PERSONAL STATEMENT ABOUT GAYS AND THE CHURCH

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I chose to write this down because it is one of the most difficult decisions I have ever made. My relationship to God is paramount to me and anything I express will always be in relation to how my walk with Jesus is affected. Since the time I became a baptized believer in 1973, two issues have haunted me because of what most Evangelicals believed to be the correct biblical understanding: the role of women and the status of the gay population.

As a political activist of the “new left” during the 1960s and early 1970s both of these issues were central to my understanding of justice and to vision of the community I helped lead. Women’s equality was a backbone tenet. On a personal level, my first serious girlfriend was a leader in the campaign for women’s rights. When I became a Christian, I really struggled with the secondary status of women in the Evangelical church at that time -- a view still held by many today.

The thought of telling my friends with whom I had struggled for a more just world that women were to be subservient and never be in overall church leadership was troubling and depressing. Yet in my love for Jesus and my joy at the liberating power of the Gospel, I decided to bury my feelings on this. But it never rested well with me.

Thankfully, after examining the Scriptures and the history of the church, I came to realize this traditional interpretation could be legitimately challenged and in fact was strongly challenged by many in the church. Throughout my Christian life, I’ve been blessed to be in churches that accord women the status they are supposed to have. I understand the arguments of the “complementarian” position, but they are not convincing enough to justify the terrible discrimination this view causes. Thankfully, there are now many Evangelical churches where women can exercise their full God-given gifts.

There was some similarity to this in what was presented to me about gay men and women. It was considered undeniable that the Bible viewed homosexual sex as a sin, with no chance of redemption for those who persisted in this practice; and that gay marriage was an abomination. That also was a wrenching struggle for me. My aunt had been a non-practicing lesbian and I had been introduced to that world at a very early age. She socialized with a lot of the top women professional bowlers, many of whom were lesbians. I got to know some of these women as people, including my aunt’s best friend and a national women’s bowling champion. This experience humanized people who were gay and lesbian for me, so I was not weighted down by the homophobic fear endemic in our culture at the time.

Later as a graduate student and campus activist at the University of Illinois, it came to my attention that a group calling itself the Gay Illini was denied permission to be a recognized student group and use University facilities. Being an advocate for justice and president of a recognized student political group, I promptly allowed them to use the space we reserved for our meetings. When the initial commotion settled down, the University backed down and accepted them as an official group.

Again, there was a campus bar in those tumultuous times frequented by the “counter-culture” element. Needless to say, the owner, who I got to know, was very pleased with the steady business. Unknown to him, however, was that a contingent of the gay community used the front bar area as their regular gathering place. One evening a shouting match broke out between the patrons and the owner. Evidently, a gay man with too much to drink had told the owner that they were all gay. The owner was about to call the police when I came on to the scene, quickly stepped behind the bar and talked him out of it. I do not know that what I said that made a difference, but he did not call the police and the gay crowd continued to drink there.

I only mention these two incidents because they made me feel honored to have helped in some small ways a group of people who were terribly discriminated against. (I also became an unwitting hero to the gay community, even though I was not oriented to the gay life in any way). So you can imagine my grief as a new believer, when it became clear to me that Christians believed the Bible taught that practicing gay people were not just sinful, but engaged in an abomination. According to them people who were gay had no hope of avoiding eternal condemnation unless they became heterosexual or life-long celibates. I had no basis for disputing this, so I just hung my head, hurt secretly inside, and moved on in my relationship with Jesus, who was – and is -- everything to me.

The Evangelical church also believed that if people who were gay prayed, God would change their orientation; and/or that they could undergo “reparative therapy,” enabling them to change, or at least be faithfully celibate. A Christian group called Exodus emerged claiming great success in assisting gays who were willing to make these changes to repent and walk right with God. Therefore, there were no excuses. Anyone who continued to engage in homosexual activity was freely choosing to persist in sin and was justly condemned in the eyes of God and the church.

No one in any of the churches I attended would even dare think that this view was wrong. Back then, even the liberal churches were just beginning to tiptoe into some openness to members who were gay and lesbian, but we Evangelicals all knew this was just another step away from the historic faith, and the reason that their congregations were shrinking -- the fate of all heretical bodies. Without a doubt, homosexuality was seen by the Evangelical churches as the very worst sin, and any acceptance of it was akin to blasphemy.

For years, though privately struggling with that position, I ascribed to it and defended it. It appeared clear to me then that Scripture held that view, and the Evangelical way of understanding biblical authority and Scriptural interpretation made it impossible to dispute. So when I encountered gay people in and out of the church, I prayed that they would understand that they just had to turn to God for repentance and healing.

Time went by, and people who were gay and lesbian increasingly asserted themselves. This included talking publically about the horrendous treatment they had received – and continued to receive -- by the Christian church. The Evangelical Church, of which I am a staunch member, has largely and intentionally become the avowed and active enemy of people who are gay and lesbian. Not only did the Evangelical church condemn all same-sex practice – including life-long, monogamous unions, but it led the charge to eliminate civil rights for gays, including jobs, housing, etc. that are needed by all humans to survive.

One example involved a gay professor I had at a class with at a college I attended for a year in Florida. He taught me modern poetry and was one of the very best teachers I ever had, as well as a friend. He had to hide all the time. There was a state senator and former governor in Florida named Charlie Johns. He presented himself as Baptist Christian, and he received substantial government funds every year to entrap gay members of various university faculties. He set up my professor friend, an incredibly brilliant instructor, who was subsequently fired. He loved that college and was crushed -- as I was -- by what happened to him. At the time, I experienced the outrage as the political activist I was. But when later as a Christian I remembered him and what happened to him, it caused me shame, which at that time I could only attribute to the Devil’s taunting.

I say this to show where the Church stood. It did more to foster homophobic attitudes than any other institution by far. They said, “hate the sin, love the sinner;” but there was no love. As the gay community began to stand up for itself against the homophobia and dreadful hate crimes, and exposed how many suicides resulted from rejection of young people by their families and society, the Church, professing love for all, instead led the charge against attempts by gay and lesbian people to change their situation.

For some churches the growing acceptance of homosexuality was proof that the society was going to Hell and that the Tribulation/Second Coming was surely close as God’s judgment on a sinful church and nation. Some preachers said that the devastating rise of AIDS was a clear sign that God was judging gay people, completely ignoring the fact that global deaths from AIDS were higher in the equally promiscuous heterosexual world. Some said that because homosexuality was so acceptable in New Orleans that God sent hurricane Katrina to destroy the city, ignoring that the worst damage was not to the “godless” French Quarter, but to the poorest areas where many believers resided. These assertions show how irrational things became whenever this subject was mentioned. While many Evangelical churches rejected these extreme views, all continued to condemn homosexual practice and refuse membership to gay and lesbian Christians who rejected celibacy.

Groups like Exodus attempted to express love and empathy, according to their own understanding, but their methods failed to the point where Exodus recently dissolved, its main leader confessing that “reparative therapy” was completely wrong. So many gay teenagers have been harmed by this “therapy” that California and New Jersey have banned the practice for minors.

Then historically a major change occurred. Mainline church scholars and leaders reviewed Scripture and began to challenge the traditional view; and society at large began to become more accepting. This set up a war within the mainline churches, resulting in many splits over the acceptance of gays and in leadership.

Still, the Evangelical church remained adamant in their anti-gay position. They took it upon themselves to make sure all knew that homosexual practice would always be unacceptable. These sentiments acquired political power – for a time -- because large parts of the Evangelical church became attached to a radical, conservative right-wing political movement that saw its task as bringing this country “back to God” by legislating morality on every level.

Yet theological reevaluation was growing and beginning to touch Evangelicals as well as mainliners. A variety of fresh perspectives were offered. It was argued that the Old Testament view of homosexual acts was just as inapplicable today as are other aspects of the Levitical law. It was noticed that Jesus never addressed the subject, while condemning divorce, fornication, and adultery.

Scholars began to present alternative interpretations of Paul’s writings on homosexuality. They argued that Paul’s condemnation in Romans and elsewhere may have been directed toward forms of homosexual practices very different from the monogamous, mutual covenanted relationships increasingly common among Christians today. And they note that the word often translated as homosexuality might better refer to specific kinds of exploitive same-sex behavior.

Other cracks in the traditional interpretation appeared. Many Evangelicals had already become convinced that Paul’s instructions on the women’s subordination and roles was specific to the culture in which Paul wrote, and not binding on our very different cultural context. The Church had also made significant changes from Paul’s teaching on slavery, divorce and remarriage and other biblical instructions. Might such revisions now be appropriate on same-sex marriage?

Within the Evangelical church itself a few voices began to question the standard Biblical reading on same-sex relationships. Several prominent Evangelicals, including some in the Vineyard denomination to which I belong, began to say that marriage between members of the same gender is not a sin, as long as the couple is faithful in a life-long marriage covenant and not adulterous. Furthermore Christians who are gay or lesbian can look forward to marriage while rejecting fornication and practicing the same pre-marriage celibacy that unmarried heterosexual Christians are called to. Monogamous gay married couples should be fully accepted by the church and expected to follow the biblical morality that virtually all Evangelicals believed in and promoted as healthy and from God.

This new understanding made headway for other reasons. It was becoming increasingly clear that the vast majority of gay people lived that way because they were either genetically inclined to do so or their orientation was fixed in-utero or in childhood. This was no different from their heterosexual counterparts. Although the standard Evangelical view defended itself by asserting that most gays were bi-sexual and chose their lifestyle, there has been increasing evidence to the contrary.

And the tragic results of the failure of prayer and reparative therapy to change individuals were becoming more manifest. Therefore to keep committed gay couples out of the church or to only accept them if they were celibate was tantamount to telling people that they could only be right with God if they repressed the sexual orientation that they were programmed to be. To demand the same of heterosexuals would be seen as cruel and absurd, so how could we to expect others to act in a way that would be totally unacceptable to us?

Telling gay people that they are automatically excluded from God’s church is literally condemning millions of people to perdition because they are choosing to follow what they genetically were programmed to be. It is important, I think, for all who think about their position on this issue to understand the implications of what they believe. If it is true, and research shows that minimally sixty percent of gay people were born with that orientation, then condemning them might be tantamount to condemning someone for being born with a crippling disease like cerebral palsy. There are huge and tragic consequences for uncounted numbers of individuals and families depending on what one asserts the Bible says on this issue.

The combination of re-examining Scriptures and the realistic life situations of Christians who are gay and lesbian has slowly begun to open the door for Evangelicals who, sincerely before God, are committed to doing God’s will and want to rectify the terrible damage that the Church has done. Who want to promote the love of Jesus over the vilification and rejection that has been the Church’s primary historical response. Evangelicals taking this stand are now viewed as either courageous pioneers or traitors to the historic faith. I see them as pioneers and am choosing to be one of them.

But there are immense challenges. This issue is tearing the church apart and probably will continue to do so. Denominational splits are likely. Those who stay with the traditional Evangelical position will do so in the face of a nation that will legally recognize gay marriage in every state in a few years. These churches will also see more and more people, particularly among the young, abandon them and the faith over this issue, which they see as inhumane and even un-Christian.

So there is open war, which sadly is the way the Christian church has too often dealt with major controversial issues. It may be years before this is resolved, if it ever will be. One Episcopal friend, who experienced the split in his denomination and local congregation told me that he had supported the ordination of a gay bishop, but was now unsure he should have done so because of the terrible feelings and recriminations he had seen take place, splitting families and friends in awful ways.

Another challenge involves how we go about interpreting Scripture – the understanding that in the Bible God ordains marriage as a sacred and holy union only between a man and a woman. While Jesus never speaks directly about homosexuality, everything he says about marriage is in the context of heterosexual marriage. Paul, in the eyes of most who revere the Bible as God’s inspired Word, does directly address homosexual relations and condemns them.

As one who believes that Scripture is God's written Word, this is more than troubling. But it has not deterred me from changing my position and now openly declaring that I accept gay married couples in the faith as long as they adhere, just as I have to, to the clear morality that all Evangelicals ascribe to—such as the prohibitions against fornication and adultery.

Fornication and adultery are repeatedly warned against in by Jesus and throughout Scripture, and I have personally seen the terrible results of sex before marriage - that ethic changing radically since the 1960’s counter-culture, with the Pill taking the fear of pregnancy out of the picture. I have particularly seen it evolve rapidly into an attitude of non-commitment that has seriously damaged many lives.

Promiscuity has been devastating, and I cannot countenance the argument that it does not matter what we choose to do with your bodies in the intimate realm of human sexuality. Also, the pain caused by adultery is obvious, which is becoming endemic in our culture. Few would argue that such betrayal isn’t devastating for couples and their children.

But I see a qualitative biblical difference between fornication and a marriage between Christians of the same gender. A Christian same-sex couple can express mutual self-giving love in a life-long covenant, reflecting the relationship of Christ and the Church (Eph. 5), just as a heterosexual couple can. (Fornication and adultery cannot do this). This means their marriage can be holy. Many Christians are in such relationships and manifest the presence of the Holy Spirit and the fruit of godliness. This is as clear to me as Cornelius's baptism in the Holy Spirit was to Peter.

I also see other apparently plain teachings in Scripture that the churches have revised rather than following the letter of Scripture, e.g. women’s roles and head coverings, remarriage after divorce for reasons other than adultery, slavery, and numerous others. Like heterosexual marriage, Scripture grounds some of these teachings in creation and God’s original intent. Nevertheless, I and many other Evangelicals believe the churches were within God’s will to make many of these revisions. Not because the Scriptures were wrong, but because the circumstances and the questions have changed.

If we’re honest with ourselves about such revisions and their rightness in the history of the churches, we reach the conclusion that Jesus intended the churches to sometimes make these kinds of changes. He gave us the Holy Spirit to “guide [the church] into all truth.” And he talked about his followers making “binding and loosing” discernments about God’s moral will in new and complex situations.

Reading the Scriptures as if every instruction -- even those grounded in a wider theological understanding -- must be applied narrowly as written and without Spirit-led modification has resulted in terrible sins and hurts. It has damaged and destroyed lives – and the faith -- of innocent people and badly hurt the witness of the church and proclamation of the Gospel.

This is a sad and happy time for me personally. It is sad because I can see the pain in the eyes and hearts of my brothers and sisters who believe that interpreting Scripture this way will open the door to more and more people discrediting God’s Word as definitive and further eroding the influence of the faith in a society.

But I am happy because, once again, the historic Christian faith may rise up and rid itself of oppressive attitudes which have severely hurt it over the centuries— neglect of the poor; justifying slavery and segregation; endorsing inhumane attitudes about remarriage after divorce; insisting on a secondary and subordinate status of women in the society, marriage; and embracing a brand of patriotism that makes killing our enemies in war more important than our calling in Jesus Christ to love our enemies and share the Gospel with them.

And now the Church – including parts of the Evangelical church -- is beginning to reject the condemnation of human beings who are gay and lesbian as anathema to God, thereby closing the church doors to them and relegating them to damnation. My heart and my faith rejoice that this is changing.

My love for Jesus means that I'm committed to God's will above all else. If I thought that the traditional view of homosexuality was right, I'd still accept it, no matter what. But I no longer believe that. And I cannot justify telling people that God condemns them when I and most others in the relatively safe heterosexual world I was born to could not ourselves be obedient to something that destroys a significant part of the very essence of who we are before the Lord.

I believe that it is God himself who has changed my mind and my heart, as I have sought his will about this with tears. My prayer is that others begin to examine their position and prayerfully open the door to serious and much needed dialogue and conversation on an issue that is tearing our beloved Church apart.

P.S. Part of the reason that I wrote the above is that I have encountered new information about the subject that made me begin to re-think it. I am boldly going to assert that if anyone maintains the traditional view and does not seriously explore the emerging evidence to the contrary, they are not seriously engaging an issue with enormous personal consequences for a lot of individuals, churches, and families. So in giving the following recommendations, I urge you to spend some time reading and thinking on this matter.

1) Mel White’s STRANGER AT THE GATE: This is the first time I read about a totally committed homosexual who tried to change in everyway over years and could not, but remained completely faithful to Jesus.

2) I want to acknowledge Pastor Ken Wilson of the Vineyard Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan for taking the public stance he did to articulate the why of his changed position at considerable cost to his life and his church. His book, AN OPEN LETTER TO MY CONGREGATION is a landmark that should be read by everyone who has an interest in this subject. I believe he is one of the main pioneers confronting the reality of what this issue meant to his church.

3) Andrew Marin, whose book LOVE IS AN ORIENTATION is a must read also, opened the door which many others will step through, at least giving people who believe completely in the historic faith, as I do, and continue to pursue a committed and blessed relationship with Jesus, a way to go forward with a clean but troubled heart ( it is indeed, for now at least, that difficult) in advancing His Kingdom.

4) Finally, I want to acknowledge and praise the best book I have read with an affirming point of view on this issue. James Brownson’s—BIBLE, GENDER, SEXUALITY—is an extremely well-written and readable study of the relevant Scriptures with more depth and insight than one can imagine on so difficult a subject. Like the other books mentioned above, or anyone who is serious about engaging this agonizing issue, the Brownson study is an absolute must read. His is a heremenutic for those who want to understand why the standard Scriptural interpretation can be re-considered. William Webb tackled the gay issue in the same fashion in his SLAVES, WOMEN AND HOMOSEXUALS and Brownson does the same with a different conclusion. For me, even the possibility that the church can be wrong on this issue, given the consequences, makes exploring this fully a serious and necessary matter.