



## Christian groups bring different messages to Pride event

By [Christopher Quinn](#)  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

5:05 p.m. Saturday, October 31, 2009

The battle for Jesus played itself out Saturday as it does every year during Atlanta's largest event for gay people.

Outside the gates of Piedmont Park, where much of the Atlanta Pride Festival takes place, a handful of conservative Christians carried Bibles and signs, warning arriving gays of impending eternal doom unless they change.

For the past two years, local churches who affirm gays have mounted a counteroffensive. Their members stand near the conservatives, holding signs saying that God accepts gays just as they are.

"We are letting people know that there is an alternative message," said Lisa Costen of Atlanta.

She attends Trinity United Methodist Church, which affirms gays though the United Methodist denomination has not taken that step.

The battling groups reflect much of what is happening inside American Christianity, as churches grapple with how to treat gay members. Some reject them. Some welcome them with open arms. Others are trying to find a balance.

Inside the park, local churches, from a born-again, charismatic gay congregation to mainline churches, such as the Episcopal Church, have taken vendors' booths and invite gays in without demanding they change.

This year, two evangelical ministers who are walking a middle path between outright condemnation and full affirmation of gay people took a booth and surprised those stopping by with apologies.

"I just want to say I'm sorry," Jason Harper, an assistant pastor from Sacramento, Calif., told a man as he handed him a white rubber bracelet with "We're Sorry" indented into it.

Harper continued, he is sorry for the way many churches have treated gay people, making them feel like outcasts. The man paused, looked Harper in the eye and thanked him before disappearing.

Harper and Craig Gross wrote a book, "No Matter Who You Are or What You've Done, Jesus Loves You,

"This I Know" (Baker Books \$17.99), about their experiences with prisoners, porn stars, Las Vegas strip down-and-outers and other strangers to church. They attended Atlanta Pride as part of the book tour. They don't condemn gay people, but they won't affirm a gay relationship as an ideal union. That typically does not come up in their brief apologies.

Renee Randall, a gay Georgia State University student, smiled and chatted with Harper and Gross after an apology.

"I think it's a message that people need to know," she said after leaving the booth.

"It gets really old hearing all that other stuff," she said, nodding toward the gates where the conservative Christians stood in the misting rain with their signs.

Others coming by were not as receptive to Harper and Gross' message. One woman took a bracelet, and as she walked away, her female partner chided her, used an expletive and called her a "traitor."

Bill Adams, a conservative Christian from Atlanta had a similar attitude toward Harper and Gross, but for a different reason. Adams comes yearly to try to talk to attendees outside the gates about his views of the Bible. You can't be a practicing homosexual and a Christian, he said. He believes people need to hear the unvarnished truth of the Bible, preached just as Jesus and his early followers preached it, he said.

"It is a dangerous and confusing thing [Harper and Gross] are doing," he said.

The variety of religious opinion on display within a 200-yard walk was as varied as the crowd's couture. Some dressed as if they had come from work. Others were in full Halloween costume.

Costen, holding her welcoming sign outside the 10th Street park gate, seemed to sum it all up.

"Not all Christians are the same," she said.

---

Find this article at:

 [Print this page](#)  [Close](#)

<http://www.ajc.com/news/christian-groups-bring-different-180580.html>