



In every society, a certain group of people has the power to name and frame reality, to say what is real, how the world was set up, what the founding story will be, and how everybody is supposed to fit into those circles. In Christian circles, this power to name and frame reality is associated with the Bible and the Church. It is advanced by leaders and faith traditions, most of whom jealously hold onto their power to name and frame reality.

Most leaders of most churches continue to name and frame reality in such a way that the very existence of LGBTQ people is a problem. LGBTQ people collectively represent a gender and sexual orientation minority of about 5% scattered among the human family -- despite every cultural (including religious) effort to suppress them out of existence or

change them to fit gender and sexual norms.

I now believe that their situation is in many ways parallel to that of other minorities who have suffered oppression at the hands of existing power structures in church and society -- which includes the power to name and frame reality.

In 2014, in a dramatic transformation of my own perspective, I came to believe that the moral call of God to Christians is to include the LGBTQ minority on the same terms as any other minority -- indeed any other person or group.

To understand this transformation, you should know that I became a born again Christian as a high school kid after being raised Roman Catholic, and about 35 years ago, I became a Southern Baptist minister. When the Southern Baptists settled on a more conservative course, I broke with them, but I do have a lot of Baptist and evangelical Christian within me, even though ever since I changed my mind on LGBTQ inclusion, I have been an exile from evangelical Christianity. You can read more about my story in my memoir *Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism* (2017).

As a Christian ethicist, teaching ethics for over 25 years, one of the things we have to deal with is sexuality. But I believe that this conversation is not fundamentally about changing our sexual ethic -- because the heart of my sexual ethic, at least, remains

unchanged—covenantal marital lifetime monogamy. LGBTQ inclusion is about widening the circle of who is included in that ethic, and about who is fully included in Christian community and the reach of the Gospel of God’s love for humanity in Jesus Christ. It is not just about sexual ethics but about human dignity.

I now believe that all halfway measures such as “welcoming but not affirming” or “love the sinner/hate the sin” are at best transitional. They ultimately fail to include LGBTQ people in the Christian community on equal terms with everyone else, while doing continued spiritual, psychological, familial, and ecclesial harm. But we only know about this harm if we listen to the voices of our own LGBTQ believers, many of whom are finally living in a moment when their voices are being heard.

Here are my top 10 reasons why I changed my mind to arrive at this conclusion. I write on these reasons in much more detail in my book *Changing Our Mind*. With each reason I will offer a biblical text that in my view speaks directly to the issue of inclusion.

It is my hope that this work will call evangelical Christians and the majority of Christians of all parts of the church to consider changing our collective mind on this issue.

1. I came to know and love LGBTQ Christians -- and learned about their plight as closeted, wounded, exiled, diverse, often quite wonderful people, who love Jesus despite a church that has not loved them.

Matthew 23:13: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them.”

LGBTQ Christians can be found in and are pushed out of many Christian communities and, even more tragically perhaps, many of their own Christian families. This community had been unknown to me. Now they are my sisters and brothers. I now see them as the church’s most oppressed group. My own change of mind is impossible to understand apart from knowing them. I now see them as people who so often want to be welcomed into church and even the kingdom of heaven but are blocked from both by well-meaning Christians who have no idea what harm they are doing.

2. I became reminded of my most core understanding of the meaning of the Gospel.

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

After study of the situation and revisiting the texts so central to my own salvation like John 3:16, I concluded that traditionalist Christianity has not acted as if the world God loves includes gender and sexual minorities.

A few critics have suggested that those of us fighting for full LGBTQ inclusion are compromising the Gospel. I believe that saying that every person is loved by God and Jesus Christ is precisely the Gospel message. I am convinced that in fighting hard for my exiled friends I am more fully living out this belief.

3. I took seriously the growing gap between cultural acceptance and progress for LGBTQ people vs. Christian intransigence – and concluded that the culture was closer to being right.

Luke 15:1-2: “Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

It struck me that the cultural movement for full dignity and acceptance of the LGBTQ community looked more like the Gospel than what the guardians of the Gospel were saying to their own gay and lesbian adherents. This reminded me of the way Jesus treated people with such dignity and inclusive love, and how he was opposed by the guardians of orthodoxy in his context. Why is it that non-Christians so often seem to “get” the inclusive love of Jesus more than those who claim to be his followers?

4. I rejected the perception that LGBTQ acceptance was part of an apostasy or cultural decline narrative and instead came to perceive it as part of a narrative of fuller participation of more people in Gospel-shaped community.

Acts 10:28: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

When we look at the narrative of how the early Jewish Christian movement found its understanding of God and of Jewish Law shattered by what God was evidently doing among the Gentiles, we find an example of how the Holy Spirit could be at work within a better narrative, one of full participation in the Gospel for all people. Much of the later New Testament offers theological-exegetical wrestling with this crazy fact, that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was now welcoming Gentiles. Peter may have said it best in his famous line in Acts 10:28, quoted just above: we all “know” that it is unlawful to

associate with Gentiles, but God has shown us something new. The same thing is happening today.

5. I became convicted of my own complicity with a Christian teaching and practice of contempt or milder rejection toward LGBTQ people.

John 10:11-12: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand...sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”

I realized it was not enough to just be politely traditionalist, but that in the cultural situation we face, full solidarity is called for and it will be costly. I felt deeply sorrowful and repentant for not having stood in solidarity in the past. I am a Christian moral leader, and I had not led properly. I am a pastor who had not pastored all the sheep of my flock. That is the situation facing LGBTQ Christians. Their own pastors have not been willing to pastor them.

6. I embarked on a fresh study of the Big Six passages that “everyone knows” establish absolute heterosexual normativity, a strict male/female gender binary, and a ban on any deviations. I concluded that it came down to two main passages (Gen 1-2/Rom 1) and one main theme—divine creation order. After considerable wrestling, I concluded that the divine creation order theme derived from Genesis 1-2 and its intertextual echoes, reflects the majority pattern in human life, but not the entirety of human life.

Other passages widely cited have their own limits and problems. The Sodom and Gomorrah story in Genesis 19 is not about loving gay relationships. The death penalty in Leviticus 18 and 20 fits in with lots of other death sentences that Christians ignore. The groups referenced in 1 Corinthians 6:9 are very difficult to determine from this cursory list of vices. Those three passages are relatively insignificant compared to the two main passages of Genesis 1-2 and Romans 1. Both seem to set normative heterosexuality as part of God’s creation design. Romans 1 seems to set same-sex activity as willful rebellion against that design.

When we read such texts, they must be integrated with what we know of sexual and gender diversity through science, life experience, and relationships. We must learn how to integrate human experience, textual narratives, and scientific study in order to respond to the actual reality around us within our moment in history.

When we integrate our creation narrative with an honest appraisal of the world as we find it, we realize truths in certain norms worth keeping like *imago dei*, relationality, interdependence, sexuality, embodiment, and “one flesh” as having to do with bonding and creating kinship ties. All of this holds truth, and all of this can be extended to cover same-sex relations and not just opposite-sex relations.

7. I recalled how often the Church has gone wrong in the past in misreading the creation story.

There are past moments in history when the creation narratives were read woodenly, literally, or prejudicially: the idea that the earth must be only 6000 years old; the idea that evolution must be a forbidden belief; the idea that earth must be the center of the universe; the idea that women must be subordinate to men because God made Adam first; the idea that humans are free to dominate earth and its creatures because of the dominion mandate in Genesis 1. I am not even going to go into other problems derived from Genesis, like the curse of Ham myth from Genesis 9 underwriting centuries of white Christian racism.

It dawned on me that just as these other Genesis or creation theology problems have proved solvable by many smart Christians, so is the LGBTQ reality also capable of being integrated with a theology of creation.

8. I concluded that the Genesis 3 account of human sin and its impact on that primal first marriage could also be applied to speak to everyone’s equal need and difficulty in establishing faithful, fruitful covenant relationships.

In other words, I began reading Genesis 1-3 as a unit, not just Genesis 1-2, and when I did, it shifted my focus away from the problem of why some people don’t fit the male/female and male +female framework of those texts. Instead, it brought me to the broader human problem in the post-Eden world, a problem of our good, yet fallen, sexuality and relationality in an imperfect world. This is a story of relationships gone wrong.

I then realized that my sexual ethic long articulated – a rigorous, binding covenantal vision -- was not changing, just widening its reach. All of us, with the helper-partner suitable to us, as we are, face the challenge of making and keeping relationships that help give structure to our lives. That then links to Jesus’ own strict teaching against divorce in Matthew 19:6: “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate.” I believe covenantal norms are really helpful

here, because the thing about a covenantal norm, rather than a binary gender norm, is that anybody can be invited into a covenantal norm.

9. Close study of multiple treatments of Romans 1 led me to the conclusion that Paul there condemns male, and perhaps also female, same-sex acts as part of a complex rhetorical strategy that is not about sexuality at all, but about knocking down either Gentile or Jewish pridefulness in the divided Roman Christian communities, while also demonstrating awareness of Roman imperial debauchery.

Romans 1:21-23: “For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or etc.”

I have been persuaded by Robert Jewett’s authoritative account in his massive commentary on Romans. What Paul was trying to do was to knit together the fractious Roman Christian community that was divided along Jewish/Gentile lines. Romans 1-3 is about establishing that no group is better than any other. All are in desperate need of salvation in Christ. Romans 1 pungently describes the characteristic sins of out-of-control pagans, with many hints that it is Rome itself and the imperial court that he has in mind. Romans 2 describes the characteristic sins of judgmental and sometimes hypocritical Jews. Romans 3 brings everyone to the foot of the cross as equals.

Readings Romans 1 as a whole against the backdrop of Jewett’s description of the omnisexual debaucheries of the emperors Caligula and Nero, and through the likelihood that maybe some of Paul’s own readers had been the objects of sexual abuse from upper household males – many from the lower sectors of society, enslaved and ex-slaved people – helped me see that the text makes perfect sense in relation to that world – while being of very questionable applicability to the devout 14-year-old who discovers himself to be gay today.

10. I was finally able to see that the broader themes of the Christian ethical tradition as I myself had interpreted it, must lead to full acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ Christians.

Matthew 7:12: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Themes like the expansive kingdom of God, justice for the oppressed, love of neighbor as self and the Golden Rule, solidarity with those on the margins, and compassion for the suffering are all essential. The Golden Rule still speaks so beautifully to this situation.

The fact that it has taken the cisgender, heterosexual majority so long to even hear the cries of our gender and sexual minorities represents a profound failure to practice the Golden Rule.

We are in a transition moment and one of intense moral conflict. Society is moving on. Some Christians are unmoved, others are conflicted, but there is much movement toward full and unequivocal acceptance and equality as well. I believe this issue will be in our rearview mirror before too long. But for now, we face moral conflict that is simultaneously intense, inevitable, and disheartening.

While that rages, I will join a growing number of Christians who stand in solidarity with our LGBTQ fellow believers. In the name of faith and reason, justice and love, I ask you to join me.

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All scripture quotations are taken from New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

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