

Our Moment: A Church With a Problem

The Church has a problem with gay and lesbian people.

IT SEEMS LIKE such a simple declaration. But that sentence could be read to mean so many different things. What did you hear?

1. The Church believes that same-sex acts and relationships are wrong.
2. The Church is facing problems because of its position on gays and lesbians and their relationships.

Or perhaps you quickly turned the sentence around, along these lines:

3. LGBT people have a problem with the Church.

Or maybe you got stuck on the terminology. You thought: this guy is all wrong already, because:

4. There is no such thing as “the Church.”

All four possible readings of that opening sentence are true. At least, they are true enough to begin the conversation I want us to have together in this book.

So let's take them one at a time.

1. The Church believes that “homosexuality” (same-sex acts and relationships) is wrong.

Yes, it is true that until very recently the Christian church in all of its major branches included as part of its 2,000-year-old sexual morality a rejection of the moral legitimacy of sexual acts between persons of the same sex. (Did you see how carefully I stated that? Precision is needed when talking about these issues. Such precision is often hard to find—on any side of any issue—in an age when all arguments must be scaled to 140 tweetable characters.)

The Church never had a category called “sexual orientation” in its ancient tradition. Once it understood in the late 20th century that a distinction should be drawn between sexual orientation and sexual acts, the smarter branches of the Church were able to accept such a distinction. This helped some Christians tentatively begin to accept gay people in the Church, which was an advance. But it did not help them accept any moral legitimacy for any same-sex acts, and thus there could be no moral legitimacy for any gay or lesbian people engaged in, or even open to, romantic relationships.

The ancient Christian rejection of same-sex acts was just a small part of an elaborate sexual and family morality. That traditional morality focused on a man and woman making vows to God and each other to live out a lifetime marriage, and to restrict sexual activity to such a marriage, for better or for worse, in good times and bad. All sex outside of marriage was forbidden by the Church and believed to be against God’s will. This older vision stressed the centrality of procreation and childrearing, viewing this sacred task as God’s main purpose for marriage. Marriage was understood to be a divine sacrament, or at least a sacred covenant. Divorce and remarriage were either banned or tightly tied to specific offenses like adultery. The Church, at least in Christian-dominated societies, played a key role in teaching and socially enforcing its understanding of sexual morality and marriage, and there were few competitors to the Christian view.

Today, most people have very little exposure to a full presentation of the ancient Christian tradition about marriage, family and sex, even if they attend a church on Sundays. Many Christian preachers and teachers have lost contact with or confidence in these ancient traditions. Or perhaps they fear the wrath of their congregants, most of whom are out of compliance with historic Christian sexual ethics in one way or another. And so the preachers remain largely silent ...

Except perhaps about the LGBT issue. Here at least is one aspect of historic Christian sexual morality that can still be presented without offending too many people. Right? (One wonders whether those preachers inveighing against gays and lesbians would do so if they constituted 40 percent of their congregants, as with divorce today.) And precisely because so much of the rest of Christian sexual ethics has been abandoned, at least in practice, by Christians themselves, many Christian leaders dig in all the more fiercely on same-sex relationships, viewing this as the final frontier, the last line of defense.

Any adequate Christian thinking about the LGBT issue needs to set the question back into its broader framework of historic Christian sexual morality; and beyond that, into a far broader Christian spiritual and theological context. That is some of what I will do in this book.

But meanwhile, I grant the historical claim that the Church has believed that same-sex acts and relationships are always wrong, and I acknowledge that many millions of Christians still believe this. In this sense, the Church does indeed have a problem with gay and lesbian people and their relationships.

2. The Church is facing problems because of its position on gays and lesbians and their relationships.

North American, Western European and generally cosmopolitan opinion have in recent decades swung dramatically against large parts of the Church's historic sexual morality, including on same-sex relationships. One hundred years ago same-sex acts were viewed as immoral, and often treated as

illegal, all over the western world. But that began changing during the late 20th century, and opinion has shifted dramatically in the last decade. State laws banning same-sex acts have been rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court, followed in recent years by the rapid spread of laws affirming same-sex marriage or at least blocking laws banning gay marriage. At the time of this writing, 44 percent of the U.S. population live in states where gay people can marry, and that number is likely to rise dramatically and quickly. And since the Supreme Court's 2013 rejection of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, the U.S. government has moved to treat gay and straight couples the same under federal law. The tides of change are flowing rapidly.

Pockets of Christian opinion, including some Protestant denominations and a variety of church and academic leaders, have made a doctrinal shift in recent decades on this issue. Many others have not made a doctrinal shift but have certainly shifted the spirit of their preaching, teaching and counsel toward more humane treatment of gay and lesbian persons.

But if the Church is understood to consist of three main ancient branches—Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant—and if Protestant is understood to include two main communities today—the more progressive “mainline Protestants” and the more conservative evangelical Protestants—it is accurate to say that most of the Church has not made any kind of doctrinal shift. Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Protestant evangelicalism have not changed the inherited Christian sexual ethic, while mainline Protestantism is bitterly divided, evidenced by constant fights over the issue at their summertime meetings.

This unwillingness or inability of most of the Church to change its sexual ethic (or especially to stop its sometimes hostile treatment of gay and lesbian people) has evoked enormous hostility from cultural leaders, gay rights activists, and millions of regular folks who feel they or their loved ones have been hurt by the Church. Many find the Church's posture and activities nothing but deplorable bigotry, little different than

historic racism or sexism. The Church's image and evangelistic mission in U.S. culture have been damaged. The damage extends to many of the Church's own young people, who cringe every time the Church is identified as anti-gay, which seems to have become our defining characteristic. So the Church's stance on gay and lesbian people and their relationships, intended to advance Christian witness, has actually set its mission back among large numbers of people.

Cultural changes in recent years raise the prospect that Christians and institutions that hang onto traditional beliefs about the LGBT issue will eventually face total cultural rejection as well as significant legal problems. More and more often, leading Christians are "outed" for having at any time articulated traditionalist stands on same-sex issues, and are threatened with very visible forms of exclusion, such as when conservative pastor Louie Giglio was disinvited from praying at President Obama's second inauguration based on sermons he once preached. This sent a chill down the spine of every Christian leader who has ever offended current cultural standards in their preaching or writing on the LGBT issue. I am one such leader.

On the legal front, it is quite possible that conservative Christian universities with discriminatory policies related to gays and lesbians may one day lose the right to educate students who receive federal financial aid. It's a powerful lever—the percentage of "full-time undergraduates receiving financial aid ... [reached] 85 percent in 2010," with much of this aid federally funded. (<http://bit.ly/1127NSE>) Such financial quarantining happened to segregationist Christian universities in the early 1970s when the Supreme Court ruled that racially discriminatory institutions could not have any contact with federal dollars. This same standard could one day be applied to Christian colleges vis-à-vis sexual-orientation discrimination. This could mean the death of some schools. The schools are very much aware of this even now; some are already joining legal battles to protect their right to

discriminate on the basis of religious conviction, while others are trying to find a way to stand down.

Growing cultural hostility and imagined or real legal threats are in turn evoking a siege mentality on the part of many Christians, and certain highly visible conservative Christian leaders are advancing this narrative with great skill. Looking for historical precedents for moments in which “biblical” or “traditional” Christians have been attacked for their heartfelt, non-negotiable beliefs, such Christians have found solace in remembering periods of the persecution of the Church. They remember the Church’s suffering at the hands of the Roman Empire, the Nazi regime in Germany, and the communists in Eastern Europe and Asia. They fear it will soon happen again, right here in America, and they are readying themselves for a new era of persecution. Some Christian rhetoric is downright apocalyptic.

Of course, this posture assumes that all aspects of the traditional Christian position on the LGBT issue really are non-negotiable Christian beliefs, similar to other non-negotiables Christians have suffered and died for in the past. Ironically, *external* pressure on the Church has actually made it much harder to have a serious *internal* Christian conversation on this very point. People on the defensive generally hunker down rather than open up. This helps explain the scene in the Manhattan conference room. The New York venue was not coincidental in that sense. The more pressure to change to fit the culture, the more Christians will just dig in their heels. And in few places is there more pressure to change Christian views than in New York.

Here is a warning to those from outside the Church who despise traditional Christians for their sexual morality. The faithful-witness-unto-death tradition in Christianity is a fearsome thing. Angry attacks on Christians for what they believe to be unchangeable beliefs will mainly drive them into more deeply entrenched resistance. *This dramatically increases the responsibility of those of us within the community to have our*

own internal conversations about this issue. It might be wise for outsiders to back off a bit while we do so, giving us some space for the kind of organic change I am trying to advance in this book. But still, those who are being discriminated against don't really like to wait very long for those who are harming them to figure out how to stop doing so. They won't wait forever. And they shouldn't have to.

3. LGBT people have a problem with the Church.

When same-sex love was “the love that dare not speak its name,” the vast majority of gay and lesbian people were closeted. That meant the vast majority of straight people never “knew” a gay person. It also meant that for centuries in Church-dominated cultures, gay and lesbian people endured in sad silence whatever the Church taught and did in relation to them.

The loosening up of cultural attitudes has slowly brought these silent sufferers out of the shadows. Some of us in Christian work, like me in my work as a pastor and professor, have come to know gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians—committed, believing, baptized, morally serious followers of Jesus. *There are millions of such “sexual other” Christians in the U.S. alone, and millions more around the world. Say it with me: There are millions of LGBT Christians.* If we take the Christian population of the U.S. as 40 percent of an overall population of 318 million, and then divide the number of Christians in the United States by an LGBT population of about 4 percent, that gives us a conservative estimate of five million such Christians in our country alone.

These Christians have been there all along. I have in recent years met some of them. Until I began meeting them, I did not know that these LGBT believers were already a part of the Christian community. And their testimony is that they have been badly hurt—sometimes by what the Church has taught in pulpits and classrooms, sometimes by how it has been taught, and sometimes by straight Christians who have felt

authorized to treat these (suspected) LGBT people with casual contempt, or worse.

So LGBT people have a problem with the Church. And those who love them have a problem with the Church that is at least as intense. This is not a perception problem, solvable by a rebranding campaign and a PR firm. This is a human suffering problem within the very heart of the Church. And many of those sufferers are very young. They are adolescents and young adults just now coming to terms with their sexuality. They are very badly wounded. Their suffering should matter to anyone with a shred of compassion for the suffering of the young. Which ought to include the Church. But perhaps ...

4. There is no such thing as “the Church.”

I keep talking about the Church. But is there really such a thing as the Church, or are there instead just a myriad of “churches”? And should the focus really be on the Church as an institution, or instead on individual Christians, all of whom (should) come to their own beliefs about LGBT issues?

I am a Baptist minister and professor, and we Baptists tend to emphasize quite strongly the responsibility of all individual Christians to think carefully about issues of faith for ourselves, in obedience to Christ. We also emphasize what is called “congregational autonomy.” Baptist churches don’t follow a hierarchical chain of command and don’t report up a ladder to bishops or cardinals or anyone else. Any look at the American religious landscape could easily conclude that a “Baptist” vision prevails here, whether congregations call themselves Baptist or not. A riot of congregational and individual versions of Christianity can be found all over the nation. Anybody can be a pastor and anybody can start a congregation, and any congregation can believe whatever the heck it wants to believe.

It’s a fact. And this does describe the chaotic American religious landscape pretty well. It’s pretty crazy out there. But still, I chose the term “the Church” for this book quite intentionally. Even most congregationalists, whether we recite or even know

the creeds, do believe in something like the “one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,” a phrase from the Nicene Creed. This means we implicitly or explicitly believe that ultimately the Church is “one” entity, founded by Jesus; it is “holy” in its origin and holy in its aims and seeks to be holy in its conduct; it is “catholic,” which means universal, with an existence crossing and including just about every tribe, nation and language group; and it is “apostolic,” traceable to Jesus and his original apostles and continuing over 2,000 years until now.

If this is true, leaders of the Church today such as myself and many readers of this book carry profound responsibilities to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. We can’t simply abandon the Bible, or Church tradition, or historic Christian beliefs, just because there is a cultural movement of great power bearing down hard on us to snap our views into line with prevailing opinion. This is precisely what Church leaders (at their best) have refused to do—from ancient Rome to Nazi Germany to apartheid South Africa. This steadfast *saying no to culture in order to say yes to Jesus Christ* was precisely what they were obligated to do by their responsibilities as Christian leaders.

Today’s Church leaders face the same kinds of responsibilities. We must get Jesus-following right in our time as earlier Church leaders did in theirs. We are accountable to every prior Christian generation—and certainly to the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ.

So I write this book—this may not sound modest, but I am trying to be clear—self-consciously as an ordained Christian minister and widely published Christian moral leader with grave responsibilities to God and the Church universal. You will hear me say no to culture at least as much as I say yes here, because my goal is not to accommodate culture, but to meet my responsibilities before God as a Christian leader.

As such, in this book *I am asking whether the Church should change our mind and our practices in relation to Christian LGBT people and their relationships—not because we are under*

pressure from a hostile culture to do so, but because within the terms of our own faith we might now conclude that this is one of those cases in 2,000 years of Christian history where we have gotten some things wrong.

Revising any significant aspect of Christian tradition is a tall order. This helps to explain why serious Church bodies are not changing their views rapidly. They cannot be expected to do so if they have any sense of organic relation with their own intellectual heritage or any meaningful connection with the Church universal. If we don't get to just make this stuff up as we go along, changing our mind must be a careful and deliberative process, not a hasty surrender to culture's latest demands. In that sense, Christianity, like most religious traditions of any vintage, is inherently conservative. Change happens slowly.

And yet, because many Christians and Church leaders sense that something is not quite right—that our tradition has not adequately understood either itself or the contemporary sexual others in our midst—we sense that some kind of change is needed. We just don't know how to get there. And so we seethe in conflict and confusion. We can't quite change our mind, but we are not fully comfortable with where we are. We keep picking at this scab without really getting anywhere. And so even when the issue is not on the agenda, it always surfaces.

Notice that I use the singular "mind," not the plural "minds," here and in the title of this book. That's because I believe the question that matters is whether *the collective mind of the Church universal can and ought to change*. The issue is not whether some Christians as individuals change their minds, but whether the Church universal will or should change its mind collectively. And that takes disciplined reflection together, in community, with all hands on deck making their best contribution.

Using the tools most central to our own Christian faith tradition, I will make a case *for changing our mind*. Not on everything we have ever taught, by any means. Indeed, I will try to show that *to transform how LGBT people are treated*

by and in the Church is not in fact to change our mind but instead to change our attitude and practice in a manner fully consistent with historic Christian convictions about the Gospel and the Church. A church that offers hospitable welcome to gay people, lesbians and sexual others as grateful recipients of God's saving love in Jesus Christ is in fact a church faithful to the Gospel and what it means to be the Church. Much needed change, I will argue, can take place without reconsidering the sexual ethics issues at all.

I will then make the more difficult case that *a change in just one dimension of our thinking about Christian sexual morality* can be considered within the terms of Christian Scripture. This change could invite every adult Christian to bring their romantic-sexual commitments into the demanding covenantal structure of historic Christian sexual morality. And for those who find this a bridge too far, the Church at least can demonstrate the capacity to live in community with each other even if we find full agreement impossible on this question.

Everything that I offer here will reflect the changing of heart and mind that I myself have undergone in the last 10 years. That Christian ethics textbook that I mentioned earlier has helped to establish me as one of global evangelicalism's leading moral thinkers. I find that I now cannot fully endorse the few pages I wrote there about the LGBT issue. That will shock some people. I want to take you on the journey from *Kingdom Ethics* to *Changing Our Mind*.

One last thing: The U.S. and many other countries are experiencing agonizing debates over gay rights. As I write, the hottest current social debate in our nation is over gay marriage.

But this book is not mainly about America or about legal rights for gay people. My intent is to think about Gospel truths. American Christians are so accustomed to cultural dominance that if we think that God has banned—or mandated—something, then we think we should try to ban or mandate it in the state. Our own (fading) cultural dominance

in the U.S., together with theological sloppiness easily confuses us here.

What the state of Florida or Minnesota or Iowa or the U.S. Government does about recognizing gay people as married is important. But it is not a first-order Christian theology or ethics question. It is a state question, and the way the state resolves such questions differs foundationally from the way the Church reasons about its doctrine and inner life. When the state thinks about marriage, it is mainly attempting to account for the public interest with regard to such matters as tax status, property rights and child custody disputes upon divorce. In fact, the vast majority of the content of state marriage laws has to do with divorce, not marriage itself. (Trust me, I've studied state marriage laws. They're depressing.) It is appalling that the Church and its representatives have allowed state debates over marriage to preempt and dominate our own thinking about the whole range of concerns related to LGBT people in the life of the Church.

What we discover about Christian fidelity to Jesus certainly will be relevant to our witness to the state. But the fundamental need right now for Christians is to think seriously about whether the Church's own marginalized sexual minorities will be treated, unequivocally, as sisters and brothers in Christ. That is the work I want us to do together here. I actually think that getting this right in the Church will be our greatest contribution to society.