

BECOMING AFFIRMING

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“I’m coming out.” Few phrases strike dread into the heart of conservative Christian parents and pastors as that one. It’s probably even worse than “I’m not sure I believe in God anymore.”

Well, today is October 11th 2022, and since 1998, the day of October 11th has been celebrated by the LGBTQ community as “National Coming Out Day.”

And I’m coming out.

Not as gay or queer, myself, but as explicitly an ally, as one who is affirming of the acceptability to the Lord and to myself of others’ LGBTQ identity and/or lifestyle.

This issue has been deeply on my heart and mind for nearly a year. The recent experiences of certain family members and friends forced it into my awareness, and when coupled with a relatively recent change in my social awareness and empathetic sense, I found it was not something I could ignore.

So before you write me off as lost to the Kingdom, or deceived, or totally broken in my faith, please hear me out, because I think this matter is very important – so important, in fact, that I’m willing to offend and deeply disappoint nearly everyone I grew up with. Just like any LGBTQ person coming out to family or friends, this is a step I take after long, careful, and prayerful consideration.

I want to address some specific topics.

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INTRODUCTION

These matters are not considered lightly, and neither am I moving precipitously. They are based on much study and meditation and prayerful consideration of the entirety of the Bible's teachings. But with that said, my decision to take a public stand is a separate matter from my private conclusions. I have concluded that making my position publicly known has value to the Kingdom, and it's partly based on things which the Lord has specifically spoken to me.

Recently the Lord presented some impactful dreams to me. I'm accustomed to this; it's one of the clearest ways that He speaks to me. As I typically do, I recorded these dreams and lay back down to get a bit more rest, and as I lay in that half-asleep, half-awake state, pondering what the Lord had already spoken to me, He abruptly presented me with something entirely different. I had a sense I was personally watching the Acts story of Peter having a vision of a sheet of unclean things descending from heaven, and being told to "arise and eat." This was surprising, since I'm not prone to thinking of myself in terms of Bible heroes, and I've never seen myself in one of those stories.

So I wish to start by reviewing the specific story in Acts 10.

PETER'S VISION

9 About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. 12 It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. 13 Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." 14 "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." 15 The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." 16 This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. (Acts 10:9-16 NASB)

The idea of violating Levitical rules about unclean foods was deeply offensive to Peter. He was suddenly being told in this trance or vision not to call foods unclean that he was trained were unacceptable for religiously pure people. Yet the Lord specifically told Peter to not call them unclean any longer, because God had cleansed them.

Note that in using the word "made clean" or "made pure" or "cleansed," God didn't say "you were wrong before." He instead effectively said to Peter, "Yes, you were right before, but I'm giving you a new commandment, and also yes, it differs from what you find in the Torah."

As Peter pondered this strange vision, a group of Gentiles knocked on his door; Peter quickly perceived that he was being asked to apply that principle of Godly righteousness and cleanness to people he also knew were ceremonially unclean and outside the religious family from a Levitical perspective. He then became aware he was being asked to take that message to others, not simply practice it himself.

PETER'S RESPONSE

I find it particularly important to note that Peter's obedience to accompany and fellowship with Gentiles is what led to the Holy Spirit being poured out on them – of the Spirit being spread beyond the small Hebrew community into the entire world.

17 Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might mean, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius had asked directions to Simon's house, and they appeared at the gate; 18 and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 But get up, go downstairs and accompany them without misgivings, for I have sent them Myself." 21 Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" 22 They said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." 23 So he invited them in and gave them lodging.

Now on the next day he got ready and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him. 24 On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter helped him up, saying, "Stand up; I, too, am just a man." 27 As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. 28 And he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner; and yet God has shown me that I am not to call any person unholy or unclean. 29 That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for." (Acts 10:17-29 NASB)

So Peter realized the purposes of the Lord in the matter, and immediately began to teach the assembled Gentiles about Jesus' lordship and grace, to all who would believe.

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the Jewish believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had also been poured out on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter responded, 47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. (Acts 10:44-48 NASB)

Notice that the confirmation came in the walking out of the relationship; Peter could have just obeyed the call to personally not call anyone impure or unclean, but it would not have mattered until he went and associated with the Gentiles. THEN, and only then, the Spirit was visibly poured out on that group, and that outpouring confirmed that they were fully acceptable to God.

MY RESPONSE

So how does that apply to me personally today? That morning, as I came more awake and pondered my new dream about Peter's biblical dream, like Peter I wondered about its meaning. Here's the critical thing: I awoke that morning also knowing that the Lord directed me to think of it specifically in terms of how the church has handled LGBTQ issues.

You see, I have been wrestling with the morality of the queer spectrum for some time. It feels like a matter that the Lord has asked me to understand with clarity, no longer simply relying on my upbringing and my former church training, but to dive much deeper, studying the issue from both social/cultural and scriptural perspectives. In fact, in the last couple of weeks I've had a number of specific encounters with friends and family about this topic, and it's been very clear to me that what I'm studying and considering sharply differs from my "home culture's" perspectives.

So it's not really surprising to me that the Lord gave me this dream about Peter's dream, to specifically direct – or more precisely, to redirect – my steps.

In much the same way as with Peter, there are people in the church today who are finally becoming willing to associate with modern-day Gentiles, who I would stipulate are the queer community, who have been shunned by the church, disassociated at every turn, and avoided in almost every way. Invective is routinely launched against them, with even direct calls for public execution of gays and queers these days on social media by right-wing Christian extremists – with little to no pushback by other conservatives.

The situation in conservative Christian churches today is surprisingly similar to how the Jews treated Samaritans in Jesus' time.

Yet amidst this ugly scene, there are those who are becoming like Peter: they have heard the Lord say "don't call unclean what I have cleansed." Although just like Peter, their minds are offended at a clear breach of how they were raised to understand the Holy Scriptures, and at a clear breach of apparent meaning in a number of verses in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, they have responded to that call to "go with them."

Just like what happened with the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles, the testimony coming from these "inclusive" churches is stunning, for those who will hear it. People who previously were rejected by the church are finding Christ, and entering into communion with the Body of Christ for the first time. The Holy Spirit is truly being poured out on them, very visibly and tangibly, and that testimony (readily available for those willing to hear it) is just like the testimony of the Gentiles receiving the Gospel from Peter. And those straight folks who interact with them are finding peace and joy, as they rejoice in their coming to Christ and they relax in a newfound freedom from fear of "otherness."

And I have heard this testimony. And I continue to hear it: there is joy and peace and all the fruits of the Spirit rising up in these communities.

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

It's instructive in this moment to also consider the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch from Acts 8:

26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, "Get ready and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a desert road.) 27 So he got ready and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot, and was reading Isaiah the prophet. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." 30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 And he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

*"He was led like a sheep to slaughter;
And like a lamb that is silent before its shearer,
So He does not open His mouth.
33 In humiliation His justice was taken away;
Who will describe His generation?
For His life is taken away from the earth."*

*34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, "Please tell me, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself, or of someone else?" 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. 36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch *said, "Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 38 And he ordered that the chariot stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing. (Acts 8:26-39 NASB)*

Let's consider a few non-obvious facts about this story.

Eunuchs in ancient cultures were usually servants or slaves. While valued by their masters for a supposed inability to be sexually tempted and for lacking a masculine desire to conquer, they were generally otherwise outcasts in their culture. Lack of virility and masculinity was deadly to social status in strongly patriarchal cultures. It's instructive that Jesus, in Matthew 19, honors eunuchs specifically, as does Isaiah 56 – both of these being shockingly counter-cultural to those who heard the proclamations from Jesus and the prophet.

But in the context of that society, remember that the Lord's own Scriptures forbade man-made eunuchs (the servant eunuchs) from worshiping in the Temple:

1 No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 23:1 NASB)

So this Ethiopian court eunuch, having traveled a very great distance by chariot from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship, was certainly turned away from the Temple, and was probably unwelcome to participate in religious instruction in Jerusalem in general. In fact, we see this as he asks Philip to help his understanding of the scriptures, pleading *"how could understand I unless someone guides me?"* This simple plea underscores his heart cry: he loves Yahweh, and longs to better understand the scriptures, but is an outcast from the Temple despite his faith.

Note that the scripture the eunuch was reading with Philip, in Isaiah 53, was written just a few chapters before the verses about eunuchs in Isaiah 56. Imagine how his heart would have exploded with joy when Philip read further into Isaiah, and this eunuch for the first time perhaps understood how valuable he was to the Lord.

*3 Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say,
"The Lord will certainly separate me from His people."*

Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree."

4 For this is what the Lord says:

"To the eunuchs who keep My Sabbaths,

And choose what pleases Me,

And hold firmly to My covenant,

5 To them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial,

And a name better than that of sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name which will not be eliminated. (Isaiah 56:3-5 NASB)

Despite being excluded from the Temple, the eunuch's faith wasn't broken, and as he was leaving Jerusalem to begin the long journey home, the Lord that day positioned Philip, a faithful disciple who was willing to associate with someone he likely believed to be a "damaged" or "lesser" human, to teach the Word of the Lord to him. And it went beyond associating: he was willing to immediately baptize the eunuch, showing his full communion in the Body of Christ that day.

Perhaps in that very moment, the Lord instructed Philip to look beyond Deuteronomy 23:1 and the man's physical state. It's pretty clear from Acts 8:26 and 8:29 that Philip knew he was specifically sent to that situation by an angel of the Lord.

26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip...

29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot."

We are not told what happened to the eunuch later, but it's quite likely that he carried his newfound faith back to his homeland and to the court of the queen of Ethiopia. I find it very possible that he would have

been the flashpoint for many thousands of people to come to faith in Jesus Christ, as a righteous understanding of the Scriptures spread in his home country. Remember church history, if you will: there were large communities of believers that sprung up in Africa in the first century AD. As Wikipedia says, *“Important Africans who influenced the early development of Christianity include Tertullian, Perpetua, Felicity, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Cyprian, Athanasius and Augustine of Hippo.”*

And I also find it quite likely that Philip’s recounting of that story would have been shocking, and also enlightening, to the other Christians to whom Philip was traveling to minister. I can only imagine that it contributed to Paul’s later teaching about the need for a complete rejection of partiality in the church.

THE CONSEQUENCES TO ME

So why am I sharing a personal dream?

I’m keenly aware, as I write and record this, how it will be received by anyone still invested in the traditional understanding of sexuality in Christian circles. A choice to affirm LGBTQ identities and behavior will instantly make me a pariah in many social and Christian conservative circles. And that’s why I’ve been deeply pondering and studying this issue for months. But that prophetic dream was a tipping point for me, of the Lord specifically pushing me off of my indecision and musing, into a particular understanding that was no longer negotiable in my heart. I trust His word to me, especially in my dreams; there have been many specific instances that I can recount where He has confirmed matters that I dreamed with great detail and clarity through other people and circumstances. So when the Lord presents this topic to me in this manner, I choose to follow His lead despite the very obvious cost. He has my “yes” and that doesn’t change.

Some who read this will likely consider me as an example of what goes wrong when a Christian walks away from the faith – as a cautionary tale of sorts. And that’s fine. Certainly there were many Jews who attacked Peter for abandoning the faith. In Acts 11:2,

And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, the Jewish believers took issue with him, 3 saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” (Acts 11:2)

But as Peter retells the story to these believers, he ends with this:

“17 Therefore, if God gave them the same gift as He also gave to us after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” 18 When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has also granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” (Acts 11:17-18)

And when I hear testimony after testimony about God’s Spirit being poured out on those that the church considers anathema, I have to reconsider my past doctrine. We either believe that God pouring out the Holy Spirit on people is a true sign of His acceptance of their full status as His children, per Acts 11:17-18, or we don’t. All my life, I have been counseled by Christian elders to judge a tree by its fruit. And that is what I’m doing here.

In particular, my conclusion is that there is an entire group of people, very well-defined, that the church is unwilling to sit at table with, unwilling to climb into their chariot and patiently study the scriptures together, unwilling to baptize. My ultimate conclusion is that I would rather risk being disciplined by the Lord for sharing His love and His word with the outcasts, of showing more grace than is wise, than risk being disciplined for rejecting those whom He loves and desires to invite into His family.

Beyond all this, I'm certain that many will respond to my earlier phrase "I trust His word to me" with "but you don't trust the Word."

Well, that's exactly where I will differ with them. Having carefully studied these matters, and considered a variety of understandings regarding every verse in Scripture that addresses sexual behavior and deviancy, and those that supposedly specifically address homosexuality, I have concluded that the Lord's word to me in a dream does not, in fact, conflict with His written Word when it is properly exegeted and understood.

LIMITATIONS TO THE SCOPE OF THIS PAPER

With that said, this accounting will not be a comprehensive investigation of the Biblical basis for my conclusions. For that purpose, I would invite you to read these specific books, preferably in this order (the links are to Amazon copies of the books):

- ["Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships"](#) by James V. Brownson
- ["UnClobber: Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality"](#) by Colby Martin and Glennon Doyle Melton
- ["Two Views on Homosexuality, the Bible, and the Church \(Counterpoints: Bible and Theology\)"](#) by Preston Sprinkle
- ["The Bible's Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical's Change of Heart"](#) by Mark Achtemeier
- ["God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships"](#) by Matthew Vines
- ["Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships"](#) by Karen R. Keen
- ["Homosexuality and the Christian: A Guide for Parents, Pastors, and Friends"](#) by Mark A. Yarhouse PsyD

Of these, the very first one is the most difficult to read, but in my sense it is the most thorough exploration of the Bible scriptures surrounding all the issues that enter into the debate, including the imago Dei, complementarianism, celibacy, patriarchy, procreation, "one flesh," "nature," and literally all the verses commonly cited as supporting the traditional non-affirming, anti-gay, anti-queer, anti-transgender views. Aside from that, "Two Views" is an interesting book, which provides an opportunity for four theologians to write an essay taking a position on the subject, then specifically critiquing each others' writings. As such, it clearly addresses both sides of the matter. Finally, "UnClobber" is particularly useful in providing a more readable and approachable discussion of the subject matter, but without the rigor of "Bible, Gender, Sexuality."

With that disclaimer, however, I believe some thoughts of my own are appropriate, and will follow below, based on all the understanding I have gained from studying the above resources.

MY BACKGROUND

Before I get into the subject matter, some personal background may help.

I grew up strongly conservative, raised in (and then attending by choice) various churches that believed largely in the inerrancy of scripture, and very traditional views of morals and ethics and definitions of sinful conduct (among other conservative Christian doctrines). I was in those churches from the age of approximately 3 until the age of 53. I was also raised strongly conservative politically, diligently voting 100% Republican in every election through 2020.

Moving forward, I'm going to carefully use the word "inherited" in this article, because I think it properly conveys the idea of things that were given to me by my forebears – my elders and parents and teachers and pastors – as opposed to things that I earned myself through hard work and diligence.

But even when I earned my own way politically and spiritually, even when there was diligent study, it was always through the lens of the inherited values and principles. It should be apparent that we often find what we're looking for when we study the Bible – it's not hard to "proof-text" a doctrine, and find verses that appear to support a given position – even when a majority of other intelligent and God-fearing Christians find the opposite position supported. Witness, for example, Democrat and Republican Christians disagreeing on social justice, or Northern and Southern Christians disagreeing about slavery, or the disagreement on salvation between Calvinism and Arminianism, or between Catholics and Protestants. Each could quote verse and chapter to support their position – but both cannot possibly be simultaneously and completely correct.

With that background and definition, one of the strongest values I inherited was opposition to homosexuality, and a very potent understanding of "traditional sexuality" including marriage, monogamy, and purity.

I inherited a strong sense of the legacy of my beliefs – the idea that things which I now believed, God-fearing Christians had always believed.

I also inherited a strong fear of homosexuals and queers. I steadfastly avoided encounters when I could, and exited such encounters promptly when I couldn't outright avoid them. I genuinely believed that I could be corrupted by even considering their viewpoints, or arguing with them, and it was risky to socialize with them.

However, despite these very strong beliefs and fears, or perhaps because they were so strong, I had never spent a single minute of time actually personally seeking the Lord about His views on the matter, or studying the scriptures to see what they actually said, investigating the original languages and cultural understandings, or anything else.

In other words, I simply took what I had inherited, and totally and unquestioningly adopted it. It was convenient and well-packaged, and that was enough for me and my need for certainty.

This is unsurprising, in retrospect, because my working definition of “faith,” one which I also believe I inherited, was to tightly hold onto what I had inherited, with every fiber of my being.

WHAT CHANGED FOR ME

So what changed?

Since those simple, easy days unmarked by critical thinking or a deep determined pursuit of understanding God and His purposes for me and the world, my understanding of the meaning of “faith” has changed sharply. I invite you to read a brief blog post of mine on the matter.

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In short, I now understand that true faith is wrestling with God as Jacob did, even if I limp away from the encounter. It’s carefully dusting off those inherited beliefs one by one, and seeing if they’re made of gold or simply wood, stubble, and hay. Just because I inherited something doesn’t mean it’s valuable. Often, mature children begin to recognize that things their parents held onto dearly may in fact not be worth keeping, despite their importance to their parents.

And as I noted above, I began to encounter a real and practical and timely need to understand the queer world for the first time. My inherited beliefs didn’t serve me sufficiently, and I needed to truly understand God’s perspective on these things rather than taking my denomination’s word for it, or my pastor’s word for it, or my mother or father or sister or brother’s or my friend’s word for it. I needed God’s own word to me, His rhema living word spoken directly to my own heart. As the Ethiopian eunuch pleaded with Philip in Acts 8, “how can I understand unless someone will explain it to me?” And that someone needed to be God Himself, because what my fellow men had explained to me was exhibiting signs of insufficiency and inconsistency as I looked closer.

And so for the last year or so, and in particular the last half of 2022, I have been pursuing this matter with diligence, and importantly, with a mind open to allow the Holy Spirit to confront my existing beliefs.

I have read those multiple books on the subject, and much other less formal material, from both affirming and non-affirming positions. I have talked to people on both sides of the matter, including trans and gay people. I’ve spoken at length with the pastor of an affirming church that is seeing amazing things happen, but also wrestling with significant opposition. I’ve meditated on the matter at great length. I’ve done plenty of writing about this, as writing is one way that I explore my thoughts. And recently the Lord has spoken directly and tangibly to me about the matter, as I explained above.

MY HEART VERSUS MY MIND

As I began to consider these matters for the first time with a true willingness to have my mind changed, I began to discover that my heart quickly got very far ahead of my mind. By that I mean that I began to

sense the love of the Lord for the people involved – the queer and the gay – and sense that I needed to accept them. That immediately surprised me, because I had effectively been taught to fear them, if not (by implication) to hate them despite the call to “love the sinner and hate the sin.” I intellectually knew that the Lord loved them no matter their identity or behavior, and I intellectually knew that the Bible said I should love them too, but I began to personally encounter God’s deep love and compassion for them, that knocked me off my judgmental pillar of self-righteousness, and quickly made me realize that my existing definition of “loving them” was utterly wrong.

Now, the good conservative Christian will respond, “of course you’re supposed to love them. Of course God does too.” But what I saw modeled by man, by the church culture in which I was raised, was fear and hatred, not love. All the words couldn’t counter the exclusion from participation that was obvious in every corner of my church world. “Sure, you’re welcome to join us, but only if you change.” “You’re not allowed to be yourself here.” “Your identity is invalid.” It just didn’t fit with what I was sensing from the Lord Himself.

And the fruit that I saw in the church was not healthy, despite all the preaching and teaching from the Bible – at least, the conservative non-affirming church’s interpretations of the Bible. One only has to look at Westboro Baptist Church to see an example of hatred that mistakenly considers itself loving.

HERMENEUTICS

I’ve already touched several times on the idea of doctrine and teaching and Biblical understanding. Since this document intends to be grounded in careful scriptural interpretation, I should explain my general hermeneutics, that is, my personal guiding principles of scripture reading and interpretation.

- I believe that the Bible is infallible: that is, the overall Bible is completely true in its presentation of God's nature and His requirements on mankind. However, it allows that specific aspects of the scriptures may require careful thought, and may have only limited cultural applicability, or may have scientific inaccuracies that today we understand better.
- Thus, I do not believe that everything in the Bible is exactly literal, for example, that a 24-hour day is a necessary interpretation of Genesis, or that the earth has four literal corners, or that the sun literally traverses the heavens in a chariot.
- I also do not believe that every command in the Bible – especially many in the Old Testament – applies literally to the Body of Christ today. We no longer advocate slaughtering children who disobey their parents, as an obvious example. We also don’t typically cut off our own hands or gouge out our own eyes when we sin, despite Jesus’ words.
- I believe that any and every English interpretation of the Bible is fundamentally imprecise, due to the difficulties of translation, especially when translating between languages from vastly different cultures with sharply different thought processes.
- Many Bible literalists assert that only the original copies of the scriptures are truly trustworthy and inerrant. But no such copies exist. I believe that there is a lot of very trustworthy evidence – testified to by many Bible historians – that there are zero known original copies in the original languages. Regarding the Old Testament books, except for a few books they were only oral

histories for many generations before being recorded long after the apparent date of the works. As such, there never WERE any original Old Testament “books” “written” by any of those purported authors. Even the Torah is widely understood to have been recorded in written form nearly a thousand years after its origins, most likely during the Babylonian captivity. Furthermore, even for the few books believed to have been specifically written originally, the oldest known copies are many hundreds of years younger than their origins. For the New Testament books, the oldest known copies are still a few hundred years younger than the time of their writing. Thus, they are many generations removed from their originals, and it is impossible to ever review the original manuscripts.

- So I also believe that even the best copies of the original documents are copies of copies of copies many generations from the original, and subject to both copyist and oral retelling errors, and even sometimes translations of copies before we received them.
- But I still also believe that our omnipotent God is fully capable of accurately communicating His Word to each generation, language, and culture, despite any such imprecision or copy errors or translation weaknesses.
- So, I do believe that the Bible can accurately present God's character to any reader of any era, and in fact the Holy Spirit reveals the essential accurate truths to His people.
- I also believe that the Bible and its individual teachings can only be properly understood in the context in which it was written and in which it was heard by the first audiences; the meanings cannot be separated from the plain understandings of the original speakers and listeners.
- But I do believe that man is fallible, and despite God’s ability to perfectly record what He wanted recorded via man’s agency, man will fallibly interpret God’s word, other than via flashes of inspiration by the Holy Spirit. A “plain” reading often isn’t plain or correct.
- And as such, I also believe that deeper understandings are intended and revealed over time by God in His grace to humanity, so that He does not require us to live as those first audiences lived, or necessarily to even believe exactly as they believed. (For example, this is why God corrected Peter’s understanding of acceptable foods and the church’s relationship to Gentiles.)
- I believe that God's primary requirements on mankind are surrendered obedience to Him and love for Him, and selfless love for fellow man.
- I believe God has great compassion on the poor, the disadvantaged, the weak, the oppressed, and the marginalized, and that He places great emphasis on His people's treatment of such people, and that He considers His own people to be the primary vehicle by which those needy are served. This matters to Him so much that the issue of how the marginalized are treated appears to be the single most prevalent issue that spans all of scripture, and carries with it both the strongest warnings and imprecations and the strongest blessings.
- I therefore believe that God’s nature should be understood by these imperatives, and the proper interpretation of His laws and commands must be made in light of those imperatives.
- Finally, I believe that God's primary purpose in Creation was to reveal Himself to the principalities and powers particularly in His relationship with mankind in all its limitations, as it was intended to fully represent the Father as the corporate Christ is assembled out of every tribe, tongue, nation, and people.

With this hermeneutic in mind, after carefully reading the books and other material mentioned above, I have concluded that the conservative position on excluding practicing active homosexual and transgender believers from full participation in ministry and Christian life is incorrect, and is bearing substantial harmful fruit, and should be changed. And I am not alone in this assertion, as many churches are beginning to recognize this truth, although I do not take this position because it's popular or supported by anyone else. I take this position because I am fully convicted of its truth.

WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

It would certainly be simpler for me to hold these matters in my heart, and take no visible action. That would be like the closeted gay or transgender individual staying silent for the sake of peace with those around them.

However, as my empathetic eyes were opened in the last two years, I have become aware that significant actual harm is being done routinely to LGBTQ people who, as humans, indisputably bear God's image. Furthermore, the political scene among self-identified evangelical conservative Christians has been rapidly changing towards Christian nationalism that favors legal suppression of the rights of LGBTQ people, even going as far as calling for their execution.

<https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/texas-pastor-says-gay-people-should-be-sentenced-with-death/287-cdcdb17a3-0daa-47e9-a8bf-913527cb1721>

<https://epgn.com/2022/06/15/pastors-in-idaho-and-texas-call-for-execution-of-lgbtq-people/>

Many states are actively passing laws restricting rights and available medical treatment for LGBTQ individuals. There are now numerous Christian and right-wing groups actively attacking LGBTQ people, both electronically and physically. In September 2022 the Cloudflare web load balancing service took the nearly unprecedented step of cutting off services to a right-wing website hosting forums that were actively threatening a transgender activist, and had been directly implicated in three queer suicides in recent years.

<https://apnews.com/article/technology-gay-rights-7d64f7b71736e091a4b5d1b3935551b5>

Furthermore, as a committed Christ-follower, I cannot agree with categorically excluding a sizable fraction of the population from Christian ministry and discipleship. Even if I were to agree that gay activity is unacceptable to God (which I do not), we are meant to be changed *by* our relationship with Christ, not *before* we begin that relationship. The church's exclusion of a group excludes them from any opportunity to develop and deepen a relationship with Christ, which is exactly where the Lord will have the opportunity to adjust their thinking and behavior – if He deems it necessary.

I am also unwilling to take the position that the church can welcome LGBTQ people into its midst, but insist that they must immediately change their behavior and identity to remain in fellowship. That is not acceptance and welcome: this is unlovingly saying “you can be here but you cannot be you.”

NOT TAKING THE EASY WAY OUT

It's often asserted by non-affirming Christians that agreeing with the LGBTQ agenda is "taking the easy way out" for the progressive Christian. I fundamentally disagree – it should be obvious that for someone who grew up in conservative, traditional, non-affirming Christian spaces, that taking an affirming position is one of the hardest things one could do, whether as a LGBTQ or just in support of them.

I gain no personal benefit from taking this position. (In fact, it should be obvious that quite to the contrary, I stand to lose significantly by taking this position.) It does not salve my conscience for some personal gay inclination (I have exactly none). It does not give me license to personally sin sexually. It doesn't give me license to overlook sin in someone in my life. Instead, I am moved to this action of "coming out" as an ally directly out of compassion and love for my fellow mankind, and in direct opposition to how they are being treated by society and by the institutional church in America (not to mention around the world).

The problem for me was pretty straightforward: I already had a pretty solid idea where my heart and my spirit had landed on the issue. But my mind was really unhappy about it. My pastor used to say that there were times when his brain was deeply offended at something that was nonetheless blatantly apparent to his spirit, and his responsibility was to surrender to his spirit's sensed calling from the Holy Spirit, and trust his brain to catch up later. In this matter, the answer, unfortunately, is much the same: so many things I've internalized over nearly 50 years in the church are clashing deeply with what I sense that the Holy Spirit is saying to me.

But the question is, why not simply change my internal position and otherwise remain silent to avoid causing offense, knowing how much trouble the topic causes in Christian circles? At least that does have a simple answer: I have both friends and family, most of them professing Christians, who are directly dealing with this topic: they're either affirming, or personally involved directly with LGBTQ people, or they're LGBTQ themselves. If I'm going to be a faithful friend and a brother in Christ, and if I hope to have anything to speak into their lives, I cannot ignore the elephant in the room, so to speak.

So this uncomfortable conflict not only directly affected me, but was directly within me. It was me against myself. It was not a conflict with someone else, and I couldn't step back from the conflict by hanging up the phone, or turning off social media, or backing out of a meeting.

With that said, I could very easily have chosen to shut down this internal conflict instantly if I had wanted to do so. All it would take, as I noted above, is to quote some convenient Bible verse to myself, and pretend that it makes the whole problem go away. I could easily have appealed to those things I'd been taught that the verses mean. Not long ago for me, that would have meant that I was being faithful to those things I'd been taught to believe by older and wiser believers. In fact, given that faith was defined, so often, as believing without any confirmation, it would have been considered the height of faithfulness not to put a second thought into the inner conflict. Choosing to stand on those principles would be the very evidence of faithfulness. After all,

"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:3)

STUDYING TO SHOW MYSELF APPROVED

But now, it would also mean directly rejecting the call that God has put in my heart to “study to show myself approved” (and to deny the compassion and acceptance to which He is now unequivocally and clearly calling me).

The essence of studying, after all, is to question. *Webster’s defines “study” as “application of the mental faculties to the acquisition of knowledge,” “careful or extended consideration,” or “a careful examination or analysis of a phenomenon, development, or question.”* There’s that word – “question.” Nothing can be acquired or considered or examined without first acknowledging a lack of understanding: it means one must have a question to answer, some topic that isn’t yet fully grasped. Questioning is inherent in study. So “studying” is not to believe without doubt. More than that, “studying” is certainly not to search the scriptures for verses to back up my existing conclusions; it’s to explicitly, intentionally doubt my own conclusions and knowledge, and use not only my brain, but also my spirit to inquire with the Lord and His scriptures and every bit of information about those scriptures that may be relevant to the topic. As any scientist knows, the heart of the scientific method is to form a hypothesis, then to work diligently to determine if it’s correct – the key being to go into the investigation with an open mind, and look at the question or hypothesis as if it’s not already solved. It’s hard work, and if it’s going to be honest, it cannot start with preordained conclusions.

And here is the interesting thing about “*Abraham believed God:*” we often quote that story as showing that faith is exemplified by blind obedience. But it’s worth noting that Abraham was asked by God to do something that deeply offended his mind: to surrender his logical understanding of God’s direct and clear promise that through his son would come countless offspring, and instead to sacrifice that son. And even before that, he was asked to not believe that his almost-hundred-year-old body was too old to sire a son, but to grow strong in faith by believing in the unbelievable. In some sense, he was commended for being willing to have his mind offended by his spirit’s conclusions.

Similarly, Peter was asked by the Lord to do something that deeply offended his mind, too: to surrender his logical understanding of God’s commands about the Gentiles, and invite them into full fellowship and membership in God’s Kingdom.

So in this matter, faith is actually taking the hard way out, grappling with the matter that seems impossible to understand or to solve, and trusting God when there’s little or no evidence it’s going to work. “*Now faith is the certainty of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen. For by it the people of old gained approval.*” (Hebrews 11:1-2)

ACCOMMODATING SIN

Whenever I raise this LGBTQ topic with conservative Christians lately, I hear essentially the same objection: the affirming position is a cheap accommodation to sin, of taking the easy way out, by avoiding conflict with the gay and queer community. Supposedly it’s avoiding calling them to account for their supposed sin, of wanting peace more than righteousness.

And it isn't just directed at me for considering an affirming position. It also says the same about the gay or queer person themselves: that they want an easy way to justify their sin.

My first observation is this: Justifying sin might possibly be true for some Christian gays or queers. But what about non-Christians who have no moral reason to avoid being gay or queer? If the whole issue is them avoiding believing they are sinning, how can that apply to someone with no inherent sense that it's sinful in the first place? And yet it's very obvious that unbelieving gays and queers struggle with this decision too, despite a lack of moral framework in which to anchor the decision. In fact, you'll hear – if you listen – story after story of them wrestling with this issue even as young children, long before ANY Christian moral sense entered the equation, and many years before anyone uttered a word about sexuality or gender or “the birds and the bees” to them. They just knew they were deeply different, but couldn't resolve the issue by just conforming to what they saw around them.

My second observation is this: I've discovered that not a single gay or queer person whose testimony I heard found this to be a simple issue. Rarely were they making this decision based on how someone else believed they should be acting. Rather than making a choice of aligning or not aligning with what Christians said about them, it was usually whether they'd come into alignment with who they utterly knew themselves to be – despite what others said about them.

So I'm going to focus in this section on Christian gays, queers, or those who affirm them: people who come to this point of decision to be or to affirm LGBTQ positions, with a solid background of Christianity and a well-established framework of understanding about the “Christian” perspective on the topic.

THE CRUSHING HARD WORK

Anyone who says that choosing to affirm LGBTQ identity or behavior in oneself or others is an “easy way out” has never done the crushing work of being required by the Lord to rethink their most fundamental doctrinal positions.

For the closeted or newly “out” gay or queer believer, it's about accepting something about themselves that is utterly certain to alienate them from family and friends and faith community. Often of knowing that there won't be a church within a very long drive that will truly accept them as they are. Of knowing that the pool of possible life partners suddenly shrinks by a factor of ten or more. Of being forever marked by mainline Christians as damaged goods. Of knowing that most interactions with non-affirming Christians will be attempts to convict or judge or change or even threaten them. These are absolute givens in today's America, and the vast majority of churches.

For the believer finally coming to terms with their own queer identity, or even just considering taking a publicly affirming position, like for me, it's finding they must repent of things they did and said for decades. Of mourning the deep and abiding harm they unwittingly caused to the “least of these.” Of knowing their family and friends may well reject them or now hold them at arm's length because of those new conclusions. Of being abruptly shunned by nearly every family in their church. Of being dis-invited as “disruptive” from an entire faith community because they don't toe a doctrinal line any longer. Of giving up that honor of leading their friends to the Throne Room in worship or preaching each week, knowing

they'll never again be welcome at that altar because they're unwilling to be silent about what God has required of them. Of having their closest friends and deepest confidants convinced they are at risk of hellfire, because they choose to actively love sinners that those friends are unwilling to even have sitting in the pews beside them.

That hardly sounds like taking the easy way out.

No, it's far, far easier to simply sit self-righteously and smugly, [holding a basket of dusty old religious doctrines and conclusions – “relics”](#) – that they were handed and told “this is what we believe; don't you dare change your mind,” rather than the painful and searingly hard work of carefully examining each and every one. It's easier to proof-text one's chosen doctrine with a simplistic “plain meaning” reading of verses in isolation, rather than to wrestle with the Holy Spirit over what those verses really mean in context of each chapter, each book, and even the entirety of Scripture. It's easier to separate oneself from entire groups of people rather than wrestling with their very different faith. It's easier to only talk this over with like-minded anti-LGBTQ Christians, than to spend much time listening to gay or queer people pour out their story of lifelong pain and shame over who they were, and how they were treated by people who claim to represent the God of love. It's easier to smugly tell them they're going to hell if they don't change, rather than to simply sit quietly and hear them out without protesting that they're wrong or damaged.

NOT EVERYTHING HAPPENING IS GOOD AND RIGHTEOUS

I do not mean to say I think that all the current pro-LGBTQ cultural changes are completely correct and wise. I see a lot of harm in how things are playing out. There is a bad and excessive fascination with the topic today, and many young individuals are definitely making poor choices. There's going to be a lot that needs correcting, and plenty of people will suffer. It's a massive overshoot of what I think will be the correct center. That bill will surely come due. At some point, the mistakes will become clear, even if many choose to ignore them in the name of equality and anti-oppression.

But let's be absolutely clear:

1) I do NOT think that it's ALL a mistake. Far from it. I'm now convinced that despite no small amount of faddish bandwagon-jumping by impressionable people, a large number of the LGBTQ community are really, truly, non-cis, non-hetero, and non-binary, and this is the right thing for the world to accept. In particular, I am completely convinced that psychologists and gender specialists are correct that being gay or experiencing gender dysphoria is not a choice for most people. No amount of conversion therapy will work, because there are truly immutable aspects to some people's brain and body (no matter how they got that way).

2) I conclude that it's NOT my place to decide which people are faddish and which are real. I repeat, it's not my place. Period. Full stop. It's not my place to force society to protect some people by forcing a very specific value system on unbelieving citizens. By Jesus' example, we don't win by force (“Peter, put away your sword”) but by appeal and demonstrating a better way.

But this forces me to ask an absolutely, totally, supremely critical question: for those who do choose poorly, and for the world that foolishly pushes too far over the proper balance, where will the church be when some of them realize they went too far?

Will we be standing self-righteously off in the corner, shrilly screaming “*We told you so! See? We were right! You’re all going to hell!*” or will we be down there on the streets, living amongst those who clearly need Jesus and His love, having befriended those sinners and outcasts like Jesus did, so that when some of them discover their mistakes, the Lord’s church is where they turn for healing and recovery and acceptance? And will there be faithful Christian gays and queers fully accepted and supported by the church, fully in love with Jesus, and also fully, deeply, completely understanding the pain, ready to minister to those who abused themselves and went with the fad, went with the crowd, instead of being true to themselves and the image of God in them? The church NEEDS them, because they can minister in ways that cis/hetero folks cannot. Can we love them all, no matter where on this spectrum they exist?

LOVE OVER FEAR

For me, a lot of the church treatment of LGBTQ matters demonstrates an infection by the spirit of fear. Will we let Love cast out fear?

That, right there, is the core of my heart in this matter.

The church needs to be that “safe space” when the prodigals come home. And it also needs to be the safe space for those who are different but are still Christians loved by their Father and welcome to His table, without any reservation, without any fear. And I am determined to be one of those known to be safe.

At some level, this matter speaks to me of the parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds).

24 Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and left. 26 And when the wheat sprouted and produced grain, then the weeds also became evident. 27 And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ 28 And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ 29 But he said, ‘No; while you are gathering up the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. 30 Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the weeds and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn.”’” (Matthew 13:24-30)

Truly, this season sees a lot of tares, in many areas of culture, but there’s also some real wheat beginning to mature. Things that need to happen are happening, and trying to rip out all the error will uproot the non-error that is needed and valuable. Instead, let it grow, and at some point the weeds will be easy to separate out. But 3. Jesus’ parable was shocking to those who listened to it in person, and it’s still shocking

today – mainly by its compassion and patience, and mainly to those who want to attack sin with every weapon at their disposal. But that wasn't how Jesus lived, and I think it's not how I should be living either.

And so I'm finding a contentedness and rest in taking that hard way out, which requires not just the challenging work of standing up for an extremely unpopular position, but also requires that difficult but necessary long view and patience and peace, waiting for the harvest to mature.

HOMOSEXUAL IDENTITY VERSUS BEHAVIOR

Changing topics for a moment, I recognize that many discussions of LGBTQ matters shortly turn to discussions of behavior.

I believe it's critical to recognize two demarcations: one between identity and behavior, and one between righteous and unrighteous behavior.

IDENTITY IS USUALLY FIXED

The science clearly shows that the vast majority of homosexuals cannot change their sexual preferences. Even the foremost "conversion therapy" advocates finally have admitted it fails most of the time. "Exodus International" tried for 37 years, and finally disbanded admitting that sexual attractions cannot be changed in most cases.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/21/us/group-that-promoted-curing-gays-ceases-operations.html>

<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/the-man-who-dismantled-the-ex-gay-ministry/408970/>

"Exodus CEO Alan Chambers reported that **99.9 percent of people** who engaged in reparative therapy did not change their orientation."

<https://www.thetaskforce.org/national-religious-leadership-roundtable-responds-to-closing-of-exodus-international/>

Suicide rates among LGBTQ individuals, which are already quite high due to societal pressures, double following conversion therapy.

<https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/press/lgb-suicide-ct-press-release/>

Misguided conversion attempts have often led gay and lesbian individuals to attempt a heterosexual marriage, in the belief that it would cure them and result in healing from homosexuality. In reality, the vast majority of those marriages fail, leaving behind wrecked adult lives and deeply damaged children.

A study at Cornell University concluded that *"there is no credible evidence that sexual orientation can be changed through therapeutic intervention. Most accounts of such change are akin to instances of "faith healing." There is also powerful evidence that trying to change a person's sexual orientation can be extremely harmful. Taken together, the overwhelming consensus among psychologists and psychiatrists*

who have studied conversion therapy or treated patients who are struggling with their sexual orientation is that therapeutic intervention cannot change sexual orientation, a position echoed by all major professional organizations in the field, including the American Psychological Association.”

Furthermore, “We identified 47 peer-reviewed studies that met our criteria for adding to knowledge about whether conversion therapy (CT) can alter sexual orientation without causing harm. Thirteen of those studies included primary research. Of those, 12 concluded that CT is ineffective and/or harmful, finding links to depression, suicidality, anxiety, social isolation and decreased capacity for intimacy. Only one study concluded that sexual orientation change efforts could succeed—although only in a minority of its participants, and the study has several limitations: its entire sample self-identified as religious and it is based on self-reports, which can be biased and unreliable.”

<https://whatweknow.inequality.cornell.edu/topics/lgbt-equality/what-does-the-scholarly-research-say-about-whether-conversion-therapy-can-alter-sexual-orientation-without-causing-harm/>

From such studies, and from actually discussing these matters with gay people, I conclude that (a) gay or queer identity is real for many people, and (b) I am utterly unqualified to make any assessment of the truth of their assertion. Only God knows what is in their hearts, how their minds are built to work, and what wounding may (or likely, may not) contribute to their identity.

BEHAVIOR DEMANDS RIGHTEOUSNESS

After carefully considering a multitude of scriptures and factual information in the books I listed previously, and my own pursuit of the Lord regarding the scriptures, I have come to believe that the Bible is not at all explicit in condemnation of loving, consensual, committed, monogamous homosexual marital relationships or sexual acts. Rather, I believe that the Bible is (in those famous verses about homosexuality) definitively explicit in condemning unloving, non-consensual, uncommitted, and non-monogamous relationships of any kind. In fact, I believe that if you describe an appropriate marriage and sexuality between a man and a woman, every aspect of that relationship other than the specific genders involved ought to also be modeled in any homosexual relationship.

Therefore, any form (whether gay or straight) of violent, abusive, controlling, or casual sexuality is clearly addressed in scripture and opposed by the Lord, as violating His core principles of (a) selfless and sacrificial love, and (b) modeling the depth and permanence of His relationship with mankind through our relationships with one another. This is not dependent upon gender-identity or sexuality-identity.

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY

I think it’s particularly important to understand whether LGBTQ+ people can represent the Imago Dei, the Image of God. A rather sizable fraction – [some surveys](#) say [30% or more](#) – of Gen-Y youths no longer assume binary sexuality or gender pronouns. In talking with many teens and twenty-somethings, I personally find this statistic to be very believable. This is deeply distressing to many in the conservative Church today, who see such choices as deeply deceived and a tangible threat to both the stability of our culture and also our entire nation.

The book “Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God” by Megan K. DeFranza was very helpful in understanding some of this topic.

THE PROBLEM

I’ve carefully listened to the arguments from traditional conservative Christians regarding gender issues – in fact I grew up with them and was deeply comfortable with them for 50 years. In recent discussions about the topic, triggered in fact by the presence of a transgender person at a gathering of my very conservative family – I heard fear for the stability of everything for which our religion stands. I heard warnings of the risks of creeping radical changes to our society. I heard caution about accepting demonic lies about the very nature of mankind and man’s representation of the image of God. Plenty of scriptures were quoted to support traditional roles of men and women made in the image of God, designed to represent Him to the world.

But I find myself unsatisfied at these answers and arguments. For one thing, they all depend on a specific set of interpretations of those scriptures, which although widely shared within conservative Christian circles, are hardly universal across denominations and around the world in different cultures. As such, they seem to desire to avoid wrestling with principles that are deeply difficult to confront; there is an element of “that was previously settled and we cannot consider any alternative beliefs.” For another thing, most of the arguments feel as if they are tinged with two unholy spirits: fear of change, and xenophobia (generally defined as the fear of that which is unlike us). Those fears are never holy. The arguments all seem to appeal to the desire to exclude “the other” or that which is alien to us, and to hold onto the comfortable and familiar at all costs.

This is all very understandable. Clear gender roles and appearances are something with which we are already deeply familiar. It’s a comfortable place to exist, and it’s simpler by far to just exclude that which is “other.” We would rather not wrestle with the unfamiliar and what looks broken to us.

ARE WE REPRESENTING GOD?

These gender issues seem to strike at the heart of a foundational principle in some doctrinal structures – that of the idea that God created males and females and He gave them very specific boundaries for their roles and behaviors, all for the ultimate purpose of better showing His character to the universe.

But that begs the question: are God's people actually showing God’s true nature and character to the universe, through strict adherence to physical norms?

Fundamentally, God is spirit, not flesh, and Jesus’ incarnation was temporary for the purpose of showing us that He fully identified with all our pain and failings.

So it seems strange to argue that our physical manifestations are instructive to the universe as regarding God’s nature.

Secondly, there is no explicit female component to the specific revelation of God to man. It's not God the Mother, the Daughter, and the Holy Spirit. In fact, any such suggestions by liberal Christians evoke howls of outrage from conservative Christians.

And finally, regarding the revelation of God's character to our fellow man, it seems strange to suggest that the appearance of humans as male and female can show anything whatsoever new to other humans, in almost any and every given culture or nation, who are quite well aware of the differences in the first place. Certainly no such tutoring is needed.

Note that the creation account in Genesis describes the Godhead as saying "*let Us make mankind in Our image.*" Given that the Godhead existed completely without physical manifestations, and would not be incarnated for thousands of years in the future, there could be no *physical* image to represent. Clearly, "the image" is of a spirit; only a spirit can accurately represent a spirit. Thus the creation of Adam and Eve was the breathing into being of a pair of unique spirits that God clothed in flesh. It was the very spirit beings that were in God's image. The human bodies were merely convenient carriers for their spirits, designed for perfect compatibility with the earth that God also created, and given with the ability to reproduce after their own physical manifestations and for God to imbue those physical offspring with more spiritual beings.

Furthermore, our bodies were made "from dust" and shall return to dust. Again, it is hard to argue that something earthy and tainted by physical reality can fully represent the eternal spiritual God that we were created to represent.

We also know that after our natural bodies die, and return to dust, we will be given new bodies, and that marriage and sexuality will be unknown in that afterlife. As the Bible describes our new glorified bodies as our eternal state, and perfectly suited for life in the intimate presence of Christ, it seems further strange to assert that our temporal, earthly bodies are the ultimate representation of the Godhead.

COMPLEMENTARIANISM AND TRANSGENDER

The doctrinal idea that men and women each represent specific and necessary aspects of God's character is relatively recent, and is called complementarianism (and was formed largely as a reaction against feminism and the increasing role of women in society and in the church). However, complementarianism inherently relies upon treating the *physical* body as the actual image of God. The rules and roles are inherently and explicitly tied to the physical form of the human flesh that is wrapped around the eternal souls and spirits. But Paul tells us there is no male or female, just like there is no Jew or Greek (Galatians 3:28). In so arguing, Paul in modern language is implicitly saying that genetic specifics (both gender and ethnicity) are not relevant. What is housed by the flesh is what matters, not the flesh itself. Complementarianism tries to limit how one can serve or act or worship based on the specific genitalia or chromosomes expressed in the temporal body. Basically it forces external limits on an indwelling soul and spirit. But if there is no male or female or ethnicity in the spirit realm, in God the Creator Himself, or in our eternal bodies, why can – why should – that genderless spirit which comes from Him be limited by

man in how it can express its design, and its calling, in the process of serving and worshiping its Creator while we inhabit these earthly bodies made of dust?

This thought process, not surprisingly, leads to wondering about the queer and gender fluid movement. If the spirit within the human body is the thing that actually represents the “let Us make man in Our image” God, then what is the basis of the non-affirming concern about queer and nonbinary individuals?

The [paradox of the Ship of Theseus](#) seems very relevant here. If you begin to incrementally replace the boards of an aging wooden sailing ship, at what point is it no longer the original ship? If every board is eventually replaced over time, what happens? Does it cease being the same ship? If so, exactly when? This question leads to other questions. Is the ship merely its specific physical manifestation, or the idea of it? Will changing part of it affect its identity? If so, how much change is acceptable?

In like manner, if you replace a human being’s body parts (or merely remove them, or build new ones from rearranged flesh or with targeted application of specific hormones) are you changing the human identity within that individual?

I would argue no. Some specific real and non-LGBTQ examples may help make the point.

- Would anyone claim that a quadruple amputee is less a representation of God than a fully-abled human, because he cannot touch or carry or walk, even though God describes Himself in various scriptures as walking or touching or carrying?
- How about a deaf or blind human, when God describes Himself as hearing and seeing everything?
- How about the dumb who cannot speak – are they incapable of representing a God who defines Himself as the Living Word and speaking to mankind?
- How about the barren, when God charged mankind to reproduce?

Where exactly might one draw the line, and say that a human is no longer capable of fully representing God? Would anyone argue that such humans are only ever able to be partial representatives?

IF NOT PHYSICAL, THEN WHAT STANDARD?

Surely the standard, then, is not physical, and never can be. The standard is more appropriately how we represent God by the character we put on display to the universe. It is notable that we humans alone among all creatures have this amazing ability to represent God’s character, not because we have bodies, not because we have genders, not because we have genitalia, not because we reproduce, not even because we are somewhat self-aware or can communicate. Dolphins and primates share those characteristics with humans, yet we do not argue that they represent God.

No, the difference is the spirit within us, a specific imbuelement from God Himself, unique to each person, yet all directly from Him. And it is our choice of how closely we represent God’s character by our own character that is the exact and sole witness to the rulers and authorities in heavenly realms, as well as witnessing to the lost humans who walk among us.

BODY MODIFICATION – EUNUCHS

Interestingly, the idea of genital modification is at least as ancient as the Bible itself, which addresses eunuchs in the books of Esther, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Matthew, and Acts. Even Jesus Himself recognized in Matthew 19:12 that some eunuchs are man-made and others are self-made.

For there are eunuchs who were born that way from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by people; and there are also eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who is able to accept this, let him accept it. (Matthew 19:12 NASB)

And even more tellingly, Jesus starts by acknowledging that some eunuchs are God-made.

It's important that the Lord specifically honors eunuchs, who were considered by Hebrew society to be deficient because of their inability to produce an heir, with special assurances that they have a place in His kingdom if they otherwise honor Him with their lives (such as Isaiah 56). In other words, the condition of their bodies is irrelevant to God's acceptance of them.

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people." Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the LORD, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, and choose what pleases Me, and hold fast My covenant, to them I will give in My house and within My walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3-5)

God here is explicitly tying His acceptance of them to their heart attitudes and their choice to follow after God. Yes, He is honoring their choice to follow the Law. But recognize that at that time, the Law was the only way to please God; the Spirit had not yet been given, and justification by faith was still in the future.

26 For you are all sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ Jesus. 27 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:26-29 NASB)

The argument is commonly made that this passage is only referring to the equality of salvation, not to all gender roles. But it's educational that verse 26 specifically says "you are all sons and daughters," and verse 29 says that both male and female are Abraham's heirs to the promise. This was a shocking concept to anyone living at the time, when inheritance was only to the male children. This passage was carefully making it clear to the readers of that day that both physical genders have full rights and privileges that traditionally were only imputed to the male gender. In fact, the only distinctive that is necessary for this imputation is faith.

BODY MODIFICATION – CIRCUMCISION

Furthermore, regarding modifying the human body's sexual organs, later in Galatians (6:12) Paul addresses the circumcision, making it quite clear that a specific man-made bodily modification of the male genitalia cannot be used to establish or deny a position in the Body of Christ. It seems odd to first accept this verse, but then to place a limitation on the extent of the applicability of the modification before one is no longer welcome to participate in the Kingdom. If removing the foreskin does not affect one's status, why would removing more – or all – of the penis matter? It's not as if having or not having a penis, or having or not having breasts – or even having both! is somehow fatally damaging the image of a spirit-only God.

1 Timothy 6:16 says "*who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen.*"

John 4:24 says "*God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*"

And again, Jesus' own words in Matthew 19 and John 4:24 as well as many prophetic statements in the Old Testament imply that gender – in other words the presence or absence of some genitalia – is irrelevant to the Lord's acceptance of one's worship.

Beyond the genitalia, then, what of the matter of how one presents themselves as male or female or even neither gender? If the condition of the genitals is not a factor in how we might judge one's acceptability to God, does one's behavior or dress do that? In other words, is cross dressing or other queer behavior a disqualification? Is this failing to represent the nature and character of God?

BODY MODIFICATION – MASTECTOMY AND TOP SURGERY

Another type of common body modification related to traditional gender roles is worth considering. For generations, mastectomy has been a common surgical procedure to address certain diseases. However mastectomy is also rather common for men who have gynecomastia, the overdevelopment of breast tissue in males. Many women choose voluntary breast reduction surgery for non-gender issues, in some cases to address physical problems, but many other times for body image reasons. And of course breast enlargement surgery is well-known for women – mostly voluntary for body image reasons.

It is interesting that most Christians readily accept every one of these surgery processes, whether voluntary or not, without addressing "image of God" implications. True, they do not attempt to cross traditional gender lines, but they are equally potent in changing the God-given body shape in many cases. Is there a practical line after which it is suddenly "sinful" to change one's appearance?

CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS

APPEARANCE AS A QUALIFIER

One might well argue that our choice of appearance – clothing, makeup, grooming – is an even stronger qualifier than our bodily condition (or changes to it). After all, Isaiah 56:3-5 and Galatians 4 and plenty of

other scriptures discuss our manner of representing the Father and of worshiping Him – essentially, our faith – as the primary determinant of our relationship with Him.

But it would be odd to argue that something that is deeply cultural – i.e. something for which acceptability is based on a particular time and place – is somehow important to God. For example, long hair was a positive sign for Sampson, and Absalom was praised for being the complete standard of beauty and 2 Samuel 14:26 describes him cutting his hair only once a year. Clearly there was something culturally different by the time that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 11, saying that long hair is a shame to a man. Is one of these passages errant? Or is it possible that the writers of each passage were simply speaking to what was acceptable to their respective culture, not defining sinful codes of grooming?

CLOTHING AS A QUALIFIER

Clothing, too, is deeply cultural, yet it is used by many fundamentalist Christians as proof of holiness. But obviously the original standard from God was nakedness. Many theologians have observed that Adam and Eve were in fact perfectly clothed by God originally – that their very bodies were the clothing wrapped around their spirits. And once they fell, removing themselves from God’s covering, He graciously fashioned another layer to protect them and salve their shame, thus teaching them about clothing as a shame remedy.

In fact, in what may be the earliest written book of the Bible, Job describes his own creation in Job 10:11 and recognizes that God clothed him with skin and flesh and bones and sinew.

8 ‘Your hands fashioned and made me altogether, Yet would You destroy me? 9 Remember that You have made me as clay; Yet would You turn me into dust again? 10 Did You not pour me out like milk, And curdle me like cheese, 11 Clothe me with skin and flesh, And intertwine me with bones and tendons? 12 You have granted me life and goodness; And Your care has guarded my spirit. (Job 10:8-12)

Job understood his own self as being that self-ness that is resident within, or clothed by, his physical frame and form. Many verses describe man as clothed in various things other than garments – righteousness, faith, honor, power, garments of salvation (surely figurative rather than literal) and even dishonor and shame. The description of the Godly woman in Proverbs 31:25 says *“Strength and dignity are her clothing.”*

In fact, perhaps the best description of this concept is Paul again, writing in 2 Corinthians 5:1-4 and referring to the physical body,

“For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this house we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.”

In another telling verse, often quoted by fundamentalists, Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:3-4 that beauty is a function of the character of a woman, not her external clothing or adornments.

"Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God." (1 Peter 3:3-4)

Furthermore, we cannot set aside the cultural expectations about gender-specific clothing styles, which drift from era to era and from society to society and from culture to culture. What would be normal to some African tribes where the men literally only wear pointed gourds on their penis would be quite shocking in any American situation – just as a woman wearing a modern American blouse would have been scandalous to Paul. And on the other extreme are Muslim burqas, which ironically are offensive to many Christians.

So with that context it is hard to assert that any specific choice of attire is a reasonable undeniable mark of righteousness or acceptability to God. These things are highly culturally relative and it is thus impossible to say that God approves of this or that style and disapproves of all others. Otherwise we would be forced to argue that the styles in vogue in any era and conditions but our own were sinful.

WHAT QUALIFIERS ARE THE RIGHT ONES?

In fact the only remaining acceptable gender qualifier seems to be that, to be acceptable to God and fellow man, a given individual within a specific society and culture and in possession of a specific human set of chromosomes must necessarily conform to that societal instance's expectations for the behavior and dress and style.

Put more concisely, it says that if you don't conform, you are damned.

This would be an unacceptable relativism, implying that some behavior or clothing is sinful here and now, but not in other situations, or that some is holy but not in other situations. That breaks the principle that God Himself is unchanging, and His precepts are equally unchanging. Thus we must either allow that our understanding of His precepts might be too strictly applied to clothing and behavior and even the form of the body, or we must decide that it is okay to create our own rules and precepts to layer atop His. And Jesus Himself castigated the Pharisees for doing exactly that, calling them "whitewashed sepulchers" for their focus on appearances and behavior over attention to the condition of their hearts.

It's important to note that today's culture (outside conservative circles, that is) places fairly little value in the specifics of dress and personal appearance. The average non-Christian may think that someone's choices of appearance or dress are unusual or personally unpleasant, but are quite willing to accept the other's choices. It's no longer appropriate to argue that failing to dress or appear in rigid gender-specific manners is culturally unacceptable. It simply isn't. That's hard for conservatives to stomach, but it's a fact of life today.

THE PROBLEM OF EXPECTATIONS

I painfully and keenly recognize that this entire construct of thinking runs directly counter to generations of conservative thinking. It is distressing to consider that one of our most cherished ways of instantly assessing the value and condition of another human being is, in fact, not necessarily scriptural. But I suggest that it should instead be deeply freeing. At a very real and practical level, it frees us from focusing on the external markers, and allows us to focus immediately on the spirit and soul of those with whom we are interacting. The Bible is full of language urging us to look deeper than the surface, and yet we typically find it very hard to overlook what is visible in front of us. That process is made quite harder when we are convinced that the person standing in front of us must be truly lost and damned because of how they modified their body or how they dress or their affect or their choice of pronouns. But if we can see that God cares little about such things, we can release ourselves from judging their souls based on appearances, and focus instead on the unseen and unspoken.

If I am convinced that a transgender person is necessarily damned (or at least living in unrepentant sin) because they violated God's original design for the human body, or that a queer individual is necessarily damned because of their gender fluidity and insistence on pronouns that do not readily match their appearance, I will approach ministering to them quite differently than if I cannot so simply assume anything about their spirit. Rather, if I cannot use those outward markers to assess the condition of their inner being, I will find myself needing to listen much more closely, both to their own self-revelation and also to the Holy Spirit in discernment. I will not start by judging them. And this is extremely consistent with quite a bit of scriptural imperative to *"judge not."*

In fact, it is interesting to read Paul's writing in Romans 1, where he concluded the chapter by listing a long set of sinful behaviors, notably including perverse sexual behaviors – immediately followed in Romans 2 by his harsh rebuke of the Roman church for judging others for the same kinds of sin – that they themselves actually participate in. He seems to be making a case that grace towards others is far more important to God than a sinful behavior. He even goes on to specifically address circumcision, how genitalia are not a factor in the individual's welcome into the Kingdom. Commentators have observed that Paul is specifically taking this approach to frankly address the new and growing Roman church's fear and hatred of the Gentile aliens among them. He makes his final point in Romans 2 saying *"But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God."* The overall theme of the introduction to Romans is that genetics and culture are not what makes a person acceptable to God – it is the condition of their hearts.

PRONOUNS

Quite a bit of concern exists in conservative Christian circles today about the trend towards non-binary and gender-swapped pronouns. I find that I need to repent of my former response about pronouns.

About 35 years ago, when I was in college, my girlfriend's roommate was a veterinary student, and not long after starting school she legally changed her last name from Teates to something common like Smith.

She was just tired of constant jokes about her ample breasts, and especially so as she entered the vet profession where dealing with animal teats would lead to those jokes being a constant affront.

I suspected that her parents were deeply offended that their own daughter would reject their family name.

But at the same time, I understood her situation. The combination of letters used to refer to her inherently conflicted with something about her core self. And as a result, she asked to be called something different.

Were her parents to insist on continuing to use her offensive-to-her last name, it would be a practical verbal assault on her each and every time, and a rejection of something that mattered deeply to her about her own identity.

I do fully understand that gender pronouns are a little bit different, as they appear to refer to something that has historically helped to undergird our societal norms about gender and relationships. Denying someone's request to use different pronouns is not just a personal matter, it's perceived as a societal protection.

But I also have to recognize that this assertion about protecting society from change carries with it an insistence about the nature of our society. That resistance to change implies that the disappearing culture is somehow objectively right and proper. But as noted in many examples above, that specific nature being protected is ultimately deeply cultural instead of objective – it's based on a set of norms that exist in that given time, not universally over every age. Even though it's deeply embedded and fairly long-standing, it IS still cultural, that is to say, not entirely objective. Language and the specifics of identity absolutely do shift over time as understandings change.

As a very practical example, it wasn't long ago that Black men were almost universally called "boy" or worse still "the n word" by a significant number of white Americans. As another demonstration, there are numerous cultures around the planet that accept – and in some cases revere – non-binary genders as part of their accepted society, in places like Samoa, Native American, Mexico, Madagascar, Albania, Nepal, Thailand, Australia, and Indonesia. Essentially, every continent has at least one culture that fully accepts and includes individuals that do not identify as male or female. It's certainly not as common as binary gender societies, but it's clearly wrong for someone to say "everyone knows there are only two genders."

Yes, a change to such a deeply-embedded matter like he/she or male/female is disruptive, but it is not inherently WRONG just because it is DISRUPTIVE.

I have personally concluded that, while these alternate pronouns definitely make me uncomfortable, when I willingly choose to accept an individual's preferences about how I interact with them, I am honoring them as individuals without violating anything fundamental about humanity at large.

As noted above in discussing the image of God in transgender individuals, the important element of any individual is their soul and spirit that lie beneath their visible characteristics – and in this case, their preferred pronouns. Nothing at all that refers to their outer person affects their eternal character or their acceptability to the Lord.

Note that (for example) by referring to an apparent biological male as “she” or “her” or to an apparent biological female as “he” or “him,” or either of them as “they” or “them,” I am not referring to their genetics or their genitals (hopefully neither of which I could directly observe in any case, and I have no proof that I or they are correct in either case); I am instead referring to their personal identity, just as calling my girlfriend’s roommate “Miss Smith” instead of “Miss Teates.” At some level, it’s not much different than when “Elizabeth” decides to use “Beth” instead of “Liz” or “Betty.” How I feel about such a change in reference is entirely up to me: I can allow myself to angrily rage about it, or I can relax and appreciate the relationship that results from honoring them personally, and then have an opportunity to share the love of God with them as we grow in relationship.

Regarding the breakdown in society, I’ll address that below.

GROOMING

I also find that I need to repent from my conclusions about LGBTQ grooming. I grew up hearing a constant refrain from fellow conservatives about LGB folks (it was before "TQIA+" was added): *“gays are grooming our children.”*

I was taught to believe that gays wanted to create more gays, that their master plan and agenda was to convert children especially into gays. I continue to hear that idea that trans folks are trying to convert others, that they're trying to get their agenda into schools so more kids will be trans.

Looking back on that assertion with a new perspective, I now find it unbelievable – and frankly more than a little silly, to be honest.

With all the abuse that LGBTQ folks suffer from conservatives in general, the utter abuse and outright hatred that they receive from Christians in particular, the mental anguish of living in a body that doesn't conform to its mind, the difficulty getting quality medical care, having to hide every aspect of their true selves from family and friends and employers, and the small pool of potential partners who will accept them, tell me who in all honest and thoughtful consideration would actually believe that they'd be trying to bring others into such a painful world?

More to the point, because I used to believe the "grooming" idea was true, I did my best to avoid being "polluted" by socializing with anyone other than cis/hetero people. So I really had zero actual opportunity to hear from someone different than me, about what they really wanted and cared about.

And quite importantly, I had zero opportunity to actually share the love of God with people who, to put it bluntly, that I hated.

Well, that's changed. I've had the opportunity to actually discuss these things a few times now with non-cis/hetero people, and I've begun to actually listen, instead of imposing my ideas on other people without any evidence to stand on.

As a result, I now hear it differently. Having rejected that "grooming" refrain, now I hear a simple appeal to not be persecuted, to not be ignored or hidden – just to be treated like humans for the first time in their lives.

If they are in any way trying to recruit others, it's merely to get to some safety in numbers. They don't want to convert anyone – they just want allies who will defend them.

The Bible spends a stunningly large fraction of its wording on how to treat people who are marginalized by society. I am well aware of the responses about protecting America's culture and Christian morals, but I personally believe we're doing far more harm to Christian morals by treating people like subhumans, or lower castes. It fully violates any attempt we might otherwise make to represent the character and nature of the Heavenly Father and His Son to the world that is looking on.

Jesus didn't respond to sinners by calling for their execution or removal from society. He went into their houses. He interrupted their stoning. He touched unclean people to heal them. He healed on holy days. He violated pretty much every conservative religious legalism of His time, constantly interacting with the poor and unclean and unrighteous and hated and feared.

Yes, Jesus called sinners to repent. But He didn't do it after telling them they were only fit to be stoned. He only did it after showing them unrelenting, unfiltered compassion and love. Until we put down the rocks and spend time in unjudgmental conversation and selfless, agenda-free ministry – until we know them intimately – we have no right or place to call them to repent.

THE BREAKDOWN OF SOCIETY

A common argument I've seen in discussing all these matters is that accepting LGBTQ behavior and/or marriage as normal, or using they/them pronouns (or any others), is contributing to the breakdown of our society.

I emphatically reject that assertion for several reasons, and I repent of former statements to that effect.

For one, I now believe that we cannot force society into a Christian box of our preference in any manner that actually glorifies God. He and His laws do not need our defending. Every defense that I can conceptualize violates principles enshrined in our Constitution that governs a pluralistic nation, and undercuts the very principles that give me the right to freely practice my own worship of the God that I know and love. To do so assaults people and their rights under our laws and also their God-given right to reach different conclusions about what is right and acceptable before their God.

Any religious legal or political box that I help construct will only fit my own doctrine. Any box constructed by anyone will always exclude other practicing, God-fearing, children of the same Living God who simply hold to different doctrinal specifics. That is exactly why the Founding Fathers emphatically rejected religious tests and state-mandated religions.

And for another reason, I have concluded that God Himself is addressing some things in the church that desperately need changing – specifically how we treat those with whom we disagree, and how we show

His love and justice and righteousness to the marginalized and the outsider. If God's hand is behind this stirring of the waters, it's not my place to cling tightly to that which I find comfortable and familiar. Rather, it's my place to ask Him, to quote David,

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there is any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way." (Ps 139:23-24, NASB)

I've often heard an argument in Christian circles – in fact I used to make the argument myself – that every significant breakdown in a major culture was preceded by a breakdown in traditional family values. However, I've studied that assertion, and found that (1) it's not as clear a correlation as I had assumed, and (2) what correlation does exist is not causation. Changes in family structures and sexual behavior did not necessarily CAUSE the society to fail – they simply occurred in parallel with the failure that occurred for other reasons. All too often, in fact, those breakdowns were caused by autocratic or dictatorial rulers who were convinced that their own religious or moral structure could be imposed on their entire society by force.

Trying to hold our culture together by forcing marriage and sexuality into a supposedly-traditional box will not work. It's often been said "you cannot legislate morality," and I believe that to be true. Imposing morality on a nation by legal force will not in any way, shape, or form bring revival to that nation. It will only cause further division and strife, and itself will lead to the destruction of our society and our nation. Treating all people with love and justice, however, will heal divisions and restore society and give our nation a chance to survive.

So from my perspective, society simply IS changing. We cannot stop that by passing morality laws, and we were never commanded to do so by the Lord. Instead, we were strongly told to represent the very nature and character of God in our own personal lives, and make disciples (which is inherently a one-by-one process). That is how we change society.

INACCURATELY REPRESENTING GOD

I am increasingly convinced that the conservative church is failing to accurately represent God's character specifically in how it treats this gender-questioning 30% of an entire generation, and those of other generations, and the issue of gay marriage and rejection of homosexuality in general.

What I see is a stunning lack of love demonstrated towards those who don't fit traditional molds. In fact, it looks to me as if the attitude taken by most Christians is to harshly and blindly apply Paul's principle of 1 Corinthians 5:5 – *"I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus"* – but without accounting for the simple fact that those so shunned and demonized and damned by the church will likely never turn to the Lord for His salvation, because the god (I use the lower case intentionally here) that is represented by the conservative church is so ugly and hateful that they would never have any desire to turn to that god. Instead, the true God is holy and just AND gracious and loving and almost infinitely patient – but the church is failing in the very thing for which God explicitly created mankind – to fully and accurately represent Him to a lost and dying world. It seems far more interested in preserving a specific and comfortable and insular culture.

Now, I want to apply a caveat here. This entire line of reasoning cannot be used to imply that all the gender and sexual fluidity now is Godly. It most certainly is not. While there are absolutely those – no small number – whose brains are wired differently than their genitalia or chests or body hair or voice pitch would suggest, I do believe that quite a bit of the current gender and sexual fluidity is faddish and will eventually be regretted – perhaps deeply by some. It makes sense to me to urge self-restraint and extreme hesitancy in considering taking such steps as abandoning traditional gender nomenclature or having reassignment surgery.

However, that says nothing significant about the general principle at play, to wit: I am beginning to believe that “the image of God” is not gendered in any actionable way.

But at the same time, we know with certainty that the enemy of our souls is a liar and a thief and attempts to steal and corrupt everything he can to distract us and try take away our joy and attention from God and His Kingdom. So he is convincing many actually normal individuals that they are the wrong gender or sexuality, just as he is simultaneously convincing the conservative church that this is a hill on which it must absolutely die to defend the honor of God Himself. I believe that BOTH are lies, and the resulting battle is deeply harming the church and increasingly setting the stage for its persecution by a society that grows weary of its hateful reactions.

I am instructed by Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares. In Matthew 24, Jesus talked about how His people should handle intermingled sin.

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.” – Matthew 24:13-20

Perhaps, then, the correct answer to all this gender confusion is: simply let it go. Stop trying to pull out the tares, because a lot of wheat is being uprooted and killed, and the resulting damage to the crop is incalculable. The harder it is resisted, the worse it will get. Rather, show love and grace and acceptance of each human being, no matter the state or gender or lack thereof. Some will turn, some won't (and I'm now convinced, many should not), but at least we will not be destroying hearts and forever chasing them away from the true God by presenting a god which is not accurate.

1 Corinthians 13 starts with this:

If I speak with the tongues of mankind and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give away all my possessions to charity, and if I surrender my body so that I may glory, but do not have love, it does me no good. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

So the ultimate question becomes, how do we show love? Is it more loving to diligently stand against a flood of change, knowing that we alienate millions from a loving God? I would have believed so until recently. But perhaps it is more loving to accept those wrestling with very deep, very painful, life-long identity issues, trusting God to love them either way, and choosing to love them just as selflessly and proactively as Jesus did.

THIS IS HARD, BUT FULL OF PEACE

I'm not taking this bold and likely painful step for fun or for approval with any segment of society. And I'm not into self-flagellation either. But I'm utterly determined to study to show myself approved, and I've given God and the Holy Spirit a solid "yes" to constantly bring change into my heart and mind if He finds my ways unpleasing to Him (per Psalm 139). If it means I have to take the hard way out, I'm explicitly willing to do it.

And the really odd thing is that I'm finding that, despite the deeply difficult process and the expectation of the extreme reaction of many family and friends, I'm finding a deep peace in this matter.

I used to reject the "homophobic" label. I would insist I wasn't afraid of them, I just disagreed with the LGBTQ community's conclusions. But now I find that I was, in fact, deeply afraid of quite a few things. I was afraid I'd be corrupted or polluted by spending time with them. I was afraid my faith might be damaged. I was afraid of what would happen to our society, or the institutions of government and marriage that mattered so much to me. It was fear across the entire issue, constantly nagging at me as I watched what happened around me, mixed with increasing rage at the changes I saw.

And now, not only am I finding my spirit quite settled despite my mind still unsettled with objections I learned for decades, I'm also finding myself at deep peace with what's happening in culture and with moments of interaction with gay and queer people that I would formerly have hurried to escape. I'm finding a fresh ability to love people I formerly feared and hated, and that somehow just feels infinitely more Christlike to me, mirroring how Jesus treated people, especially how he actually TREATED sinners.

It's worth remembering that Jesus knew that everyone He encountered was a sinner. He knew that Judas would betray Him, yet He chose to fellowship intimately with him nonetheless.

CONCLUSIONS

There will always be much more to consider on this topic. One should not lightly dispute the results of years of diligent pursuit of righteousness by millions of believers. However, I'm also keenly aware that the

same segment of the American church that is the most vocal about gender and sexuality issues is also the exact same group that historically staunchly defended slavery – to the point of joining a civil war – and opposed abolition and opposed integration and fought against interracial marriages very explicitly on scriptural grounds for hundreds of years, and was still actively doing so even within the lifetime of many older members of our society still alive today (see, for example, Jerry Falwell Sr. and Liberty University, which only ended its interracial dating ban in the year 2000). As such, I tend to look askance at claims that any particular denomination or belief structure truly has a claim on doctrinal absolute truths in this area too. They have been deeply wrong before, and came to the table with a wealth of very flawed but very confident scriptural interpretation to back it up. For the most part, they have finally admitted that they were wrong. But rather than admitting too that they might be wrong about other things, they deny any humility and double down on their insistent claim that their interpretation on gender roles and sexuality is absolute truth.

Ironically, quite a bit of the today's anti-LGBTQ language is identical to that formerly used to defend slavery. Many Americans do not recognize the parallels, but for those who have studied America's racism history, it is simply strikingly clear. This further strengthens my confidence that my original, decades-long view of such doctrine was incorrect.

My study and thoughts on this topic will certainly continue. I find a definite responsibility in my heart to persist in wrestling with these topics, as I am convinced that under the present circumstances the church is doing deep harm to many of God's children, as well as itself and the Kingdom, and increasingly so as culture changes. We cannot lightly write off so many people, and I suspect that the Lord has allowed this issue to explode in significance at this very time for the specific purpose of addressing some church-wide doctrinal issues that truly need correction.

MY CHOICES

The bottom line is this:

- I choose today to publicly repent of my former opposition to homosexual identity, marriage, and behavior, to transgender identity and surgery, to non-binary identity and pronouns, and other such issues as described above. I have confidently concluded that I was wrong, and I acted unlovingly and in ways that did not honor the Lord's reputation among my fellow man.
- I choose to explicitly affirm LGBTQ relationships that are loving, faithful, monogamous, and married.
- I choose to affirm the right of LGBTQ individuals to fully serve and minister without apology or repentance in Christian organizations of all kinds.
- I choose to take these steps explicitly in the hope that my actions and words and my example can be more fully used by the Lord to minister His love and presence to all people made in His image.
- I choose to continue to commit myself to learning from the Lord by the moment-to-moment guidance of the Holy Spirit in these matters, and becoming a better representative of the Kingdom, and I continue to give Him permission to adjust my thinking and awareness.

- To that end, recognizing the value in hearing wise counsel from others, I commit to hearing opposition to these choices, provided it is given graciously and lovingly, and I commit to patiently and calmly discussing these matters when challenged.

