force in socialization. It remains a source for social meaning and, at the same time, limits the contents of one's identity through group forms and the availability of role models. But conversion, and any identity change, becomes better understood as a product of negotiation between the individual and the social context (Straus, 1976). While social interaction and involvement with others is necessary for the validation and maintenance of a revised identity, the individual is seen as the active agent.

### *A DESCRIPTION OF GOOD NEWS AS THE CONTEXT FOR CHANGE*

Good News is a parachurch Evangelical organization whose national office and primary group are in Atlanta. The group meets biweekly in a local gay center. Attendance varies, but averages about eight people. The core group consists of four persons, all white males, as are the majority of other members. Occasionally, there are a few white females or black males. The average age of those who attend is 35 years. In addition to this group, there are four affiliate groups in cities throughout the South and Midwest. At any time, there are hundreds of individuals, living in isolated small towns around the country, who have contact with the group through correspondence. Good News publishes a quarterly newsletter that is distributed to approximately 400 people. The group has corresponded with over 1,300 people in its

nine years of operation.

The study of Good News took place in 1984 and 1985. The data were collected through participant observation of 20 meetings. In-depth personal interviews were conducted with seven members of Good News. Along with this, an intensive study was made of the voluminous correspondence, all issues of the newsletter, and the group's published literature. The descriptive statistics in this article are derived from the author's rough estimate of observations, plus a content analysis of group correspondence.

Good News has been meeting since 1977 under the leadership of three co-founders. Following the lead of "liberal" Christians, they have embraced a cultural interpretation of the scriptures. They continue, however, to assert forcefully their Evangelical heritage and maintain many of the characteristic traditional Evangelical beliefs and practices. The group officially operates with a threefold mission of dialogue with the "straight" church, enrichment for gay believers, and service to the entire homosexual community. Actually, their central task is to offer members a way, both experientially and cognitively, to reconcile a conservative Christian faith and a homosexual identity. This task is the focus of this paper.

In this context, "membership" should be understood not as joining the group structure, but as accepting its ideology and world view concerning the negotiation of a gay Christian identity. Evangelizing the good news of this cognitive adjustment, by which one could be both gay and a conservative Christian, occupied most of the group's energy. Because of this emphasis rather than physical recruitment to the group itself, membership continued to decline in the years after this study ended. In 1987 the group officially disbanded. Along with an emphasis on believing over belonging, other factors that contributed to the group's demise included two founding members redirecting their energies to AIDS work, and three other core members relocating and becoming more active in their local congregations. During the time this study took place, however, Good News still offered both cognitive structures and some experiential contexts by which members could reconstruct their self-concept.

Good News' mission is unified around a vision that reflects this goal of identity revision. Good News "is a family of believers who strive to forge bridges of biblical faith which serve, not oppress, lesbian and gay lifestyles." After a brief look at those who seek out Good News, this article focuses on how these bridges are forged or the identities of the Evangelical faith and the gay lifestyle are reconciled.

### THE FAMILY OF BELIEVERS

According to the letters Good News receives, most persons (74%) who seek out the group are in the midst of an identity crisis.<sup>3</sup> This struggle arises from being a conservative Christian and having homosexual feelings. The tension, guilt, and confusion that result from an attempt to hold these incongruous identities together becomes too great for these persons. They feel as if they can no longer remain in the tension between desiring to be "good" conservative Christians and yet having "sinful," and

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<sup>3</sup>The rest of those who contacted Good News did so for support, for fellowship, or for an opportunity to work in a Christian ministry.

specifically condemned, feelings of homosexual attraction. One person wrote to the group, "I will not and cannot disregard my faith (nor my sexual orientation). I often find myself compromising my beliefs. The Lord is disappointed with me." Another writer stated, "I have abstained from sexual involvement with others for three years because of my fear of breaking God's law. I miss the close fellowship of a lover, but I'm scared that I will go to hell if I do. I'm so lonely." A third quote from a letter to Good News clearly exemplifies this identity dissonance.

I can remember dying inside one Sunday listening to my minister tell me and his congregation that "those queers were going to fry in Hell for the choice they made." I thought I knew Christ then. So if it seemed to be God's will for me to not be homosexual, then I'd do something about it. I prayed about it but nothing happened.

All those who come to Good News place significant value and meaning upon the conservative Evangelical identity. One of the leaders made this clear in his statement. "I left the Metropolitan Community Church because I felt that they were putting gay before God. . . . They just weren't evangelical enough for me." Members' religious faith is a very important aspect of who they are. As one said, "It is through my Christian faith that I am able to define myself and know who I am." It is the core identity for most of them.

For many, their religious affiliation symbolizes a grounding in a history, membership in a tradition, and stability in a social order. An overwhelming majority of those who contact Good News (94%) were reared in religious families and attended conservative evangelical churches in denominations such as Baptist, Missouri Synod Lutheran, Church of Christ, and Assemblies of God. Sixty-eight percent grew up in the South or Midwest in rural areas or small towns. They were all oriented to look to religion in solving their problems and in giving meaning to their lives.

Two primary characteristics of the Evangelical tradition are the doctrine of the inerrancy of scripture and a traditional moral conservatism (Hunter, 1983). Both result in the creation of a very difficult atmosphere for a Christian struggling with homosexual feelings. The Bible literally states, "Thou shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is abomination" (Lev. 18:22). Homosexuality has been a sin throughout the history of Christianity (Boswell, 1980; McNeill, 1976).

According to both researchers and interviews with Good News members, homosexuality is still strongly condemned in the Evangelical denominations of Christianity. Hunter reports 88.7 percent of Evangelicals thought homosexuality was an "immoral behavior" (1983:85); Ammerman found 98 percent of Southern Baptists surveyed indicated that it was not a viable Christian lifestyle (1985). Roof and McKinney report that conservative Protestants were the least likely religious group in America either to affirm the civil rights of gays or to view homosexuality as morally acceptable (1987:192, 212). For a conservative Christian, this reality presents both a theological and a social barrier to being an Evangelical gay Christian.

Such a reality is clearly evident in that most members report experiencing tremendous rejection from family and friends. As one letter writer put it, "I came out to my family and they kicked me out of the house." Another actively attending member related, "I told my best friends, this Christian couple from my church, and now they

won't talk to me." The social ostracization that accompanies the homosexual stigma, especially in a small town or rural area, had taken its toll on those who contacted Good News.

Every person expressed feelings of "being different from the other kids" since early childhood, seeing themselves as social outcasts. Almost every person said he or she felt or experienced rejection from a church congregation because of his or her homosexual desires. An active member recounted his experience, "I heard more and more sermons condemning homosexuality. Knowing that if I was ever found out, I might be thrown out of the church. I was in such a confused state." About 40 percent had some experience with a gay community, but very few, only eight percent, had continual contact or exposure with a local group of gays. All of those in contact with Good News stated they desperately wanted to resolve the perceived tension between being a homosexual and an evangelical Christian. One letter writer stated, "I love God, but how can I deny my own feelings? Why should I have to sacrifice myself either to God or to the Devil because of my feelings?" They were actively seeking resolution of the tension when they responded to Good News's advertisements, "Gay and Christian, is it possible?"

Many expressed anxiety, despair, and the feeling that they had come to "the end of the rope." Religious acceptance by God, a community, and a heritage were perceived as a potential way to relieve the sense of alienation and rejection. This was often expressed as a desire to serve the Lord and become "good, whole" Christians, while hoping to live out authentically what they perceived to be their God-given sexuality.

### *GOOD NEWS' AGENDA — ASSURING THE PROPER MOTIVATIONS*

The leadership of Good News are well aware of the situations of those who contact them. They focus the group's efforts directly on the biblical and social condemnation of homosexuality. The structure of the organization is to help members change this negative perception into a positive self-concept. A number of specifically designed tasks are intended to promote identity revision. The leadership present these as separate and logical steps; however, within the group they take place simultaneously and are inseparable.

The written responses to those who asked for help illuminated the proposed pattern of progression. Most letters from the core members began with counseling and the assurance that it was possible to reconcile being gay and evangelical. Next they offered their testimony, information (biblical and scientific) about how it was possible, and a list of books to read for more information. The third part of the letter often consisted of encouraging the person to seek supportive fellowship or come to Atlanta to visit the group. Finally, there was a discussion of possible pitfalls and spiritual ways of maintaining the gay Christian identity. Interviews and interaction with the group highlighted the fact that members followed this pattern intellectually, but in practice observed interactions and identity negotiation were not nearly so easily or sequentially perceived.

Good News understands its first task to be one of convincing potential members that it is permissible to alter their religious beliefs. In an initial encounter one must literally be counseled and assured that one will not be condemned to Hell if she or

he tampers with traditionally “sacred” doctrines. Reinterpreting the scripture is to be viewed as a legitimate undertaking that does not destroy the validity and efficacy of the scriptures. As one of the leaders put it, “They have to realize that the house doesn’t fall down if one of the bricks was out of place.” This instruction can be clearly seen in the comment from a corresponding affiliate member. “The two books you sent me broke the barrier of guilt, fear, and anxiety my homosexuality had falsely imposed. The teaching I had been taught were men’s fears, condemnations, and opinions spoken in God’s Name. They were social condemnations NOT GOD’S.”

Once a person accepts the challenge to question doctrines and a literal interpretation of scripture, the focus then turns to one’s motives for change. Although personal motivation is an absolute necessity, the “proper” framing of that motivation must be taught. The motive for challenging traditional beliefs must be spiritually grounded; it must be seen as a spiritual quest.

Good News casts the change in terms of sanctification or “growth in wisdom and perfection of the Christian life.” Tension between sexuality and religiosity is understood as “an ungodly dualism between the body and the spirit.” Problems resulting from a literal interpretation of scripture are redefined as issues of “cultural relativity.” The choice then becomes either expressing one’s God-given, unchangeable sexuality or being bound by “men’s fears and opinions spoken in God’s name.” Once members tentatively accept this ideological perspective, “it is God’s will for us to be gay and Christian,” they can begin internalizing the perspective. The only correct action is to “follow God’s plan for your life.” In response, a potential member often asks, “How can I know for sure that what you say is God’s will?”

### TEACHING GOD’S WILL

The second task of Good News is to present the doctrines that support the proposed identity revision. Included in this instruction are new ways to understand the identity dissonance and the issues in question. Good News often asserts that “you must know the truth and the truth will set you free.” This means that the more one learns about the “correct” doctrines, the easier it is to accept the new identity. This teaching has a two-fold purpose. First, the teaching must denigrate the former position by identifying the faulty reasoning and incorrect learning from which it arose. Then, the instruction must provide information to replace the former thoughts about self-identity, redefine the supportive meaning system, and prescribe the direction of future action.

Good News must teach its members the “proper” interpretation of the scriptures and, at the same time, the acceptability of the gay lifestyle. They go about this first task by employing a historical-critical hermeneutic. This principle of interpretation reduces the condemnation of specific passages by calling into question their relevance for a modern world. One of the leaders affirmed this in a talk during a meeting. He stated, “I would still say that I believe in the infallibility of the scriptures, but what I would mean by that is certainly a lot different. I’m more liberal in the culture-related things, but conservative in theology. My theology hasn’t changed much.”

They then offer an elaborate exegesis of these passages to show that the Greek words translated as “homosexual” are either undefinable or refer to pederasty. A third



method they use is to emphasize biblical principles, such as love and acceptance of all persons, to counter the discriminatory attitudes of the church toward gays. Another of the leaders announced to the audience at a homecoming, "The bottom line — the top line — is that God loves people, all people. That to me is the basic message of the Bible."

A final theological method used to affirm the gay lifestyle is focusing on the image of God as creator. Psalms such as 139, "For you have created my innermost parts," and 100, "It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves," are often quoted. The reasoning of this creationist argument is, "Since God made me the way I am, why shouldn't I express my sexuality?" The group also relies on scientific literature to show that homosexuality is an orientation and is, therefore, immutable.<sup>4</sup> In this regard, the question is heard, "Why would God ask me to change something I can't?"

The primary modes of teaching are: lessons presented at meetings; special guest speakers; recommended readings of supportive books, such as *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?* by Scanzoni and Mollenkott (1978); written correspondence; and interaction with appropriate role models. These teachings offer alternative cognitive categories that support the proposed identity revisions. In doing this, Good News hopes to insure the acceptance of the revised identity by providing a complementary meaning system to support the new identity.

### EMBODYING THE NEW IDENTITY

Once the cognitive structures which support the revised identity have been presented, a third task is begun. Good News attempts to facilitate integration of the new gay Christian identity. This is undertaken in two primary ways: through evangelistic activities and through social interactions. There are a multitude of activities that need to be done for Good News to remain an organization. Members are put to work on such tasks as counseling and corresponding with newer members, writing and mailing newsletters, and planning and organizing social activities. As the newsletter challenged, "If God is using Good News to bless you and challenge you, won't you give so that others who are in despair may hear the gospel of God's love and concern for them." They are also encouraged to become involved in overt gay activities such as participating in gay rights rallies, AIDS benefits, visiting gay clubs (often to witness), and volunteering at various gay service organizations. Again the newsletter made this aspect evident, "so who will take the Word of Salvation and daily victorious living in Jesus Christ into the gay community?" In addition to these activities, Good News holds prayer meetings, Bible studies, spiritual retreats, homecomings, and pot-luck fellowship dinners. All these are open and receptive to guests and visitors.

The group also intentionally promotes evangelism to "heterosexual" congregations. Pastors of local churches are often asked to speak at bi-weekly meetings. Members

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<sup>4</sup>The conceptualization of homosexual identity used throughout this paper is the one offered by Good News. This understanding is common to many gay groups, and certain scientists, see Bell and Weinberg (1978). There is a debate presently between researchers who see homosexuality from an "essentialist" perspective and those who hold a social constructionist view, see Diane Richardson (1984) or David Greenberg (1988).

are strongly encouraged to attend "straight" churches within a member's denominational tradition. One of the group leaders made this clear during an interview.

I consciously chose to be a member of a predominately non-gay congregation because I believe in the concept of the family of faith, the community of faith. Christians who are gay cannot afford the luxury of isolation. We have to be willing to risk the pain, the alienation, the separation, if we are to achieve any semblance of dialogue.

According to the group's bylaws, officers and board members are required to attend straight churches as witnesses of God's redemption and grace to all people, including gays. This is also done as a sign of the group's commitment to the unity of the body of Christ.

In many ways the social activities that Good News sponsors replicate the Evangelical heritage of members. Most of the social events are reminiscent of conservative church activities, such as "group dates," Bible retreats, and homecomings, which are the annual revivalistic gatherings for marginal and out-of-town members. All of these events help legitimate the new identity. Through positive interaction with others, members begin to internalize the gay Evangelical identity and integrate it into their self-concept. One member expressed this in a letter, "The Mollenkott weekend retreat was quite an experience for me. That weekend was the first time in a very long time that I actually felt accepted, that I felt I belonged."

The leadership encourage those who contact Good News by letter to find a gay community or fellowship and subscribe to gay magazines, including the group's newsletter. Good News offers an opportunity for acceptance by other persons in a positive social context. They recommend that out-of-town members visit the Atlanta group, or one of the affiliate groups, and even, if possible, move to a larger town that has a gay church or fellowship in it. The group structures allow members to experiment with the tentative identity through service, community involvement, and participation in activities that parallel the Evangelical Christian ones from which they would be excluded as gays. Finally, these social activities, and the acceptance gained from interaction with other group members, strengthen the process of socialization into the new identity. One member made this clear in an interview. "I decided to visit Good News. There I found, along with a wonderful group of people, a place where I could feel free to be myself and to profess my faith in Jesus Christ." This interaction promotes the assurance that the decision to accept the revised identity is a correct one.

### *MAINTAINING THE NEW IDENTITY*

The fourth and final task for Good News is to help strengthen and maintain the newly revised identity. Community and group support are correlated strongly with continued commitment to the gay Christian identity. Many members find that acceptance by other Christians is all they need to solidify the identity revisions. However, the group uses a number of other techniques to facilitate this change. One of these methods involves negating and devaluing the former identity. Members come to regard their previous situation as a hindrance to becoming "whole" Christians. This is expressed in the statement by one of the long-time members.

By accepting [my sexual orientation] I was able to move spiritually. I don't live a double life now. I can't change, and I don't want to change. When you are able to accept yourself and know that God accepts you and made you, you're able to go on and live a more productive and more happy life.

A second technique is to present the current gay Christian identity as part of an oppressed minority, thus seeing outside, "unenlightened," groups as hostile and misguided. "Being different" is strengthened further by and the creation of an "elitist" group identity. Both conservative denominations and certain secular gay groups are viewed as opposing the truthfulness of Good News's position. The former errs in not accepting gays in the Christian fellowship. The latter is at fault for devaluing Christian involvement in the gay community. Another approach the group uses is to infuse many of the morals of the evangelical lifestyle into the gay lifestyle. Good News states that sexual expression and relationships are to be guided by biblical principles, not by wanton desires. Ideally, one should engage in sexual activity only in a committed relationship.

A fifth way to strengthen the revised identity is to compensate for the felt losses in religious orthodoxy. This is done by encouraging increases in orthopraxy. Good News offers its members many traditional evangelical activities, as noted above. They place a strong emphasis on individual piety and outward religiosity, to such an extent that it hints of a "works righteousness."

In terms of beliefs, Good News also promotes a strict adherence to all "significant" orthodox doctrines, such as the divinity of Christ, his virgin birth and bodily resurrection, the absolute necessity of personal salvation, and the belief that the Bible is the inspired word of God, correctly interpreted. One group leader made this very clear during one meeting. "A Christian can still have a high view of scripture, humanity, sin, and salvation, and yet find nothing in homosexuality incompatible with being a Christian."

They assure any inquiring person that they strongly adhere to every point of the statement of faith of the National Association of Evangelicals. Good News's statement of faith begins,

The members of Good News profess their individual and corporate faith in the basic Biblical Truths of the full authority of Scripture, a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of Life, and the urgency of Sharing the Gospel message in both word and deed.

Finally, since Good News frames the change as a spiritual journey, the rewards of maintaining a revised self-identity are presented as primarily spiritual in nature. One out-of-town member expressed the truth of this claim. "I cannot express the spiritual release of standing clean before the Lord." The love and confirmation of worth from other Christians toward those who previously had been ostracized by the church becomes an act of redemption and forgiveness.

The group's acceptance is understood as a sign of God's approval and blessing. As one of the leaders commented, "God loves us and stays with us, forever offering forgiveness, healing, and wholeness. We live and move and have our being — including our sexual being — within the sphere of God's love." The biblical mandate of sanc-

tification and the assurance of eternal "rewards" for a faithful Christian operate as implicit mechanisms of commitment to the new gay Christian identity.

### THE INDIVIDUAL AS ACTIVE NEGOTIATOR

Much of this discussion of the process of negotiating a gay Evangelical identity has focused on the group dynamics promoting change. This was intentional; Good News presents a model into which its members are socialized. A central premise of the concept of socialization is that individuals are brought to conform to the expectations and ideals of the group through internalization and social learning. As Long and Hadden state, "the special character of the process is defined by what members *do to novices*" (1983:5). But to view this process only as one-sided, or the novice as passively receptive, is inadequate.

Very few people who contact Good News actually end up carbon copies of the leadership. They negotiate with the group as much as the group negotiates its "identity ideal" with the Evangelical tradition. Persons come to the group with varying degrees of commitment to Christianity, of openness to homosexuality, and of willingness to change. Different levels of motivation drastically influence how one responds to the identity revisions suggested by Good News. This is seen most clearly in the diverse ways the new identity is embodied. A few persons wholeheartedly accept both the new identity and the group, becoming core members (roughly 5%). More often people seek out Good News to resolve the identity dissonance; once the dissonance is resolved or reduced, they disappear (almost 65%). Sometimes a person accepts the identity and continues to maintain a surface relationship or affiliate membership with the group for occasional support and fellowship (25%). A small percentage (5%), upon hearing the message of Good News, reject it and quickly sever their connections with the group.

### THE GAY EVANGELICAL

Persons who have successfully internalized a gay Evangelical identity very likely may appear different from the way they were when they first sought out Good News. In most cases members accept their homosexuality and become open about their lifestyle. At the same time, they forcefully affirm their Evangelical heritage. In most cases, these gay Evangelicals are more pious and orthodox than they were prior to their encounter with Good News. Members certainly hold more moralistic views on sexuality and relationships than are found in the general secular gay population (Bell and Weinberg, 1978). Most members report an increase in personal piety, including more Bible reading and daily devotions, a systematic study of the scriptures and of their Evangelical heritage, and a greater amount of time spent in prayer and meditation. They explain these changes as resulting from feeling accepted by God.

At the same time, however, these members are no longer traditional Evangelical Christians according to doctrinal beliefs. They do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible. They are less affected by the moral proscriptions against drinking, dancing, sex outside of marriage, and most of all, homosexuality. The leadership, and some of the members, align politically with the left on issues of war, poverty, individual rights,

abortion, and foreign policies. Members almost inevitably become somewhat more tolerant of the rights of others such as blacks and women. Many members fit nicely with Hunter's description of the "young Evangelicals" (1983:111). They are no longer traditional Evangelicals, but in many ways they know themselves to be more authentic as gay Evangelicals.

## CONCLUSIONS

Except for the hermit or the isolated sect, identity negotiation appears to be unavoidable in the modern world. This is true for members of Good News, especially in light of their struggle with homosexual feelings. The gay community ideology asserts that a homosexual orientation is immutable and an essential part of a gay person's nature. This presents a difficult problem for those who seek out Good News. They feel they must remain faithful to their evangelical heritage and doctrinal beliefs — doctrines that explicitly forbid homosexuality. These persons have struggled with this core identity dissonance for years before arriving at a point where something has to be done. Yet few have any idea of how to reduce this dissonance and still remain authentic to their sexuality and religious identity.

The only possible solution they find to be viable for them is one that maintains both identities. This solution demands a negotiated settlement between the dual core identities. Some amount of accommodation is necessary. The identity negotiation requires that these Christians accept a historical critical approach to the Bible, but it does not change them into liberal Christians. The negotiated identity allows them to accept their homosexuality, while not requiring that they deny their faith. Socialization into Good News's ideology, alters, but does not eradicate, members' Evangelical religious identity. Good News offers an unique brand of identity negotiation. It presents an opportunity to "have one's cake and eat it too."

Through interaction with the group, members construct a gay Evangelical Christian identity as an alternative to their previous dissonant religious and sexual identities. In hundreds of people who have come into contact with Good News, a change of self-concept becomes both the impetus and result of the integration of a strengthened gay identity with an accommodated Evangelical Christian religious identity. Neither identity is radically compromised; rather, both are combined to create the new core identity and self-concept of a gay Evangelical Christian.

Although this is a unique situation, it does raise the question of whether this same process occurs in diverse religious situations or conversion events. In conceptualizing religious identity change or conversion as an either/or proposition, researchers may be overlooking the subtlety of the individual's identity negotiation. Likewise, in ambitious efforts to show the rampant conservative religious accommodation to modernity, we may be missing those who successfully negotiate both a core Evangelical world view and very modern aspects of culture. The example that members of Good News offer us suggests that social scientists should take a closer look at what is going on in the socialization dynamics of religious accommodation to the modern world.

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