

# The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage



*An Evangelical's Change of Heart*

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## INTRODUCTION



This book is the story of a change of heart. In the middle 1990s, I was a conservative church activist working hard to defend the “traditional” teaching of my own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that was condemning homosexual practice. In the fall of 1996, I published an article supporting traditionalist efforts to keep openly gay and lesbian people from serving in positions of ordained church leadership.<sup>1</sup> Those efforts proved successful, and the result was a constitutional ban on gay ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), beginning in the summer of 1997.<sup>2</sup>

The passage of fourteen years found me working to repeal the ban on gay ordination I had once helped put in place. My own efforts came to fruition, along with the work of a great many others, when on July 10, 2011, the PC(USA) officially repealed the constitutional language that had prevented faithful gay and lesbian Presbyterians from serving as ministers, elders, and deacons of the church. On October 8 of that year I was privileged to preach the sermon for the ordination of Scott Anderson, the first openly gay Presbyterian to be granted ministerial credentials under the new rules.<sup>3</sup>

The following pages chronicle the journey with the Bible that took me from a personal stance of judgment and exclusion to a changed heart that longs for the day when the church will fully celebrate and participate in God's blessing of same-gender relationships.

The Bible has been my constant guide and traveling companion on every step of this journey. Some people find this surprising: I remember speaking to a conservative Presbyterian who had heard about the change in my views. His first words upon meeting me were, "So when did you lose your faith?" It seems to be a common assumption that the only way a person could embrace this kind of a change would be to renounce the authority of Scripture or the Lordship of Christ, to decide that the Bible is outdated, or simply to ignore selected portions of scriptural teaching.

But nothing could be further from the truth! This journey for me has been a story of God leading and often prodding me into a steadily deepening encounter with Holy Scripture. My overriding goal has been to grapple honestly with this issue using the best principles of scriptural interpretation acquired through my work and training as a minister and theology professor. The result of this encounter with the Bible has been a growing conviction that the church's condemnation of same-gender relationships is a tragic and destructive misinterpretation of the Bible's message. Moreover it is a misinterpretation precisely because this so-called "traditional" teaching ignores classical principles of scriptural interpretation that date back centuries in the history of the church. Bringing these principles to bear on the question of same-gender relationships has led me to a deeper appreciation of the Bible's teaching in this area. The result has been not to undermine or ignore biblical teaching on love, sex, and marriage but to recognize how God's blessing is available to same-gender relationships just as much as to heterosexual ones.

Another thing people sometimes assume when they hear of this journey I have been on is that somewhere along the line I must have had a family member or loved one come out of the closet, or perhaps I have struggled with same-sex attraction

myself. Again, the truth is quite different. God has blessed me with a wonderful marriage to my wife, Katherine, with whom I recently celebrated our thirty-second wedding anniversary. Together we have three wonderful children. We would love them as much as we do now if any of them happened to be gay, but none have shown any inclinations toward same-sex attraction.

This journey is not something I ever felt forced into. It began with some remarkable friendships that allowed me to catch a personal glimpse of the emotional and spiritual toll that the church's traditional condemnations were exacting on gay people who had a sincere desire to follow Jesus. Seeing the obstacles the church was putting in the way of their discipleship led me to wonder if the traditional condemnations against homosexuality contained problems that I had previously overlooked. The growing sense that something was wrong with this picture led me back to the Scriptures and set me out on this journey toward a more faithful and hopeful understanding of the Bible's message.

I believe that if the church attends carefully to the best biblical insights about marriage and sexuality from the Christian tradition, it will find that these teachings can open up rich possibilities for all Christian couples to experience God's blessing, whether their marriages are gay or straight. My goal has not been to overturn classical Christian teachings about marriage but to extend them so that their application to same-sex relationships becomes clear.

The time to make such a case is long overdue. I noted with alarm the results of a survey done a few years ago by the Barna research organization, which surveyed young people about their impressions of the church. The survey made national headlines when it found that eighty-five percent of unchurched young people thought of the Christian church as hypocritical, judgmental, and anti-gay.<sup>4</sup> As our society has become more aware of gay peoples' struggle for acceptance, the vocal opposition from many corners of the Christian community has led people outside the church to conclude that the

Bible and Christianity must inevitably function as sources of bigotry and exclusion.

These characterizations are not always fair. Having been a defender of the traditional, exclusionary teaching myself, I know that many people holding such views are convinced that same-gender sexual activity is a source of spiritual, emotional, and physical harm to the people who engage in it. Their oppositional stance is sometimes the product of an ill-informed compassion that seeks to prevent gay people from harming themselves.

But as the Barna survey makes clear, the presence of these good intentions has not been sufficient to allay the impression in the wider society that Christianity and the Bible are sources of hatefulness. This impression threatens to undermine the credibility of the church's witness for generations to come. It is high time for conscientious Christians to make the case that hatefulness and prejudice against gay people, far from reflecting the essence of Christianity, represent grave *distortions* of the Bible's message. Simply protesting the distortions will not be enough, however. To be credible, a critique of the distortions must be accompanied by a positive case for inclusion and acceptance based on a careful consideration of scriptural teaching.

I do hope what I have written here will prove helpful to gay people, as well as their families and friends who may be struggling to come to terms with who they are in the light of their Christian faith. I would, of course, like to persuade traditionalist Christians to change their views, and I trust that there are numbers among them for whom a carefully crafted biblical argument will be effective.

I have also encountered a great many compassionate and sympathetic Christian believers who hold traditionalist views but have a feeling deep in their hearts that something is not quite right with the church's exclusionary stance toward gay people. Many of these conscientious folk would like to support marriage equality but have felt uneasy about doing so in the absence of a clearly explained biblical case. I hope this record of my own journey will give them grounds for embracing in practice what their hearts already recognize as the right thing to do.

Though there is a great deal of excellent scholarship available on homosexuality and the Bible, I have not attempted with this work to provide a scholarly survey. Readers will find this book more of a spiritual travelogue, and my goal throughout has been to provide personal testimony to the discoveries that have kept me on the path of this remarkable journey. My actual progress has not been as direct or straightforward as the presentation of this book might indicate. I experienced many false starts and blind alleys along the way. But I do believe this work reflects an accurate chronicle of the biblical and intellectual milestones through which God has led me to this dramatic change of heart.

As I write these words, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) continues to be in turmoil over questions of sexuality, in company with many other Christian denominations. The issue of gay marriage currently looms large on the agenda. The PC(USA) constitution presently prohibits Presbyterian ministers from performing wedding ceremonies for gay and lesbian couples, but challenges to this exclusionary stance will come before the church's General Assembly in the very near future. The arguments show no sign of abating, and it appears that American churches will be debating same-sex marriage for a long time to come. It is with the earnest hope of injecting some light into the midst of all the heat generated by these discussions that I have taken up the writing of this book.