

What could bring a person to change his or her mind about sexuality and ordination? What happened in your case?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

In 1993, a gay man, who had earlier been elected a deacon, asked Pasadena Presbyterian Church to consider becoming a More Light Church (i.e. a congregation willing to ordain lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people - LGBT). My wife Sharon and I worship at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, and I reluctantly agreed to serve on a task force charged with creating an educational program that would inform the whole congregation about the theological, social, and scientific issues involved in such a decision.

I had never before really studied homosexuality. I opposed ordination of LGBT people reflexively - it was just what I thought Christians were supposed to do. Serving on the task force challenged me to apply my Reformed theology and evangelical method of biblical interpretation to the issue of homosexuality for the first time.

I had a sabbatical coming and decided to research how the Presbyterian Church had changed its mind on other moral issues: slavery and segregation, the subordination of women to men, and divorce and remarriage. In each case the church initially selected isolated proof-texts to support a general societal prejudice. Then, over time, we learned to interpret Scripture through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry. In that way we recognized the full humanity of people and our responsibility to support equal rights for all.

Studying the Biblical texts further, I learned that, for most people, there are, at most, eight passages that are purported to discuss homosexuality. None of them are about Jesus, nor do they include any of his words. In fact, many responsible scholars on both sides of the homosexuality debate have concluded that properly understood, seven of the eight passages have nothing to do with homosexuality as we

know it today. That leaves some of those who oppose equal rights for people who are LGBT relying on one text, Romans 1. So I undertook a more thorough study of Romans 1-3.

It seems clear to me that the Gospel Paul is proclaiming in Romans focuses not on the issue of sexuality but on the universality of sin, and on the free grace of salvation through Jesus Christ. That is the essence of the Christian message. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul is writing about idolatry – worshipping, giving our ultimate allegiance, to anything in the creation instead of God, the Creator. Paul’s point in Romans 1 is that we are all sinners.

Then, in chapter 3, Paul articulates the central idea of our Reformed theology -- we are saved, not by our own acts, but by God’s grace, “as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3: 23-24). To turn Romans 1 into a law, condemning, not the pervasive idolatry to which every one of us is susceptible, but rather the sexual expression of one group of people, seems to me to misrepresent Paul’s point.

How then does Romans 1 become the central passage for those who oppose

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equal rights for people who are LGBT? Many of those who share the general cultural bias against people who are LGBT import a variety of theories, irrelevant to Paul’s point, in order to interpret Romans 1 as an anti-homosexual text. The most egregious example of this is the book by Robert Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (2000). The irony is that for Gagnon, one really doesn’t need the Bible, because, according to him, everything it says about homosexuality comes initially from the observation of nature.

Gagnon says what many people who are heterosexual believe: “Acceptance of biblical revelation is thus not a prerequisite for rejecting the legitimacy of same-sex intercourse” (488). Behind all of the ancient sources, including the biblical ones, for Gagnon, was “the simple recognition of a ‘fittedness’ of the sex organs, male to female” (364). He goes on to say that the Old Testament Holiness Code “was responding to the conviction that same-sex intercourse was fundamentally incompatible with the creation of men and women as anatomically complementary sexual beings” (157). He refers to “Paul’s own reasoning, grounded in divinely-given clues in nature” (142). In each of these statements, Gagnon gives priority to nature over revelation.

Based on his observation of nature, Gagnon claims to know that people who are homosexual choose their orientation. He asserts that they are willfully idolatrous and sinful (254), and implies that they must behave like heterosexuals or be celibate in order to be saved (493 and 470). None of these theories has any basis in science or in Scripture.

In contrast to the use of non-biblical theories to oppose equal rights for people who are LGBT, the Bible contains a clear and direct analogy for our present situation. In the early days of the church, Gentiles were prohibited from becoming Christians. Jewish Christians considered Gentiles unclean by nature and polluted by idolatrous practice. But Acts 15 records the testimony of Peter and Paul that God's Holy Spirit had fallen on believing Gentiles. These Apostles accepted Gentiles into the church with no restrictions. James then read the Torah to say that God had always purposed the conversion of the Gentiles. If the early Christian church leaders could find new truth in Scripture and change their minds about something of which they were once so sure, so can we.

I had often said that I could not change my position on homosexuality unless I was convinced by Scripture. By studying the Bible in its historical and cultural context and through the lens of Jesus' redeeming life and ministry, I have now been convinced that Scripture does not condemn, as such, the sexual expression of contemporary Christian people who are LGBT.

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My professional focus of study and teaching has been creeds and confessions, especially those in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions. There is nothing in the authentic texts of that collection of credal statements that forbids a loving, life-long commitment of two people to each other, whether gay or

straight. The phrase, "homosexual perversion," that appears in the English translation of the Heidelberg Catechism in our Book of Confessions (4.087) was illegitimately inserted in 1962 by a pair of American translators who shared the general cultural bias against homosexuality – it does not appear in the original Latin or German.

The issue of granting equal rights to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender has been a source of conflict in our denomination for 30 years. There is a biblical way to resolve the conflict in the church. Jesus said: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and

the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). All we have to do is to apply the same hermeneutic, the same gracious interpretation of Scripture, to all people.

In the Reformed tradition we know that God’s first word to us is grace. Our thankful response is obedience to the leading of the Holy Spirit. When we finally accept Christian people who are LGBT as full and equal members of the church - as we will - we will be wonderfully blessed.

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