

Advance Praise for *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*

“In lucid, accessible prose, Mark Achtemeier makes plain what remains obscure for many: God’s purposes for marriage, love, and sexuality according to the Bible. His book helps to clear away many harmful confusions, and it leaves in their place a rigorous sexual ethic that is both faithful to Scripture and inclusive of committed gay couples. It is an excellent introduction for those open to changing their position, and his witness is a worthy model to follow.”

—Matthew Vines, founder of The Reformation Project
and author of *God and the Gay Christian*

“Many people experience a change in thinking when it comes to important matters of faith and life, but very few can articulate their transformation with careful clarity. Reading this book made me want to pull out some stationery and write Dr. Mark Achtemeier a long thank-you letter. I have such gratitude for Achtemeier’s grace toward those who don’t agree with him. I appreciate how he answers the questions that concern many loving Christians. And I admire him for taking the time to become a helpful guide for the church. Dr. Achtemeier’s journey is not my journey, but throughout *The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage*, his perspective, thoughtfulness, and care moved and enlightened me.”

—Carol Howard Merritt, pastor, columnist,
and author of *Tribal Church* and *Reframing Hope*

“For Christians who fear that embracing a gay-affirming theology means relinquishing biblical authority, Mark Achtemeier’s careful, step-by-step exploration of the issue might prove an invaluable guide and comfort. This is no fiery treatise, no inflammatory polemic. This is a thoughtful, conservative theologian offering to hold the hand of the reader who cares to accompany him on his journey from the Christian he was to the Christian he is today.”

—John Shore, founder of The Not All Like That (NALT)
Christians Project and author of *UNFAIR:
Christians and the LGBT Question*

“A deeply compelling read. I couldn’t put it down. In these pages, an esteemed, conservative scholar shares his personal and theological journey through the complex terrain of the most divisive issue facing churches today. His method is solid, his humility is inspiring, and his insights are profound. I admire Mark Achtemeier’s ability to tell a very human story about our place in the very holy Gospel story.”

—Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary,
New York City, and author of *Trauma
and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World*

“With his skills as a distinguished biblical scholar, his pastor’s heart, and his personal integrity, Mark Achtemeier carefully explores what Scripture says, and does not say, about same-sex relationships and marriage. This is the book we have been waiting for—biblically based, carefully researched, unapologetically Christ centered, and compellingly argued. It moved me deeply, and it will make an enormous contribution to the conversation in the church, and beyond, about one of the most important moral issues of our time.”

—John M. Buchanan, editor/publisher of *The Christian Century*

The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage



An Evangelical's Change of Heart

MARK ACHEMEIER

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*To my dear wife, Katherine,
beloved partner and companion on the journey*

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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.¹ 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 1997.²

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.³

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.⁴ 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.

CHAPTER 1



THE HARVEST OF DESPAIR

Why Traditional Condemnations of Gay Relationships Can't Be Right

The young seminarian speaks to me in hushed tones across the table in the café where we have agreed to meet. Kristi (not her real name) is bright, capable, and committed, but today her face appears deeply troubled.

Kristi describes herself as a conservative evangelical who has always been deeply committed to Christ and the church. She has grown up convinced that God was calling her into full-time ministry, and she arrived at seminary tremendously excited about having her call become a reality.

Kristi also confesses to me that she has struggled with same-sex attraction since the time when she was a young teen. When she first became aware of these feelings she was horrified. At first she tried her best to ignore them, hoping they were a passing phase. But even though she never acted on them, the feelings have persisted over the years, becoming an ever deeper source of anguish and struggle for her.

I note the quaver in her voice as she speaks about all the years she has spent in fervent prayer, begging God to

relieve her of what she believes are unholy impulses. She has sought out ministers and chaplains and Christian counselors. All have advised her to keep praying and hanging on, trusting that God will give her the strength to overcome these feelings.

As her story tumbles out, it becomes clear to me that Kristi is at the end of her rope. She speaks about faith with resentment in her voice, wondering why God would weigh her down with such an affliction when all she wants is to serve Christ as a committed disciple. She can't understand why a loving God would ignore her heartfelt prayers. She is not praying for any selfish reasons, she assures me, but only so that she can become the kind of faithful minister God has called her to be. After so much struggle, it is clear that God seems more like a distant, uncaring judge to Kristi than the loving, heavenly Father she grew up hearing about. Her future plans are in shambles, and she is on the verge of giving up on the faith altogether. The many years she has spent faithfully battling temptation and following church teaching have left her feeling bitter, hopeless, and deeply depressed. With tears running down her cheeks, she confesses to me she has been thinking about suicide.



I found Kristi's story very troubling, first and foremost on a human level because her deep distress couldn't help but tug at my heartstrings. But even beyond the emotional impact of her story, her testimony was disturbing because none of it matched up with the Bible's teaching about how faith and discipleship are supposed to work.

A really striking feature of Kristi's story was that through all this trial and struggle, she had continued to faithfully follow the path that her Christian mentors and teachers had identified as God's will for her life. This was not a story about a person falling prey to temptation and reaping a bitter reward as a result. Kristi had persisted in the battle against the troubling feelings that disturbed her so deeply. She had not surrendered to her

alienation from God and a weariness that was leading her to give up on the faith altogether. These were not at all the outcomes Scripture would lead us to expect from a life of faithfulness.

This is not to suggest that faithfulness to Christ always leads to a peaceful life of serenity and comfort. The Bible never suggests that faithfulness will always be easy. Followers of Jesus are by no means exempt from facing hardship, suffering, and struggle in life, and in this they follow their Master's example. After all, the path of perfect faithfulness for Jesus led to the cross, and Christ teaches his followers that they, too, must be willing to pick up their crosses daily and follow him (Luke 9:23). God sometimes calls us to do things that are very hard for us.

But the Bible also speaks clearly and consistently about the blessing that attends such sacrifices in the form of closeness to God and the "peace of God, which surpasses all understanding" (Phil. 4:7). Jesus went to the cross out of his passionate desire to do the Father's will; as a result of his supreme sacrifice, God has highly exalted him (2:9–10). Paul and Silas, attacked by a hostile mob, beaten and thrown into prison, pass their time in captivity singing hymns of praise (Acts 16:16–25). The early Christian martyrs gave heartfelt testimony to God as they made the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. Even a modern-day martyr like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, imprisoned by the Nazis and struggling with isolation and depression in his filthy prison cell, gives a witness to a calm and sustaining faith that has inspired countless thousands down to the present day. A prison doctor gave the following eyewitness account of his death:

Through the half-open door in one room of the huts I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution he again said a short prayer and then climbed the steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.¹

The abiding presence of God, strengthening and upholding the faithful through times of hardship and suffering, has been a nearly universal feature of Christian experience from biblical times down to the present day.

But this was strikingly not the case for Kristi. The sacrificial commitments she had made in her attempts to remain faithful had resulted in alienation from God and loss of faith. I was left wondering: If this path Kristi had been walking produced results that were in so many ways the exact opposite of what Scripture would lead us to expect from a life of faithfulness, could it be that both she and I were mistaken about what path God really wanted her to follow?

Kristi's story didn't end there, but the events following our lunchtime conversation served only to reinforce my questions. By this point in my journey I had developed some contacts among gay Presbyterians. I was so concerned and shaken by the depth of Kristi's distress that I asked one of those friends if he might be willing to talk with her. That contact in turn put her in touch with a quiet fellowship of gay seminarians, many of whom had also come from very traditional backgrounds. These were people who had struggled with the same issues that had led Kristi to the brink of despair. Hearing their stories and becoming a part of their fellowship led Kristi for the first time to consider that God might not be automatically condemning her for the attractions she was feeling. For the first time she considered the possibility that her future might include sharing her life together with a partner whom she loved, in a relationship blessed by God.

The ensuing transformation in Kristi was remarkable. Her faith in God revived, stronger than ever. Her previous despair and depression rolled back, and a passionate, committed, Christ-centered young woman appeared, eager to be a witness of God's love. Once again, these were exactly the opposite results one would expect if her new openness was a move *away* from God's will for her. If a person's life departs in a serious way from God's will, one would not expect the result to be a flourishing spiritual commitment. John's Gospel records Jesus' clear teaching on this:

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. . . .

(John 15:5–6)

Seeing Kristi's vibrant faith and strong commitment re-emerge as a result of her newfound openness made as deep an impression on me as her former despair. I couldn't help wondering if this really was the path God intended for her. I could see nothing in Kristi's life that looked like the spiritual withering one would expect to find in a person whose life had moved away from abiding in Christ.

Kristi's story is far from unique. I remember being struck early in my journey by the testimony of author and blogger Andrew Sullivan. Sullivan spoke in an interview about his early attempts to conform his life as a gay man to the teachings of his Roman Catholic faith, to which he was deeply devoted. Sullivan writes,

The moral consequences, in my own life, of the refusal to allow myself to love another human being were disastrous. They made me permanently frustrated and angry and bitter. It spilled over into other areas of my life. Once that emotional blockage is removed, one's whole moral equilibrium can improve. . . . These things are part of a continuous moral whole. You can't ask someone to suppress what makes them whole as a human being and then to lead blameless lives. We are human beings, and we need love in our lives in order to love others, in order to be good Christians! What the church is asking gay people to do is not to be holy, but actually to be warped.²

Here again the same, puzzling pattern appears: Sullivan's committed attempts to follow church teaching on homosexuality did not lead to the spiritual flourishing that Scripture would lead us to expect as the fruit of true faithfulness. Instead they led to a spiritual life that was warped and stunted. Perhaps what the church was asking of gay people wasn't true faithfulness after all.

Another early conversation that got me thinking took place with a gay friend who was speaking to me about her marriage to her partner. I was suggesting, very generously I thought, that perhaps a commitment like hers could be justified from a Christian standpoint as a concession to human weakness: I believed that God's ideal for her as a gay person was to live a life of chaste singleness. But if she lacked the ability to do that, perhaps a marriage like hers could be viewed as a lesser evil in comparison with simply being promiscuous. Looking back on the conversation, I am amazed that she had the patience with me to respond in a civil manner, but her response has stayed with me. "I know all about sin and repentance," she said. "I have lots of areas in my life where I know I fall short and where I ask God's forgiveness and strive to do better. But my marriage just doesn't feel like one of these problem areas. My marriage feels like the part of my life that brings out the very best in me. It is where I learn the most about love and giving and self-sacrifice." Here was another striking break in the biblically predicted pattern: Scripture says that departing from God's will leads to spiritual withering. But the part of this person's life that I assumed was deeply contrary to God's will turned out to be one of the most fruitful areas of spiritual growth for her.

This conversation also started me wondering about what the church was asking gay people to do who were in committed, covenanted partnerships or marriages. Was it really God's will for people like my friend to abandon a beloved life partner and get a divorce?

I tried to think if there was any precedent in the Bible where God actively commands people to divorce their spouses. The one example I came up with was from Ezra, chapters 9–10. That biblical book chronicles the rebuilding of the nation of Israel following the peoples' return from seventy years in foreign exile. As chapter 9 opens, a group of officials brings to Ezra's attention a situation that has developed during the time of exile. Within that situation of captivity, many of the scattered Israelite men had intermarried with women from idol-worshipping foreign peoples, in violation of the Law of Moses. When Ezra and

the other officials bring this situation to light, a great zeal for purifying their national life overtakes the Israelite masses. They resolve to “send away” their foreign wives and children, and the officials subsequently put in place a systematic plan for imposing divorces on all the affected families in the nation. The whole episode struck me as heartless and a bit chilling.

It is not at all clear that God approves of these mandatory divorces imposed on the nation. Nowhere in the story does anyone report a direct word from the Lord commanding this action; it is the idea of the religious leaders. Furthermore, the book of the prophet Malachi, which comes from the same period of Israel’s history, contains a blistering condemnation of the divorces that have taken place within the nation (Mal. 2:13–16). This prophetic denunciation, which is reported as coming directly from God, sounds as if it is aimed squarely at this tragic episode of mandatory divorce undertaken by the returning exiles. The one recorded biblical instance where divorce is used as a remedy for marriages that were seen as violating God’s law leads not to blessing but to divine judgment.

Finding no biblical precedent where divorce was required as an act of faithfulness, I tried to think about this situation from a personal standpoint as well. What would it be like to hear the church telling me that the only way my life could find favor in God’s eyes would be for me to abandon my dear wife, Katherine, and seek a divorce? Whether or not I followed such teaching, what kind of damage would it do to my spiritual life and my view of God to hear a message like that coming from the church? I raised some of these questions in an address given to a gathering of conservative Presbyterians in 2002 and was surprised at the number of appreciative responses I received.⁵

As my circle of acquaintances within the gay community widened, I heard dozens of heartrending testimonies from committed gay Christians about the spiritual devastation that had resulted from desperately trying to conform their lives to the demands of a God whom they believed was standing in judgment over their longing for love and committed relationships.

And on the flip side of the ledger, I kept finding myself deeply impressed by the vibrant witness of gay Christians who had somehow come to terms with their sexual orientation and devoted themselves to following Jesus.

Sadly, I also encountered a great many stories that did not have the kind of happy ending I observed in Kristi's case. I became painfully aware of the thousands upon thousands of gay people who, upon finding themselves unable to live according to the requirements of traditional church teaching, had despaired of their faith, fled from the church, and lived under the assumption that the Christian God was their enemy. In the most heartbreaking cases, the burden of this spiritual devastation had proven too crushing to bear. These despairing children of God were turning to the path that had once tempted Kristi, seeing suicide as the only possible means of obtaining relief from the spiritual pain and heartbreak that resulted from their experiences with the church.

Asking the Impossible

My observations and experiences were raising a lot of questions about whether traditional church teaching on homosexuality was in accordance with God's will at all. As I became more and more aware of the personal and spiritual devastation that this teaching was causing, I realized that getting to the bottom of these questions was far more than just an intellectual exercise. Lives and souls were very much at stake. I had always assumed that the Bible's teaching on homosexuality was quite clear, but there was no denying the dramatic disconnect between the Bible's predictions about the fruits of faithfulness and the actual results I was seeing in the lives of gay people who followed, or tried to follow, this traditional teaching. I began wondering what I had overlooked in my own understanding of the Bible's teaching.

I also started to wonder what kind of God we were dealing with if the traditional condemnations of homosexuality really did reflect the will of God. These questions arose as I realized

that people like Kristi did not choose their same-sex orientation, nor did they have the ability to embrace a lifelong discipline of celibate singleness.

It was absolutely clear from my conversations with Kristi and others that their sexual orientation was not a choice. Many of them had devoted years to prayer and struggle, pleading with God and desperately trying to be rid of their same-sex attraction, all to no avail. Scientists sometimes debate whether sexual orientation is determined by a person's genes or by external environmental factors, or by both. But we don't need definitive answers to such questions in order to take seriously the testimony of people like Kristi: The traditional path of heterosexual love and marriage is simply not available to them, try as they might to choose to be something other than what they are. As I write this, the national news has recently reported a decision by the leadership of Exodus International, a well-known "ex-gay" organization, to give up on all its ministries aimed at "curing" gay and lesbian people of their same-sex attraction.⁴ The leadership of this group has finally concluded, after years of trying, that peoples' sexual orientation can't be changed and that telling them otherwise is a source of grievous psychological and spiritual harm. Even the highly traditional Roman Catholic Church has acknowledged in its official teaching that same-sex orientation is not a condition that people can either choose or reject for themselves.⁵

It was also clear from all the stories of brokenness I was encountering that Kristi and many others were not able to embrace a lifelong commitment to celibacy without crippling spiritual and psychological consequences. It is not immediately obvious why this should be the case. I remember sharing Kristi's story at a conference where I was speaking one time, only to be approached afterward by a very indignant member of the audience. "I am a single person," she said. "I have been striving very hard my whole life to live faithfully according to biblical sexual morality, and it's not always easy. How is it you can talk about the crippling, impossible burdens of celibate life for gay

and lesbian people, but not for single men and women? Isn't that a double standard?"

In fact it's not a double standard, because traditional church teaching imposes requirements on gay and lesbian people that are far more drastic and far-reaching than anything it asks of single people. Yes, traditional church teaching counsels gay and single people alike to refrain from irresponsible sexual activity that is not coupled with covenant promises joining one's life together with one's partner. We will have much more to say on why this requirement makes sense in chapter 8. But for people like Kristi, the traditional teaching goes far beyond this.

Traditional teaching says to someone like Kristi that she must not only avoid irresponsible use of her sexuality while she is a single person but also forever give up hope of falling in love, getting married, and building a shared life with a person she loves. There is nothing comparable to this in the advice the church gives to single people, in fact it encourages them to find that special person they can share their life with. It is the traditional teaching's additional demand of gay people, that they must forever renounce even the hope and possibility of ever sharing in the kind of loving intimacy that is God's will for a good marriage, that makes the traditional teaching so spiritually and psychologically toxic for people like Kristi.

People sometimes fail to recognize this additional, heavy burden placed on gay people because they mistakenly believe that sex is the only issue on the table. I remember having a conversation one time with an older colleague who is usually quite wise and sensible. But on this particular occasion he said to me, "I just don't see how the church can say everyone has a *right* to have sex. That has never been the church's teaching." Indeed it has not. And if we put blinders on and pretend the issue is about only whether or not certain people should have sex, then it becomes very hard to register the difference between the church's traditional advice to single people and to gay people. In both cases it is advising a particular group to refrain from being sexually active. Church teaching has been communicating this

message to single people for centuries. So why all the fuss when it comes to gay people?

What my colleague failed to appreciate is that for people like Kristi, the issue at stake isn't some right to be sexually active, but whether they can have love in their lives. Lots of people go without sex for various reasons, some for extended periods of time, without any sign of spiritual devastation or despair. But to ask someone to give up on the hope and possibility of ever getting to experience love and marriage—that is a far more serious matter.

In fact, in recognizing the overwhelming difficulty of a lifelong celibacy requirement, we stand squarely in line with traditional Protestant teaching about love and marriage. Starting in the early 1500s, leaders of the Protestant Reformation like Martin Luther and John Calvin vehemently criticized the Roman Catholic Church for imposing vows of lifelong celibacy on whole classes of people, as it was doing for monks, nuns, and priests.⁶ These devout church Reformers argued that such vows were cruel. They required people to make sacrifices for God that were not in their power to make, resulting in widespread suffering, hypocrisy, and spiritual damage.⁷ They also argued that celibacy requirements were unbiblical. Martin Luther emphasized that God created people for lifelong companionship with a spouse according to Genesis 2:18.⁸ Both Jesus and Paul teach that celibacy is a gift given to only a few individuals. It is not an ability that God makes available to everyone (Matt. 9:16–17, 1 Cor. 7:7). John Calvin argued that it is an ungodly cruelty to impose a celibacy requirement indiscriminately on groups of people, the vast majority of whom have no gift or ability for it. Such an action substitutes spiritually damaging human regulations for the gracious gift God has provided in the institution of marriage.⁹ And to those who claim that praying to God will help people find the strength to conform to such requirements, Calvin replies that God helps only those who walk in God's calling. People who despise the gift of marriage and try to embrace a celibacy for which they lack the requisite gifts are setting themselves against God and God's calling.¹⁰

Reviewing this Reformation teaching, I realized that there was nothing exaggerated, surprising, or unusual about the spiritual and psychological damage Kristi and other faithful gay people had experienced in trying to follow the church's traditional teaching. Protestant Christians had been arguing for centuries, on the basis of both Scripture and common experience, that requiring people to embrace a lifetime discipline of celibacy was cruel and damaging in the vast majority of cases.

What Kind of God?

These observations set the stage for some serious questions about God. What kind of God were we dealing with, I wondered, if the traditional condemnations of homosexuality were faithful and accurate reflections of the divine will? That would mean that God places Kristi and others like her in a situation from which there is no escape. They have absolutely no ability to wish or pray or choose their way out of their same-sex attraction, yet God condemns them unless they can change it. God further adds to the difficulty of the situation by withholding the gifts and calling that would make lifelong celibacy a realistic possibility.

If the traditional condemnations were true, then God had put Kristi and countless thousands like her in a position where she had exactly two options open to her: either she could embrace a life of celibacy for which she had no calling and experience all the brokenness, loss of faith, and alienation from God that I had seen following from that; or she could follow the path that led to love and personal fulfillment and stand condemned by God.

The more I thought about this picture, the more uncomfortable I felt with it. What kind of God would put people, through no fault of their own, in a situation where the only spiritual options available to them were broken alienation from God or divine condemnation? It was quite literally a situation of "damned if you do and damned if you don't." Kristi certainly had no say in whether she was gay or not. She had no ability to choose not to be gay. Try as she might, she was unable to manufacture a gift

of celibacy for herself where none existed. The only way out for her was through seeking love and fulfillment within the bounds allotted her by her same-gender orientation. But if God truly condemned that path, then what? Then God had created Kristi simply as an object of condemnation, with no path available to her that led toward spiritual growth and wholeness, and no possibility of ever finding a life-giving relationship with God.

That was a distressing picture to contemplate, but fortunately I realized it was a picture that stood in utter contradiction to the portrait of God painted by Scripture. If the Bible and Christian proclamation are true and if Jesus really is God-with-us, then the clearest picture we have of what God is really like is Jesus himself. And there was absolutely nothing in Jesus' life or ministry that even remotely resembled the kind of gratuitous cruelty that would bring someone into existence only for the purpose of breaking or condemning them. To the contrary: Jesus' love and compassion broke through all the traditional barriers of his age, reaching out to embrace even his own enemies (Luke 23:34). Jesus spoke about God's heart rejoicing when the wandering find their way home (Luke 15) and about God's desire that no one be lost (Matt. 18:14). None of this fit with the picture of a God who would cruelly leave no path to grace for people like Kristi.

This picture, of a God who leaves gay people no option but condemnation, collided so dramatically with the witness of Scripture, I knew something had to be wrong with it. But what? I couldn't pretend that Kristi had the ability to stop being gay—if that were the case she would have left it behind a long time ago. I also couldn't deny the spiritual brokenness I had seen in her and dozens of others as the result of trying to embrace a life of celibacy for which they had no calling. The only part of the picture that was open to doubt was the traditional teaching condemning homosexuality. If this teaching were true, then the New Testament portrait of a loving and compassionate God was demonstrably false in the case of gay people like Kristi. Rather than go this route, I chose to stick with the Bible's testimony about God. The traditional condemnations of homosexuality had to be mistaken.

Summing Up

My encounters with Kristi and others like her brought to light two striking contradictions between the traditional church condemnations of homosexuality and the testimony of the Bible. First, the spiritual fruit I saw coming to the fore in lives of devout gay people who were trying to follow the traditional teaching was the exact opposite of what the Bible says will be the results of conforming our lives to the will of God. Instead of love, peace, joy, and closeness to God I was seeing bitterness, brokenness, and spiritual alienation. It was only when Kristi and others *gave up* trying to follow the traditional teaching that I saw the spiritual fruits emerging that would normally be associated with obedience to God's will.

Second, when I viewed the traditional teaching alongside the actual lived experience of people like Kristi, the result was a picture of an arbitrary and cruel God who closed off all possible avenues of escape for gay people and left them having to choose between psychological and spiritual brokenness on the one hand, and divine condemnation on the other. This picture differed strikingly from the portrait of a loving and compassionate God that is painted by the New Testament.

The combined weight of all this evidence forced me to conclude that the traditional condemnations were wrong. This recognition marked only the start of my journey, however. I had always assumed the traditional teaching was grounded in a straightforward manner on the testimony of Scripture. How could a teaching be in error if it was based on the Bible? I realized I would not be able to invest any confidence in my conclusions until I figured out how and why the traditional teaching had gone astray.

CHAPTER 2



JESUS AND THE LAW

How Biblical Fragments Can Lead Us Astray

The new student was nothing if not enthusiastic. Before coming to seminary, Joe (not his real name) had been a successful high school football coach. I smiled as I saw him bringing to his ministerial studies the same can-do, hundred-and-ten-percent attitude that had served him so well on the gridiron and in the locker room. His commitment was inspiring.

Joe was feeling extra fired up after his first semester of seminary studies, and while he was home on Christmas break, he decided he would get some practice witnessing for his faith. As it happened, Joe's home was located not too far from a twenty-acre compound that served as the national headquarters of the Aryan Nations, a notorious white-supremacist hate group. What group of people could possibly stand more in need of the healing, reconciling love of Jesus Christ, Joe wondered. After praying and meditating about it for a time, Joe decided that God was calling him to bring the gospel to this group of heavily armed neo-Nazis.

Joe could be very persuasive when he needed to be. He managed to talk his way past the armed guard at the entrance to the compound and eventually found himself sitting face-to-face with Richard Butler, the national leader of the Aryan Nations. The conversation in Butler's office was cordial, with the white-supremacist leader asking Joe what he was there for. Joe took a deep breath and responded that he was there to tell him about the love of Jesus Christ. Opening his Bible, he started reading and explaining a number of Bible passages he had chosen for the occasion, beginning with John 3:16.

Recounting the story to me afterward, Joe said that Richard Butler listened politely to his witness. And when Joe was done, the older man reached into the drawer of his desk and brought out his own Bible. Opening it up, he began reading selected passages and explaining to Joe how these verses clearly showed the Bible to be the history of God's favored blessing bestowed upon the white race. Butler countered Joe's witness verse for verse and passage for passage with his own racist distortion of the Bible's message. Sad to say, there was no mass conversion to the gospel of love that day among the ranks of the neo-Nazis!



Joe's story helped me understand with a new clarity that even though certain ideas or teachings might have Bible verses to back them up, they could still be very far removed from the will of God. In particular this seemed to be a weakness of what I will call the "fragment method" of Bible interpretation. What Richard Butler and his followers did with the Bible was to identify a group of isolated, individual passages that they interpreted out of context and applied to their pet issue of race relations. Citing these fragments as a group, without any consideration of the broader witness of Scripture, they came to some disastrously false and mistaken conclusions about the message of the Bible and God's will for humankind.

A History of Bad Results

Joe's conversation with Richard Butler provided a vivid illustration of the dangers of the fragment method, but I soon realized that this problem was not limited to fringe groups standing outside the bounds of the mainstream church. The predecessor denominations of my own Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) split over the issue of slavery in the mid 1800s. Going back and reading about that history, one discovers that the pro-slavery churches were defending their positions by appeal to the Bible! Isolated fragments, pulled out and interpreted apart from the overall witness of the Scripture, led those devout southern Presbyterians to conclude that their pro-slavery cause was blessed by God. Another such episode, which extends into more recent times, saw well-intentioned Christians appealing to isolated scriptural fragments as they argued to keep women in subordinate roles within both church and society.¹ The fragment method clearly has a long and sad history of providing "biblical" justification for teachings that we can recognize in hindsight as contrary to the will of God.

Would faithful Christians one day look back at the traditional condemnations of homosexuality and similarly shake their heads at us? I wondered. Witnessing the devastating fruits of that traditional teaching as it worked itself out in the lives of real human beings had given me some very strong reasons for believing it did *not* reflect the will of God. Could this be another case of the fragment method yielding false results?

Most of the biblical arguments I encountered that sought to justify and defend the traditional teaching seemed to employ this method. They lifted out from the Scripture seven fragments that seemed to reference some type of same-gender sexual behavior.² Some of these passages do not focus on sexual behavior as the main point of their teaching, mentioning it only as an illustration in the context of other discussions. But while a number of these passages refer to same-gender behaviors only in passing, all of them cast such behaviors in a negative light.

I started to wonder if the traditional teaching was paying sufficient attention to the broader witness of Scripture. These were

seven isolated references, pulled from the Bible without much consideration of their surrounding contexts or the witness of Scripture as a whole. All of them spoke negatively about same-sex behaviors. (The particular behaviors these texts refer to will be important for us to consider down the road.) And the witness of these isolated passages was being used to justify the sweeping conclusion that God judges and condemns homosexual activity in all its forms, in all times and circumstances, without reservation or qualification. It seemed to be a classic example of the fragment method at work.

But was the recognition of this method sufficient to explain how a supposedly biblical teaching could turn out to be counter to the will of God? Maybe I was being too hard on the fragment method. After all, Christian believers appeal to isolated verses from Scripture all the time in support of faithful beliefs and practices. Was I stacking the deck against the method unfairly by shining the spotlight on unfortunate historical episodes like slavery and the oppression of women, while overlooking all the good results that this method produces daily in the lives of faithful Christians? In fact, there is a much stronger case to be made against the fragment method, and that case comes not from historical examples but from the pages of the New Testament!

The New Testament Critique of Biblical Law

I remember a prayer once offered by a dedicated leader of the Sunday school program in a church I was attending. “Thank you God,” he said, “for giving us the Bible to teach us your rules for how we should live.” Faithful people have always been inclined to read the Bible primarily as a book of rules, and with good reason. Lists of divinely authorized *thou shalt*s and *thou shalt not*s figure very prominently in the text of Scripture. Loving God and wanting to obey and serve God have a way of going together, and so from Old Testament times down to the

present day faithful people have pored over the text of Scripture, seeking to extract from it God's laws for how we are to live faithfully. We can see this exercise depicted in the pages of the New Testament itself, for example when the Pharisees test Jesus by asking him which of all the commands in the Old Testament Scripture he sees as most important (Matt. 22:34–39; see also Mark 12:28–34 and Luke 10:25–28).

But the New Testament is also shot through with the recognition that people who faithfully and conscientiously strive to follow all the rules—the Law of God—can still wind up straying very far afield from God's will and intention. People sometimes suffer from a kind of tunnel vision in how they interpret biblical Law, which causes them to miss its true purpose and significance. And at the end of the day, biblical rules and biblical Law do not have the power to refashion hearts in ways that are required for us to be truly faithful.

The New Testament records some very dramatic instances of people trying valiantly to follow biblical Law and still failing utterly to align their lives with God's will. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, the “scribes and Pharisees,” who failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Many of these were devout and sincere people who were extremely serious about understanding and following the Law of God. And it was precisely this seriousness about following scriptural rules that tripped them up when they saw Jesus violating the Law as they understood it. Jesus did things contrary to their interpretation of the Law, like ignoring the prescribed ritual washings before eating and healing people on the Sabbath (Mark 7:1–5; John 9:1–41). As a result, many of these religious authorities decided that a rule breaker like Jesus couldn't possibly be the Messiah or the Son of God. Ultimately, these conclusions led them to support his crucifixion. It would be hard to imagine anything more opposed to God's loving will for human beings than handing God's incarnate Son over to the authorities for execution! And yet it wasn't godlessness, but their devotion to biblical Law as they understood it, that led many of these religious authorities to oppose Jesus.

A second striking instance of the Law's failure to align someone with the will of God comes from the personal experience of the apostle Paul. Paul, by his own admission, was a zealous follower of biblical Law, and his devotion to it led him to oppose and persecute the church (Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:4–6; see also Acts 22:3–5). His rule following failed so completely to align him with God's will that he referred to himself as "the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9). Paul was acutely aware that it was only the direct intervention of God that had saved him from the disastrous course into which his devotion to the Law had led him: The risen Christ had appeared to him on the road to Damascus and set his life on a new course (Gal. 1:15–16; Acts 9:2–22).

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul presents a striking meditation on the powerlessness of the written Law to lead people into the life that God desires for them (Rom. 7:5–8:8), even going so far as to call it the "the law of sin and death" (8:2). Paul is clear, of course, that there is nothing bad or wrong about the biblical commandments in themselves. The problem is that human beings are blinded and deceived by sin to such a degree that no written code, including the biblical commandments, has the power to steer them toward true life in God (7:7–13).

Paul's own life required outside intervention from God to open his eyes to the errors into which his devotion to the written Law had led him. In just the same way, Paul suggests that it is the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of believers that will overcome the limitations of the written code and lead them into the life that God desires for them:

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

(8:2–3)

In his old life as a Pharisee, Paul had tried desperately to faithfully obey and follow God's will using the written commands of Scripture as his guide. But contrary to all his hopes and expectations,

Paul found himself unwittingly opposing God's work as he persecuted the newly formed church. As conscientious as Paul was, his devotion to the written rules contained in the Scripture proved insufficient to align him with the will of God. Paul required something extra to set him on the path of faithfulness.

In Paul's case that "something extra" was a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus that opened his eyes to the work of God taking place in and through the life of the church. This need to look up from the written code and see what God was actually doing is also reflected in advice that Jesus gave to John the Baptist about keeping aligned with God's work in the world. The Gospel of Luke records an episode in which John dispatches messengers from his prison cell to seek out Jesus and ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Luke 7:20). Perhaps John, like the scribes and Pharisees, was starting to get rattled by all the ways in which Jesus' actions placed him at odds with traditional understandings of what obedience to the written commands should look like.

Jesus' reply to John was essentially to open his eyes to the work of God taking place in and through his ministry: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them" (7:22). For John the Baptist, as for Paul, the errors and confusion that arose from attending only to the written commands of Scripture found correction when Jesus helped him see and understand what was actually taking place in the world around him.

Reflecting on this pattern, I realized that it was similar to what I had been experiencing. Perhaps I was on more solid ground than I thought when I allowed observations of what was actually happening in the lives of believing gay people to raise questions about the traditional condemnations of homosexuality that were based entirely on fragments of the written, biblical Law! Was it possible that the Holy Spirit would correct peoples' misunderstanding of the Bible surrounding this issue, in the same way as had happened with the "biblical" cases supporting slavery and the oppression of women?

The Journey So Far . . .

At the beginning of this journey, described in chapter 1, I had found strong reasons for doubting whether the church's traditional condemnations of homosexuality were in line with the will of God. Now I found myself considering how it was possible for those teachings to be mistaken, even though they seemed to be based on a reasonably straightforward reading of individual passages taken from the Bible.

I found strong evidence, both in the history of the church and in the testimony of the New Testament, supporting the conclusion that this fragment approach to interpreting biblical Law is unreliable and highly prone to error. These findings lent further credibility to my initial strong suspicions that the traditional condemnations were contrary to the will and plan of God.

In concluding that the traditional teachings were mistaken, however, I realized that my journey with the Bible was only beginning. When God helped Paul and other early followers of Jesus to jettison their false and misleading understandings of biblical Law, the result was to correct their understanding of the Scripture, not throw it out altogether. Jesus did not come to abolish the Law (Matt. 5:17).

Instead, God worked through the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit to help the early church come to a newer and truer understanding of the Scriptures. Luke records a picture of this process taking place as he relates the encounter between the risen Christ and two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

Erroneous readings of biblical Law led many people to reject Jesus. When those errors came to light, Christ led the church toward better and more faithful ways of interpreting the Bible. These new interpretations made it clear that the Law and the Prophets had been pointing to Jesus from the very beginning.

As I attempted to apply this to my own situation, I realized it was not enough simply to recognize that traditional

condemnations of homosexuality were mistaken. Such a recognition wouldn't carry much credibility unless it was accompanied by a truer, better reading of the Bible that showed in a positive way how gay people were recipients of God's blessing. It was to the task of developing that truer, better reading that I now had to turn.