Reconciling Evangelical Christianity with Our Sexual Minorities: Reframing the Biblical Discussion

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INTRODUCTION

Arguments in the Western Christian world over LGBT-related issues\(^1\) have now leaped the gap between mainline Protestantism and evangelicalism.\(^2\) Evangelicals largely looked on from a distance over the past four decades as the gay rights movement advanced in Western and US culture and as mainliners began writing their scholarship and undertaking their long, often stalemated denominational debates. In evangelical circles, however, until the past few years, pretty much everyone who raised a challenge to what I will call “traditionalist” views immediately experienced some form of exclusion from evangelical life.\(^3\) To dissent from the majority view about what was seen to constitute “the LGBT issue” — that all same-sex relationships are sinful based on the witness of scripture\(^4\) — by definition excluded the dissenter from the evangelical community.

The space for conversation in evangelicalism is still very fragile, and almost exclusively confined to the Western/Northern Christian world.\(^5\) But a number of new books have been written (and organizations founded) by avowed evangelicals, gay and straight, attempting to open up conversational space, plead for better treatment, reframe the issues, or revise the traditionalist posture. The landscape is changing dramatically. And if even part of the vast evangelical community softens its stance, it could presage (even more) dramatic cultural and legal changes in the US and other lands where evangelicals are a large part of the population.\(^6\)

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\(^1\) I will mainly deploy the acronym LGBT in this paper to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons while recognizing that there is not quite consensus on the best shorthand terminology: LGBTQ(IA)+, etc.

\(^2\) For brevity, I will not even attempt to address parallel conversations in Catholicism or other communities.

\(^3\) One form of exclusion is to be banned from writing in or mention by evangelicalism’s flagship publication, Christianity Today, perhaps after critical news stories. Those subject to this exclusion have been many.


\(^6\) The Society of Christian Ethics 2015 focus is “Law and Christian Ethics.” I note it here to say that all gay rights groups in the US now recognize that anti-LGBT religious convictions are a central factor in their struggle. The more deeply I delve into this issue as it pertains to the evangelical community, the more I am convinced that though advances in gay rights have moved ahead of the attitudes of the majority of evangelicals, full and unequivocal LGBT acceptance depends on an evangelical change of heart. This is especially true where evangelicals are strongest, as in the South. The interaction between legal change and moral-values change is very interesting always, and definitely so in this case.
Lonely evangelical forerunners go back decades, such as Ralph Blair and his group Evangelicals Concerned. The first blockbuster memoir from within the evangelical world was by Mel White, a gay man who once served in the marrow of the Christian Right. In the late 1990s, Fuller Seminary ethicist Lewis Smedes suggested a more accepting posture toward gay couples in a well-known essay and pre-YouTube video. Evangelical psychologist David Myers, alone and working with others, has been making his faith- and science-grounded plea for full LGBT acceptance and an overall reconsideration for over a decade. Andrew Marin shocked many in 2009 when calling for dialogue rooted in well-informed love, in a book triggered by his three best friends coming out as gay (Love is an Orientation).

But now the call for Generous Spaciousness (Wendy VanderWal-Gritter), for far greater understanding of LGBT people, and for respectful dialogue in our churches about what should be viewed as a disputable rather than open-and-shut matter (Rom. 14-15), has been expanded. Senior evangelical pastor and Vineyard Church leader Ken Wilson (Letter to My Congregation) has called for full “embrace” of LGBT Christians “in the company of Jesus,” though he attempts to frame his approach as a “third way” emphasizing Christian unity rather than moral approval. No such distinctions, though, have been accepted by the Vineyard Church’s nonhierarchical hierarchy, as Wilson has suffered rejection and the loss of the church he founded decades ago. In December 2014 he launched a new evangelical congregation.

Memoirs are surfacing in increasing numbers, including by out gay evangelicals. (Not an oxymoron anymore!) These have considerably increased evangelical understanding of the gay Christian experience. Wesley Hill’s Washed and Waiting (gay but committed to celibacy as biblically mandatory) and Justin Lee’s Torn (gay and not committed to celibacy) have made an interesting pair, and now there is a new book by Tim Otto called Oriented to Faith. The first memoir by a (formerly) evangelical lesbian has just come out – musician Jennifer Knapp’s

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8http://abouthomosexuality.com/lewissmedes.pdf, accessed December 14, 2014. This essay is sometimes referred to as “There’s a Widenss in God’s Mercy,” other times “Like the Widenss of the Sea.” These are of course references to two parts of the classic Christian hymn.
10Andrew Marin, Love is An Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009). He also founded the Marin Foundation to further this work: http://www.themarinfoundation.org/
12Ken Wilson, A Letter to My Congregation: An evangelical pastor’s path to embracing people who are gay, lesbian, and transgender into the company of Jesus (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2014).
Facing the Music. The transgender issue, meanwhile, is just beginning to surface, tagging along in evangelical life as it does elsewhere in the LGBT conversation.

There’s more: Evangelical Christian Kathy Baldock, out of Nevada, who experienced her own heart and mind transformation through a lesbian friend, subsequently founded Canyonwalker Connections and published Walking the Bridgeless Canyon to “repair the breach between the Church and the LGBT Community.” Young straight evangelical Timothy Kurek decided to try an incarnational experiment of Cross-bearing on the margins when he “came out as gay” in order to understand what that experience is like in conservative Christian America. Gay evangelical Jeff Chu took on a journalistic travelogue in 2013 with his book Does Jesus Really Love Me?, discovering that the answer very much depends on who you ask. Other recent writings offer poignant descriptions of the ordeal of being gay in conservative religious America. Pray the Gay Away is one such offering; Mitchell Gold’s Crisis is another.

Only now are the six most widely cited purportedly anti-gay Bible passages — I will call them the Big Six here — and the scholarship undergirding their traditional interpretation, being taken on directly by evangelicals for serious reconsideration. Earlier this year biblical scholar James Brownson published a significant treatment of the relevant textual issues in his book Bible, Gender, Sexuality. It is a fine and rigorous work of scholarship. But Professor Brownson tells me he now faces discipline charges in his denomination, the Reformed Church in America.

Most visibly, also in 2014, young prodigy Matthew Vines, a Harvard drop-out of Zuckerbergian intelligence and vision, came out with a memoir-plus-biblical-excavation called God and the Gay Christian. Conservative faculty members at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary felt compelled to publish a brief e-book refutation the day Vines’ book came out. Vines has also

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16 Jennifer Knapp, Facing the Music: My Story (New York: Howard Books, 2014). Perhaps the most visible card-carrying evangelical lesbian in good standing is Wheaton College staffer Julie Rodgers. But notice this negative story released in the conservative evangelical press about her in December 2014:

17 Though I am a relative newcomer to this conversation, it is clear enough that the LGBT+ coalition is sometimes an uneasy one, and transgender persons face some similar and some distinctive issues from other sexual minorities. In any case, I find little evangelical conversation on transgender issues to this point. The only source I have found is not an evangelical one: Justin Tanis, Trans-Gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003).


19 Timothy Kurek, The Cross in the Closet (BlueHead Publishing, 2012). Glen Stassen would call Kurek’s effort a “transforming initiative” for justice.


22 James V. Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013).


launched a national evangelical movement called the Reformation Project. This effort began as a training seminar for hand-to-hand combat on the negative Bible passages and is growing into the most prominent LGBT activist platform in evangelicalism.

Full disclosure requires that I tell you that I now know almost all of these people and am making my own contribution in my recent little book Changing Our Mind, along with subsequent and planned work. I do not purport to be a "sexual ethicist," and there is much I have not yet read. But I am a senior evangelical ethicist, and I have realized over the last few years that this issue demands my attention – and my repentance, because what little I had said about LGBT-related issues until recently has been inadequate, and in a few places, hurtful. And because evangelical churches and families are still doing an awful lot of harm to gay people, beginning with their own children.

The abstract promises that my paper will offer a description of the state of the conversation in the North American evangelical community, summarize my own normative proposal, and offer reflections on lessons to be learned for Christian ethics from the way historic change is happening, and being resisted, in this part of the Christian community. My only revision is that I will flag ten methodological-theological questions, rather than lessons.

THE STATE OF THE EVANGELICAL CONVERSATION

For purposes of this paper I distinguish between the US evangelical community as a discrete, self-conscious subculture of theologically conservative white Protestants, over against evangelicalism as naming certain theological tendencies and convictions, much like one might name neo-orthodoxy or postliberalism. This distinction draws on earlier work I have done that describes US evangelicalism beginning as a Protestant renewal movement but settling into a religious community with its own ethos, leaders, and institutions, self-consciously distinct from mainline, Catholic, and other religious communities. This is true even though some members of the latter groups share what might be described as evangelical methodological, theological, or ethical commitments. I am among those who often call members of the evangelical subculture “card-carrying evangelicals.”

Sociologists of religion further distinguish white evangelicals from black Protestants and Latino/a Protestants as distinctive religious communities, even though many black and Latino/a Protestants are also “evangelical” in theology. Therefore, though the LGBT/conservative

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25 http://www.reformationproject.org/about/board-of-directors
26 David P. Gushee, Changing Our Mind: A call from America’s leading evangelical ethics scholar for full acceptance of LGBT Christians in the Church (Canton, MI: Read the Spirit Books, 2014). I will be speaking around the country on these issues in 2015, have joined the Board of Advisors of the Atlanta chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and now serve as Faith Consultant to the Family Acceptance Project, described later in the paper.
28 For example, see the polls of the Public Religion Research Institute, which are state of the art today. www.publicreligion.org.
Protestant interaction carries similarities across racial lines, the differences are profound enough to dissuade me from straying outside the white evangelical situation with this paper.\textsuperscript{29} I will further focus on the US setting.

Mainline Protestantism has had an LGBT debate for decades, and often the traditionalist side of these debates self-identifies as evangelical.\textsuperscript{30} But mainline Protestants live in a different religious subculture than their card-carrying evangelical counterparts. It is one thing for Wesley Seminary, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and Fortress Press to discuss LGBT issues; it is something else for Fuller Seminary, the National Association of Evangelicals, Willow Creek Church, World Vision, Gordon College, and Baker Books to do so. There has not been -- until now -- a full-on LGBT conversation in the card-carrying evangelical world. Because “everyone knew” that evangelical Christianity ruled out any acceptance of gay sexual relationships—and everyone knew that accepting or not accepting such relationships was the sum total of the LGBT controversy. Until now.

\textit{How Evangelicals Think: Sola Scriptura}

Despite centuries of historical-critical methodology and more recent challenges to the way evangelicals tend to read and use the Bible, a majority of my religious tribe still tend to narrow the (explicit) grounds for their religious knowledge claims to the Bible as the premier, if not the sole, authority.\textsuperscript{31} This is sometimes called \textit{evangelical biblicism}.\textsuperscript{32} With variations, most evangelicals still believe that the (Protestant) Bible is divinely inspired, the truthful and authoritative Word of God to humans, the only sure guide for Christian faith and practice. And most evangelicals have been deeply shaped by a sometimes wonderfully productive, sometimes


horribly destructive biblical populism (or “democratic perspicuity”) in which any literate, reasonably devout Christian (it is believed) can read an English translation of the Bible and receive a clear understanding of God’s Word and will.\textsuperscript{33} This of course creates a chronic authority problem because there is no universally recognized pope, cardinal, bishop, elder board or collegium of wizened scholars to sort out and adjudicate competing evangelical interpretations of the Bible.\textsuperscript{34} Every religious tradition has its own epistemological and authority repertoire, with its own limits and problems, and this has been ours.

Evangelical biblicism means that rarely if ever will an evangelical claim that a biblical text or writer is inaccurate, erroneous, or harmful. (More often they will subtly move problematic texts into the background, where they gradually recede from view along with thousands of other ignored texts.) Evangelicals will rarely if ever allow a claim from science, experience, or tradition to challenge what they believe to be a claim from the “plain sense” of scripture\textsuperscript{35} (often with little or no reference to social context), though they sometimes will cite other sources to buttress or supplement their “biblical” claims.\textsuperscript{36} Claims to “what the Bible says” must generally be met within evangelicalism by stronger counterclaims to what the Bible (really) says, not to externally grounded claims.

Evangelicals even tend to be suspicious of intra-scriptural moves that would offer any kind of explicit trumping or relativizing of specific scriptural texts to resolve disputed issues. For example, a common move of Christian reformists on issues as diverse as slavery, women’s roles, and sexuality has been to appeal to broader biblical themes, motifs, or threads as trumping problematic specific passages, which are often set aside as culture-bound or erroneous. Conservative evangelicals, at least, have tended to resist this move vigorously -- especially if the trumped texts offer clear moral rules and the trumping move is seen as weakening them.\textsuperscript{37} This is

\textsuperscript{33} Among the many who have challenged this populism/democratic perspicuity has been Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{Unleashing the Scriptures: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America} (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993). Not coincidentally, though Hauerwas is popular with evangelicals, his own affininity has turned Anglican. The sometimes chaotic and disastrous consequences of evangelical populist biblicism has driven many an evangelical toward Canterbury, Rome, Byzantium, and the Church Fathers.

\textsuperscript{34} See Molly Worthen, \textit{Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in Modern Evangelicalism} (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2014).

\textsuperscript{35} Christian Smith, among others, attributes this to an evangelical lineage going back to Scottish common-sense realism. \textit{Bible Made Impossible}, ch. 3. I got the term from David L. Balch, editor, \textit{Homosexuality, Science, and the ‘Plain Sense’ of Scripture} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

\textsuperscript{36} A caveat: a number of learned evangelicals, motivated in part by the weaknesses of evangelical biblicism, have been attracted to the broader Christian tradition, or Tradition, in recent decades. See D.H. Williams, \textit{Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). Thomas Oden’s retrieval of Christian paleo-orthodoxy in the massive \textit{Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture} series (IVP Academic) has been very appealing to some. And challenges to scriptural interpretations on the LGBT issue do sometimes drive evangelicals to a secondary appeal to tradition. This raises questions about expediency and hypocrisy; it also raises the question of whether it is accurate to posit a two millennia anti-gay tradition given that the concept of homosexuality (as opposed to same-sex acts), is just about 120 years old. The recent cultural history of the concept of homosexuality is discussed in Jenell Williams Paris, \textit{The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011).

\textsuperscript{37} James Brownson, for example, now a revisionist on LGBT issues, expresses dissatisfaction with the broader-theme move as a response to the Big Six passages, though he does suggest a close attention to the “underlying moral logic” governing texts—Brownson, \textit{Bible, Gender, Sexuality}, p. 15.
one reason why evangelicals often have been among the last to move off of retrograde moral positions rejected by other Christians and by many in the broader culture.

In general, those evangelicals who define the texts that are to be viewed as most relevant to an issue dominate the discussion of that issue. This is true especially because evangelicals are rarely self-conscious about interpretive traditions in relation to scripture; no one has taught them that the very texts we treat as relevant to an issue are themselves a product of earlier choices and their transmission through some kind of ecclesial tradition.

All of these patterns have shaped the way evangelicals have dealt with the LGBT issue. A very high view of biblical authority, biblical populism, reticence to critique any biblical texts, plain sense, context-free readings of scripture, a reluctance to credit other widely used sources of authority, and the existence of a standing but unacknowledged interpretive tradition related to which texts count on LGBT has retarded evangelical movement on this issue; in my view, with often tragic consequences.

Evangelicalism has fragmented in recent decades, and what I am saying about evangelical knowledge claims applies more to conservative evangelicals than to progressive evangelicals, who are methodologically more open to liberal or postliberal approaches.\(^\text{38}\) Progressive evangelicals are also much more open to hearing criticisms about the difficulties inherent in our particular way of grounding normative knowledge claims; sometimes they are so open that they abandon evangelicalism altogether. (\textbf{Question #1: How does evangelical biblicism function today and how might it be reformed?})

Especially as a result of brutal disputes in evangelical life in recent decades, the conservative side has tended to heighten its claims about biblical inspiration, truth, and authority. It is hard to question the authority of a Book treated as God-breathed, completely inerrant, and utterly supreme in its authority.\(^\text{39}\) Such claims tend to rule out conversation other than in the form of a heavily cognitive exchange of exegetical claims.\(^\text{40}\) (\textbf{Question #2: How is it that evangelicals became semi-modernist hyper-rationalists and how do we reconnect to our emotive and pietist traditions?})

\textit{The Traditionalist LGBT & Scripture Paradigm}\(^\text{41}\)

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\(^{38}\) It is possible to document the existence of an evangelical left and center, as distinct from the right, in various ways. My primary study of this matter has been related to political engagement. I made an attempt at such a delineation in \textit{The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center} (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2008). Certainly most card-carrying evangelicals could immediately identify the different locations of, say, John Piper (R), Bill Hybels (C), and Jim Wallis (L).


\(^{40}\) The extent of this hyper-cognitivism in conservative evangelicalism has become clearer to me in exchanges related to the LGBT issue. I am hearing from many LGBT young people describing their efforts to dialogue with family members or church leaders. In many such dialogues the only admissible evidence is biblical exegesis.

\(^{41}\) The next section hews closely to the material in chs. 10-15 of my \textit{Changing Our Mind} (Read the Spirit, 2014). It is interesting that one finds few recent evangelical works defending the traditionalist paradigm. One relatively recent book is Dennis Hollinger, \textit{The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). The most commonly cited traditionalist perspectives are offered by Robert A. J. Gagnon, \textit{Bible and Homosexual
The essentials of the traditionalist (often but not exclusively evangelical) reading of scripture in relation to what might generically called the LGBT issue can be rendered by this formula, though of course there are variations: Genesis 1-2 + Genesis 19 (cf. Judges 19) + Leviticus 18:22/20:13 + Matthew 19:1-12/Mark 10:2-12 + Romans 1:26-27 + 1 Corinthians 6:9 (cf. 1 Timothy 1:10) + all biblical references to sex and marriage assuming or depicting male + female = a clear biblical ban on same-sex relationships. Sometimes traditionalists simply assemble some or all of the words, phrases, and sentences in these texts into a cumulative condemnation of gay people and/or their relationships. Other times they attempt something like a broader theological-ethical rendering of the issue, rooted in these biblical texts.

Here I summarize these references in as balanced a manner as I can:

*Genesis 1-2* offers creation accounts in which 1) God makes humanity in the divine image as male and female and commands (blesses) that they be fruitful and multiply and have dominion, and 2) God responds to the man’s loneliness by creating a suitable helper-partner, woman, then giving her to the man, with the narrator connecting this primal divine act to marriage. These stories have been understood traditionally by Christians as establishing an exclusively male-female gender and marital sexual-ethical paradigm. The most coherent broader theological-ethical rendering of a traditionalist position argues that the Bible’s message on sexuality is consistently gendered, complementarian, procreative, and marital, with all of these dimensions grounded in God’s design in primeval creation and all ruling out same-sex relations for all time.

*Genesis 19 and Judges 19* tell stories of perverse local city men seeking to sexually assault male guests receiving hospitality in local households, but instead being offered defenseless women. This long has been understood as a condemnation of “homosexuality,” though well-founded objections to this reading have been taken seriously in some quadrants of evangelicalism. Still, grassroots evangelicals haven’t all gotten the memo.

*Leviticus 18:22* commands men not to lie with men as with women, presumably sexually; *Leviticus 20:13* prescribes the death penalty for this offense. The Hebrew word *toevah* used in these passages has generally been translated “abomination” to describe God’s abhorrence. These passages still are cited in evangelical circles, even where Leviticus has otherwise disappeared from use.

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Matthew 19:1-12/Mark 10:2-12 are texts depicting Jesus responding to questions about the morality of divorce. He appeals to Gen. 1-2 to ground his rigorous response setting strict limits on initiating divorce. These texts are often read as Jesus' implicit affirmation of an exclusively male-female creation design for sex and marriage and thus the broader theme noted above.

Romans 1:26-27 is part of an argument Paul is making about why everyone needs the salvation offered in Jesus Christ. In an apparent effort to illustrate the idolatry and sinfulness of the Gentile part of the human community, Paul makes harshly negative reference to “degrading” passions and “unnatural, shameless” same-sex acts on the part of men and perhaps also women; later he condemns 21 other desperately debased behaviors or vices. This passage continues to function as the most important text cited for condemnation of same-sex acts and relationships.

1 Corinthians 6 and 1 Timothy 1 both offer vice lists as part of moral exhortations. The Corinthians text excludes unrepentant practitioners of the vices in the list from the kingdom of God. The rare Greek words malakoi and especially Paul's neologism arsenokoitaí, used in these passages, often have been translated into English as “homosexuals” or related terms. These English terms have been formative for many Christians, who have not been informed about the significant translation challenges involved.

If we take the most commonly cited texts on the issue from the traditionalist side, they derive from 11 of the 1,189 chapters in the Bible. This body of biblical citations is seen as settling “the LGBT issue.”

Critical Observations

Engagement with this issue and with traditionalists has now led me to notice a few things:

1) The texts offer language so harsh about the perverse character and ungodly posture of those desirous of or participating in same-sex acts that they continue to fund an attitude of contempt toward gay people that survives no matter how polite mainstream traditionalist leaders try to be today. Evangelical and fundamentalist preachers regularly show up in the news with contemptuous, even murderous anti-LGBT declarations. These few sacred texts actually go further in their rejectionist rhetoric than many traditionalist evangelicals want to go these days.

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42 Close reading of Romans 1:26 reminds us that Paul never specifies exactly what type of “unnatural” sexual relations these women are having. They may or may not be same-sex activities.


44 This is really important. I first noticed this pattern among conservative evangelicals related to their reading of scriptures vis-a-vis the role of women during the great evangelical debates of the 1980s and 1990s. The more-or-less consensus conservative position finally concluded that women were creatures of equal dignity to men, equal worth, equal status before Christ, and spiritually gifted like Christian men, but that they were still required to submit graciously to their husbands in marriage and to some kind of male hierarch in church life. See John Piper and Wayne Grudem, Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991). This resolution of the problem affords women more status and opportunity than the strictest biblical statements would warrant (cf. 1 Cor. 14:34-36, 1 Tim. 2:8-15) It also is much more affirming of
2) The biblical texts focus on sexual acts (and in one case sexual passions). This helps produce a continued narrow focus of traditionalists on same-sex acts to the exclusion of other dimensions of a complex human issue. This might fairly be described as creating a legalistic, moralistic and even casuistic rendering of the LGBT issue. It systematically blocks attention to the human beings who happen to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender; to relationships, not just acts; and to the mental and emotional health of LGBT people at all developmental stages. (Question #3: Is an act-focused ethic really text-driven? Or are traditionalist readers bringing that to the texts?)

3) Because the biblical texts do not discuss what today is called sexual orientation and identity, traditionalists continue to struggle with these human realities. The reparative/ex-gay therapy temptation survives among us, attempting to grind same-sex sexual desires out of those who have them -- despite clinical evidence of the ineffectiveness and harm of these efforts, including a notable abandonment by some of their most visible former practitioners. Some traditionalists, as well, encourage LGBT people (and sometimes straight people) to reject the very concepts of gender identity or sexual orientation/identity, perhaps by refusing any identity other than Christian. Such efforts fail to take seriously the extent to which human beings are bearers of multiple identities, including gender identity and sexual orientation. They also disregard the part that psycho-social discovery of gender and sexuality, and formation of gender- and sexual identity, plays in human growth and development. (Question #4: Can evangelicals recognize multiple, overlapping identities, including gender and sexual identities, as appropriately embraced by those claiming identity in Christ as Lord?)

4) In general, the fixed nature of the interpretive paradigm around the Big Six texts blocks engagement with any other data: the claims of contemporary research and clinicians, personal experiences of and with LGBT people, or alternative renderings of the biblical witness. I have already indicated that some conservative evangelicals are methodologically committed precisely to not engaging such other potential sources of knowledge.

Shaking the Consensus: A Youthful Movement of Dissent

But this once-immovable posture has begun to be shaken. The most important factor is not external-cultural but internal-generational. It has come from a youthful movement of dissent in

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43The Romans 1 passage, which mentions illicit lusts and degrading passions and links these to same-sex acts, also makes it difficult for evangelicals to maintain a clear distinction between lesbian and gay sexual orientation, on the one hand, and same-sex sexual acts, on the other — as some Christian thinkers and communities have tried to do in order to make space for LGBT people in the churches. If that distinction collapses, it becomes next-to-impossible for any evangelical who acknowledges LGB sexual orientation to be seen as a Christian in completely good standing.
44See this famous renunciation: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/warrenrockmorton/2012/01/09/alan-chambers-99-9-have-not-experienced-a-change-in-their-orientation/
45A very interesting evangelical effort challenging a focus on sexual identity is Paris, The End of Sexual Identity. She means to challenge modern constructs of sexual identity especially as these reinforce heterosexual privilege, but I am not sure her project can succeed. Still, her book is part of the recent evangelical journey on this issue.
the evangelical world, notably in our colleges and seminaries and online. This dissent increasingly takes institutional form among the young: in Facebook groups, gay-straight alliances, campus groups, often called ONE[School], Christian college alumni/ae, national groups like Level Ground and the Reformation Project, and resistance efforts such as Soulforce.48

In ascending order of challenge to their schools, these groups are demanding a) safe space for LGBT students to gather for mutual support; b) institutional acceptance and even sponsorship of such support groups; c) permission and even sponsorship of public campus dialogue around LGBT issues; d) reconsideration of student life, discipline, admission, and hiring policies viewed as stigmatizing and discriminatory; and at their most aggressive, e) an overturning of the traditionalist view in favor of either a silent or neutral institutional stance or full acceptance and complete equality for LGBT persons and their marital-covenantal relationships. The more powerful and visible these groups, the more progress they make on campuses. (Question #5: Can we avoid the Niebuhrian conclusion that ethical norm-making is all about who holds, and challenges, social power?)

Where these dissenting movements are strongest, they place real pressure on administrations caught between pro-LGBT and anti-LGBT forces. The greatest pressure being placed on the traditionalist position and its institutional embodiments has come from these youthful dissenting voices, which have found more success in schools than in churches.49 The more recent scholarship noted in this paper has responded to, rather than created, this movement of dissent, which – whether it uses this language or not – strikes me as genuinely a liberationist-solidarity movement from below. (Question #6: Were the liberationists right all along? Is this just a “heterosexism” problem, with privileged persons resisting change, and resistance required on the part of the oppressed and their allies, as with all other unjust power relations?)

MY OWN NORMATIVE PROPOSAL

It is time for me to say a word about the dissenting proposal that I have now entered into this broiling conversation.

Engaging the Big Six Passages

In Changing Our Mind, one might say I begin by playing the evangelical game in the evangelical way, moving early into at least brief analysis of the exegesis, cultural backgrounds, and hermeneutical issues raised by each of the Big Six passages, even though I am less and less convinced that this is where the real issue truly lies. Still, a summary is in order.

Genesis 1-2/Matt. 19/Mark 10. I engage the claims that a) these texts establish an eternal creation design rooted in God-given male/female genital/anatomical complementarity (sometimes also

49It appears that the power structures of evangelical churches more often push out LGBT Christians and their families, whereas students and alumni/ae remain associated with evangelical colleges and have financial power in relation to them.
claims about the centrality of procreation for legitimate sexuality) and b) these texts forever rule out the moral legitimacy of same-sex relationships. I propose three biblically serious alternatives for reading Genesis.50

1) Christians earlier had to learn to read the creation accounts of Gen. 1-2 in intelligent conversation with scientific discoveries about the world (e.g., a heliocentric rather than earth-centered solar system, an old earth vs. a young earth). Perhaps the same principle applies to the issue of gender identity and sexual orientation. Not every person is clearly either male or female, not every person is heterosexual, therefore not every person’s sexuality will be procreative — and this exceedingly well-documented diversity in the actual creation must be taken seriously in reading biblical creation texts that do not mention such diversity. This is a solvable faith/science problem. Scriptures about creation and sexuality need to be integrated with reasonably certain claims from science about gender- and sexual-orientation diversity, leading to the conclusion that just because creation accounts don’t mention this diversity it does not mean that it does not exist or that such diversity is morally problematic. Perhaps we will one day conclude that such sexual diversity has as little moral significance in itself as “handedness” diversity, which also was once seen as a problematic orientation in need of correction. (Question #7: Is this another front of the interminable faith/science problem for evangelicals, literally a new “creationism” issue?)

2) Christian theology does better looking forward to redemption in Jesus Christ rather than gazing back into the mist of an unreachable pristine creation. Numerous Christian ethical disasters based on creation (or “orders of creation”) claims can be identified — such as the supposedly divinely ordained subordination of women and subjugation of Earth and her creatures.51 Perhaps the LGBT issue is best understood in this light, with the same solution — looking forward to redemption, not back to creation — as long as we don’t understand redemption as some kind of return to Eden.52 (Question #8: Many evangelicals love the Creation-Fall-Redemption Paradigm—can it be used constructively to revise on LGBT?)

3) Perhaps we should focus not just on Genesis 1-2 but also Genesis 3, which a major part of Christian scripture and tradition (I was taught to call it the Pauline-Augustinian-Lutheran strand) takes to be the account of the entry of sin into the world (cf. 1 Cor. 15). A thoroughgoing understanding of the pervasiveness of human sinfulness would include every human’s sexuality, which should be seen as good-yet-fallen like every other aspect of human existence. One implication is that instead of straight people’s sexual desires and acts being seen as innocent (especially if they are married), and gay people’s sexual desires and acts being seen as sinful (under all circumstances), no one’s sexual desires or acts would be viewed as entirely innocent. Everyone’s sexuality is good-yet-fallen and needs to come under the discipline of covenant. This

50 This section draws from my book Changing Our Mind, ch. 15.
51 Dietrich Bonhoeffer set me on this path of inquiry. See Bonhoeffer, Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press Press, 2005, pp. 388-408; see also Clifford J. Green, “Editor’s Introduction to the English Edition,” pp. 17-22. Lutheran ethicist James M. Childs presented a paper several years ago for SCE which suggested a similar theme. See also his Faith, Formation, and Decision: Ethics in the Community of Promise (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), ch. 3.
52 If “redemption” is understood to mean a return to Eden, a restoration of pristine original creation, looking forward to redemption helps little. But if redemption looks more like gathering up the good-yet-broken strands of human existence and moving forward into a kingdom of forgiveness, grace, and new beginnings, that’s different.
approach knocks down straight Christians’ sense of prideful superiority, and might lead to
greater acceptance of the idea that a rigorous covenantal-marital sexual ethical norm can apply to
all human beings, whom we now know come into the world with a range of sexual orientations,
and also with sinful tendencies in relation to sex that need covenantal ordering.  

 Leviticus 18/20. There is an obvious problem in focusing on two verses from the Levitical
holiness code, one of which carries the death penalty, when Christians apply almost none of the
rest of it to our lives today. Moreover, biblical commentators express uncertainty and
considerable difference of opinion about why exactly those two verses ban male (but not female)
same-sex acts. Many of these possible reasons (male superiority as penetrator but not penetrated in
sex, sex-for-procreation-only, the need to distinguish Israel from pagan neighbors, etc.) are not
normatively compelling for Christians today.  

 Gen. 19/Judges 19. It is widely agreed by most commentators that these texts are about
attempted violent gang rape of strangers, the Genesis text concerning not just visitors but angels.
No biblical text mentions “homosexuality” among its many references to the sins of that
legendarily evil city. These two texts are essentially irrelevant.

 Romans 1/1 Cor. 6/1 Tim 1. Paul, the only New Testament writer who addresses same-sex
issues, wrote in a context where such acts were often adulterous, debauched, and exploitative,
easily viewed by any conservative moralist as abusive and excessive. This context had to affect
what he said about same-sex acts in both 1 Corinthians and Romans, the latter perhaps in
connection to the debauchery of the Roman court under Caligula and Nero, which included
violently abusive same-sex acts and reprisals. This is relevant hermeneutically for the church
today when thinking about same-sex acts that are not adulterous, debauched, exploitative, or
imperial-pagan but instead covenantal and marital. It also could help account for the profound
harshness of the language Paul uses when speaking about same-sex acts. And it may speak to the
best way to translate vice-list terms in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim. 1:10. We should translate them in a
manner that links them to sexual predation, abuse, and exploitation.

 The supposedly ironclad reading of these Big Six texts to ban any and all same-sex relationships
today turns out to be very much arguable, especially when ancient contexts, modern contexts,
and their great differences, are taken seriously.

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53This approach assumes a continuing normative power for that Augustinian creation-fall-redemption framework.
54Background sources for this paragraph can be found in Gushee, Changing Our Mind, ch. 12.
55For fuller discussion, see Gushee, Changing Our Mind, ch. 14, informed especially by William Loader, The New
56Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, pp. 156-157.
57Brownson, Bible, Gender, Sexuality, p. 274.
58An increasingly massive literature related to sexuality in the ancient world is now available, sometimes with
connections to ancient Jewish and Christian texts. Few can claim to have mastered it. A leader is Australian scholar
William Loader, with his five-volume series, “Attitudes towards Sexuality in Judaism and Christianity in the
Hellenistic Greco-Roman Era,” with Eerdmans. See also Finnish scholar Martti Nissinen, Homoeroticism in the
Biblical World: A Historical Perspective (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998); Kirl Ormand, Controlling Desires: Sexuality in
Responses to Female Homoeroticism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996); Sarah Ruden, Paul Among the People:
Real Lives Matter

And then there is serious attention to real contemporary human beings.

A young evangelical Christian discovers he is gay. Devout parents experience their 15-year-old daughter coming out as a lesbian. A transgender kid shows up for youth group. Often LGBT evangelicals and then their families move from the traditionalist at least into the “conflicted” category through these experiences. Their “heart” tells them one thing (be who you are/love your child!) and their “head” tells them something different (all same-sex attraction is sinful, etc.).

The methodological question here – indeed, a theological question – is what to make of the extraordinary power of transformative encounters with oneself or a loved one as a sexual minority, an LGBT person.\(^5^9\) Is corrosive self-hatred based on religious teaching relevant data? Is perspective-shifting sympathy with the suffering of one’s child a tempting seduction from God’s Truth? Or is it a path into God’s Truth? Do we read ourselves and other people through the lens of sacred texts that we love? Or do we read texts through the lens of sacred people that we love? Or do we encounter both sacred people and sacred texts through the lens of Christ whom we love above all?\(^6^0\) (Question #9: *What theological resources help evangelicals to grasp the idea of divine self-disclosure through beloved, suffering, sacred, people, and not just sacred texts?*)

Many grassroots evangelicals who have broken with the traditionalist posture are located right here. I have heard from a number of them in recent months. They haven’t really figured out what to do with the Big Six passages. But for them, “the LGBT issue” has become the face of a beloved person. It’s about loyalty and love for that person. Then perhaps they make a theological move: *I have to believe Jesus stands with my loved one, not with those who reject her, regardless of what it seems to say in Romans 1.* I will therefore love her “beyond my theology.”\(^6^1\) It may not be enough for a complete Christian ethic. But what if fierce parental love actually comes closer to the heart of Jesus and the meaning of Christian discipleship than simply quoting the Big Six passages? It certainly turns out to be critically important for gay people themselves to find at least some people who will love them like this.

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**LGBT Youth Suffering and Family Rejection**


\(^5^9\) For fuller discussion, See Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, ch. 17.

\(^6^0\) This is an issue much-discussed online by families of LGBT Christians. A small number of books are now out as well, including Carol Lynn Pearson, *No More Goodbyes: Circling the Wagons around Our Gay Loved Ones* (Walnut Creek: Pivot Point Books, 2007), and Susan Cottrell, *Mom, I’m Gay*: *Loving Your Child Without Sacrificing Your Faith* (Freed Hearts, 2014).

The Center for American Progress did a key policy report on LGBT homeless youth. Homeless youth are defined as “unaccompanied young people between the ages of 12 and 24 for whom it is not possible to safely live with a relative or in another safe alternative living arrangement.” Among these homeless youth are “runaways” and “throwaways.” CAP cites commonly reported estimates that there are between 2.4 million and 3.7 million homeless youth between the ages of 12-24.

LGBT youth are vastly overrepresented among the homeless youth population. “Several state and local studies from across the United States have found shockingly disproportionate rates of homelessness among LGBT youth compared to non-LGBT youth.” Here are the percentage of homeless youth in some specific locations who identify as LGBT, with all studies undertaken since 2000:

New York City: 33%
Seattle: 39%
Los Angeles: 25%
Chicago: 22%

The most common reasons that LGBT homeless youth cite for being out of their homes are family rejection and conflict. And much of this family rejection and conflict is religiously motivated. Everyone who works with homeless youth knows this.

The data are clear that all too often when young people come out or are found to be LGBT, they are met with family rejection, especially from religiously conservative families whose faith has left them unprepared to accept who their child has turned out to be. The indispensable Family Acceptance Project is “a research, intervention, education and policy initiative that works to prevent health and mental health risks for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) children and youth, including suicide, homelessness and HIV-- in the context of their families.” FAP has identified and researched dozens of different family responses to an LGBT child and measured them to show the relationship between experiencing specific family-accepting and family-rejecting behaviors during adolescence with their health and well-being as young adults. The higher the level of family rejection, the higher the likelihood of negative health, mental health, and behavioral problems. The tragedy, as FAP says, is that most devout religious parents are attempting to love and serve their children through the very behaviors that their

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63 http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/. Some of the family rejecting behaviors documented and studied by FAP include hitting/slapping/physical harming, verbal harassment and name-calling, exclusion from family activities, blocking access to LGBT friends, events, and resources, blaming the child when he/she experiences abuse or discrimination, pressuring the child to be more masculine or feminine, threatening God’s punishment, making the child pray and attend religious services to change their LGBT identity, sending them for reparative therapy, declaring that the child brings shame to the family, and not talking about their LGBT identity or making them keep it a secret from family members and others. Everyone needs to read this document from FAP:
http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/supportivefamiliesbooklet
children find emotionally devastating. They have no idea, at least at first, what their version of religiously faithful parenting is doing to their own children. When it does become clear, sometimes the damage is impossible to reverse. And sometimes parents spend the rest of their lives grieving those damages.

FAP found a direct correlation between “highly rejecting” families and the following behaviors on the part of LGBT youth:

* more than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide at least once
* more than six times as likely to report high levels of depression
* more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs
* more than three times as likely to be high-risk for HIV and STDs

Since writing my book I have heard hundreds of stories from people who have contacted me—in two months, amounting to 18 single-spaced pages of material. This correspondence has reinforced what I said more cautiously in my book – in the real world, all around us, is an underground of wounded LGBT Christians and ex-Christians. Looking at “the LGBT issue” from the perspective of struggling adolescents and their families, and especially having seen numerous reruns of a disastrous Christian script leading to mental illness, family fractures, and even suicide, has revolutionized my entire perspective.

From the Big Six to the Bigger Six Thousand

With the faces of legions of exiled and wounded gay adolescents in mind, I have found my way from the Big Six to the Bigger Six Thousand. I have come to conclude that the most important theological and ethical themes in scripture point toward full acceptance rather than the wary distance or angry contempt that now characterizes evangelical responses to gay people so much of the time. I could quote chapter and verse. To summarize, I will speak of Gospel, Church, Christian ethics, and Jesus himself:

1) The Gospel is that God loves good-yet-fallen human beings and has offered all of us needy sinners redemption in Christ Jesus. But a tragic misreading of scripture has blocked access to God’s grace on the part of those considered unworthy of it. This in turn has hurt the evangelistic witness of the Church in culture, with LGBT persons, and in our churches.

2) The Church is a community of humble/grateful forgiven disciples of Jesus. Christians are called to welcome as family all who believe in and seek to follow Jesus, and to live together in unity and shared commitment to the work of God’s reign. But a tragic misreading of scripture has tempted straight Christians to view themselves as superior to gay Christians (or to reject the idea that there could be gay Christians), and to exclude them from the family of faith (or to leave a church or denomination if perhaps gay people might actually be fully welcomed). It has created first- and second-class Christians, and damaged the unity of the Church.

3) The great ethical imperatives of the Christian life center on justice, deliverance, compassion, human dignity, and love. But a tragic misreading of scripture has produced a harvest of bitter fruit: injustice, oppression, mercilessness, degradation, and hatred or indifference. If, as Glen
Stassen argued, you can know an ethical tradition by its historical fruits, these fruits are not appealing ones. They are the opposite of what the Kingdom of God looks like, which is justice, peace, healing, deliverance, inclusion in community, and joy in God’s presence.

4) It comes down to Jesus, what those who claim his name understand his incarnation, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection to mean. A tragic misreading of scripture, I believe, has actually taught traditionalists to deny the Jesus we meet in the Gospels, and to do so in the name of Jesus himself. It has created an unchristlike body of Christian tradition that continues to deliver damage every day, all around the world. It needs to be abandoned, like prior unchristlike bodies of tradition have largely been abandoned; for example, in relation to historic Christian anti-Judaism.

Transformative encounters with LGBT people in recent years have led me (and others) to fresh encounters with the Gospel, the Church, Christian Ethics, and above all Jesus. I have moved into full solidarity with LGBT people, with a special focus on evangelical young people. In making this move I am not setting aside scripture. I am embracing its deepest and most central meaning.

(Question #10: Can a biblicalist legalism/moralism be overcome by this Gospel-Church-Ethics-Jesus move within evangelicalism?)

CONCLUSION

Many evangelical Christians have thought the LGBT issue was a sexual ethics issue. Our job was to draw a moral boundary line between whose desired or actual sexual acts are morally legitimate and whose aren’t.

Because we fixated on the sexual ethics issues we tragically failed to notice our LGBT neighbors bleeding by the side of the road, mainly bleeding because of what we Christians have done to them while not even knowing we were doing it.

The fundamental “LGBT issue” is that a misreading or at least a misapplication of six texts in scripture taught many Christians a tradition of contempt toward sexual and gender minorities.

That teaching of contempt has cost many lives, fractured many families, and wounded the mental health of millions. It has driven many away from God and church. The LGBT issue is a Gospel issue, a human dignity issue, a family wholeness issue, a church unity issue, an adolescent health issue, a justice and love issue, a solidarity-with-the-oppressed issue, a reconciliation-in-Christ issue. It is not fundamentally a sexual ethics issue.

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64He called this validation by historical fruits. See Glen Harold Stassen, A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012).
65Our list in Glen H. Stassen and David P. Gushee, Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).
66In dialogue, a traditionalist on this issue cited Matthew 10:37 to me in relation to a father rejecting and shunning his gay son for his entire adult life: “Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Therefore: loving Jesus “more” means rejecting one’s gay child in Jesus’ name. I don’t recognize that Jesus.
67I draw an extensive parallel between these two unchristlike “teachings of contempt” here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2o3ZGwzZvk
We have misunderstood a form of human diversity that has shown up in every society and every era as sinful and a form of rebellion against God. We have done so in the teeth of overwhelming research evidence and urgent appeals for destigmatization by our culture’s leading scientists, clinicians, and mental health experts. In doing so traditionalist Christianity still trains many of its most devout adherents to disdain and reject 1/20th or more of the human population, including their own children, church members, and fellow believers, leaving a legacy of great harm. This obvious moral blind spot on our part has deeply discredited the moral witness of Christianity.

It is time to end the suffering of the church’s own most oppressed group. It is time to reconcile evangelical Christianity with humanity’s sexual minorities.