

Changing Our Mind: My Journey as a Christian Ethicist toward Full LGBTQ Acceptance
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I. INTRODUCTION

- a. Gratitude for privilege of being invited into your context and conversation (Rom. 1:11-12)
- b. Sobriety before the challenge of offering faithful Christian teaching (Jas. 3:1ff; Rom 14-15)
- c. Prayer for discernment of truth in love (Phil. 1:9-11)

II. BEGINNING MY JOURNEY: THE TRADITIONALIST POSITION (1993-2007)

- a. Began teaching ethics in 1993 without having engaged serious study of this issue
- b. Adopted the position passed on to me by my tradition and most trusted mentors
- c. Impervious to dissenting positions as embodied/communicated at UTS where I did my Ph.D.
- d. Mandatory in my ecclesial and teaching context at SBTS; as constitutive of “evangelicalism”
- e. LGBTQ was viewed as a sexual ethics issue alone – who has legitimate sex with whom
- f. Assumption that this question resolved easily by the most widely cited biblical passages
- g. Entirely uninformed by personal contact and conversation with LGBTQ Christians themselves

III. ANOMALIES DEVELOPING (2007-2013)

- a. Meeting devout Christian LGB people in my new home church: singles, couples, families
- b. Development there of a critical mass demonstrating substantial diversity but steady faith
- c. Development of deep personal friendship with one new friend—TS—his story
- d. Encounter with high-quality LGB seminarians, largely blocked from service and ordination
- e. My sister Katey comes out as lesbian at 38—her story
- f. Visit from Mitchell Gold and publication of his book *Crisis*, which called me out as bystander
- g. Pained correspondence from gay ex-student of mine—more notes like that came later
- h. Awareness of background cultural changes (double-edged potential meanings)
- i. Reading of Kinnaman/Lyons *Unchristian* and awareness of anti-gay reputation of church
- j. Sense of responsibility to tackle this issue in a serious way at last (my 19th published book)
- k. Encountering and coming to love LGBTQ persons in their suffering & dignity was decisive.

IV. WRITING OF *CHANGING OUR MIND* (2013-2014)

- a. Stage 1: Unpublished version (Theme: humble equality in Gospel and Church; shared covenantal ethic): Jn 3:16-17, Mk 10:17-18, Lk 18:9-14, Rom 3:21-26; Gal 3:26-28, Rom 12:9-18, Rom 14:1-4, Rom 12:3-8; Mal 2:13-16, Gen 1:27-2:25, Rom 1:26-27, Jn 9:1-5, Acts 10
- b. Stage 2: Serialized Baptist News Global essays, summer-fall 2014
- c. Stage 3: Publication of book *Changing Our Mind* (late October 2014) as a basic primer for traditionalists and conflicted Christians—not a full-on scholarly tome
- d. Reformation Project speech Nov. 2014—included in 2nd and 3rd editions of book

V. MAJOR CLAIMS OF *CHANGING OUR MIND* (October 2014)

- a. The Church has a serious problem with the “LGBTQ issue” and the people affected are hurting.
- b. There are traditionalists, avoiders, and revisionists. Avoiders are having trouble avoiding.
- c. The main issue: “Christian understandings of sexuality are being reevaluated due to evidence offered in the lives of those who do not fit the historic heterosexual norm, together with associated research and mental health” findings and efforts.

- d. The human population reveals a gender and sexual orientation minority of at least 3.4-5%, regardless of centuries of cultural and legal discrimination, stigma, and violence.
- e. The ex-gay movement has failed by its own admission, and sexual-orientation change efforts are utterly rejected by mainstream mental health experts though some Christians still cling to them.
- f. Christians routinely have participated in anti-gay rhetoric, activism, legislation, and worse; the gay-rights movement has won substantial gains in the US--and so some but not all Christians have fallen back to a 'merely' theological or church-based resistance to LGBTQs; but that resistance continues to cause substantial mental health, familial, and spiritual consequences
- g. All decent Christian folk need to hold the line for "mandatory minimums" of decent treatment: accepting existence of SSA and LGBTQ people/Christians; ending slurs and bullying; ending criminalization; ending civil (employment, housing, accommodation) discrimination; ending violence; ending stigmatizing and treating with contempt; ending blaming for cultural ills.
- h. The churches have 6 basic options when gay Christians show up looking for welcome and membership: 1) ask no questions 2) who are we to judge 3) dialogue for discernment 4) pastoral accommodation 5) exclusion of ("practicing") gays 6) normative reconsideration...
- i. If this is where you get off the bus, I said, if normative reconsideration is too much, at least do everything up to that as outlined so far.
- j. Normative reconsideration sends most Christians back to the Bible
 - 1. Where we must first acknowledge "pervasive interpretive pluralism" throughout Christian history on a huge range of issues from salvation to tongue-speaking to war to gender to...
 - 2. Which means the Church can't avoid a fallible, difficult, but necessary moral discernment process involving head and heart, text and interpretation, under the lordship of Christ
 - 3. Traditionalist case rests on Big Six passages (not a large number of texts). They "connect the biblical dots" in a very specific way.
 - 4. *Gen. 19/Judges 19*: appalling stories of attempted gang rape of angels/visitors—little direct relevance to issue of loving same-gender relationships
 - 5. *Lev. 18/20*: text matters, but so does the "moral logic" beneath the text; scholarly uncertainty about reasons for ban on male same-sex activity (divine creation order, pagan neighbors, cultic possibilities, rape associations, wasted seed, shame of male taking on female role in sex); problems of selective OT (holiness code) law use for Christians
 - 6. *1 Cor. 6:9/1 Tim 1:10*: translation uncertainties of two Greek words in context-less vice lists; the gender/sex/shame issue again; latter text may especially have sexual exploitation for money in mind; huge impact of translation choices; challenge of crossing cultures to get to Greco-Roman world and bridge over to our own
 - 7. *Gen. 1-3*: important creation narratives describing human worth, relationality, and joy in finding that helper-partner; but the LGBTQ issue perhaps best understood through a faith/science integration framework; or looking forward to redemption in Christ rather than back to primeval creation; or Gen. 3 might help us think of all of ourselves as sinners needing covenantal structure for our sexuality.
 - 8. *Mt. 19/Mk 10*: critically important texts on divorce, not LGBTQ—quotes of Gen 1-2 reinforce that adults and their children need trustworthy, lasting marital/familial covenants, and monogamous, faithful, permanent marital covenant should remain our sexual ethics norm; Jesus, like Paul, presents a celibacy option as gift/call for some, not all (cf. 1 Cor. 7)
 - 9. *Rom. 1*: damning attack on gentile/pagan/human sin, but genre, purpose, and context complexities matter. Paul is able to pick out same-sex for attack in part because of Greco-Roman context and experiences of those on the bottom of society: master-slave and social dominance concerns, adultery and male household head sexual greed, pederasty, prostitution, wartime and street rape, trafficking and profiting from exploitive sex, Roman imperial court excesses and licentiousness (see Appendix 1).

10. My conclusion of the biblical section is that you don't have to connect the biblical dots in the traditionalist way, and choosing not to do so is not throwing overboard Christian sexual ethics. We can retain a rigorous covenantal sexual ethic, just including LGBTQ people in it. This is possible if we accept what should now be obvious: the existence of devout Christian "sexual others" who need to be and deserve to be included in the churches on the same terms as everyone else.

I then step back for some broader reflections in the last ¼ of the book. These are what interest me the most at this stage:

- k. We are in a moment of transformative encounters with God & people, leading some to paradigm shifts/leaps in reading biblical texts—it happened on Emmaus Road (Lk 24) when two disciples encountered Jesus; it happened when Jewish Christian apostles encountered Spirit-filled Gentile believers (Acts 10, really all of Paul's writings affected by this revolutionary experience); it has happened in Christian history when slavery, sexism, Jim Crow racism, and anti-Semitism have been repudiated; it is happening now as some of us experience the dignity, devotion and suffering of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers in Christ
- l. So much of moral discernment involves perception and analogy—how we see reality and what historical analogies we find relevant. Some see current movement toward LGBTQ acceptance as sinful apostasy and participation in cultural decline; I see it as Spirit-led breakthrough in recognizing universal sacred worth and kingdom inclusivity. I called this chapter "a dual-narrative tour."
- m. My posture actually has greater coherence with broad themes of Christian ethics, as I have presented it in *Righteous Gentiles*, *Kingdom Ethics*, and *Sacredness of Human Life* books: compassion; care; solidarity; love; justice; marks of the reign of God; equal worth and dignity. Etc.
- n. I have made a core moral decision simply to "stand with" the LGBTQ Christian community and against their continued exclusion. Repentance for where I and we got it wrong before.

VI. CONTINUED DISCOVERIES AND LEARNING (2015-2017)

- a. Inundated with correspondence from LGBTQ Christians and ex-Christians and their families, even greater awareness of ongoing harm inflicted on LGBTQs in Christian settings (see Appendix 2)
- b. Deeper contact with LGBTQ movement leaders both Christian and secular & their perspectives—they know that US conservative Christianity is the major roadblock to full acceptance
- c. Joining up with Family Acceptance Project – massive significance of their research. See www.familyacceptanceproject.org; donate: <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/donations>
- d. Deeper grappling with Christianity's historic failures of inclusion—my Reformation Project talk comparing historic anti-Semitism: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2o3ZGwzZvk> and the depth of hatefulness sometimes directed at LGBTQ people by Christians. "Teaching of contempt."
- e. Concerns over protecting covenantal ethic, avoiding schism, maintaining charity amidst painfully inevitable yet tragic moral conflict
- f. Awareness that we need not just better exegesis, and better hermeneutics, we need a better, psychologically informed theology of the human, of human relationality, personality, and sexuality—Catholic ethics helps here. Not just Bible cites, but a theology-ethic of sexuality
- g. A new way of connecting the dots—God-given human dignity, diversity, sexuality, and relationality; human sin often looks like resistance to embracing the "other"—Christ's ministry was about an expansive demonstration of God's love for all; sexuality is an important part of this created order, woven into human personhood and relationality; it is good, damaged, powerful, in

need of covenantal ordering; most human beings yearn for that suitable helper-partner; since we now know about ubiquity of same-sex attraction in small part of human family, we Christians simply need to expand the embrace of our love and include LGBTQ people in the same communal life, including the same covenantal-marital sexual ethic, that applies to the rest of us.

- h. As for me: reading Bonhoeffer beyond Bonhoeffer: the individual's responsibility before God, an ethic focused on real persons in their concreteness; entering into the shame, loneliness, and suffering of marginalized persons, like Jesus did—a suffering caused by the church; a solidarity ethic, a repentant ethic, a Cross-bearing ethic, a reconciliation ethic; a willingness to be misunderstood and to pay a price. The view from below:

There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer. The important thing is neither that bitterness nor envy should have gnawed at the heart during this time, that we should have come to look with new eyes at matters great and small, sorrow and joy, strength and weakness, that our perception of generosity, humanity, justice and mercy should have become clearer, freer, less corruptible. We have to learn that personal suffering is a more effective key, a more rewarding principle for exploring the world in thought and action than personal good fortune.

VII. AFTER EVANGELICALISM (2018-2022)

- a. The experience of evangelical rejection – deepened my solidarity with LGBTQ folks and allies
- b. I joined the community of post-evangelicals – not just in experience, but in rethinking much scriptural interpretation and theology – *After Evangelicalism*
- c. I am very clear that only in a post-evangelical or non-evangelical space is there full dignity and inclusion for LGBTQ people and many other marginalized ones
- d. Quite unexpectedly, my effort to inform and shape evangelical conversation eventually took me right out of the community. I am now fine with that, but it was a hard journey.

Appendix: Some LGBTQ-Related Correspondence Excerpts

“I struggle to find comfort in the idea of eternal life among those who hate us so.”

“Your plea is so right in its focus on LGBTQ youth who have been rejected by their families.”

“I have seen it so many times how a young person came out to his parents and family and because of the rejection at home they start to find that acceptance in a night club.”

“I will never forget the grief I suffered as my gay brothers died from AIDS and the Evangelical world stood by, quoting their little bit of condemning scripture. That can never, ever be undone. Jesus always forgives. I'm not Jesus.”

“I told my parents, and they became physically, verbally, and sexually abusive. I had to run away from home. I lost a job because I was "no longer safe to be around children." Some Christians treated me horrifically while others became the body of Christ to me...”

“I find it most difficult to love those who hate me, yet this is the commandment given by Jesus; I wonder if many straight Christians also struggle with loving those who are most difficult to love, and thus act out their own frustration in ways which do not follow Jesus' teaching?”

“You smug b@\$% are incapable of understanding the damage you have done by simply declaring God's Word as you see it. Jesus had a lot to say about pharisaical jerks like you. The Gospel? What's that? Can you possibly look at what you have done to gay people?”

“I needed to hear that there are people out there that are rooted in the gospel and yet willing to allow people like me to access the covenant relationship model that you discuss in the book.”

“I happened to be reading *Kingdom Ethics*. I learned so much from the book and loved almost all of it, but I remember reading the section on sexual ethics and weeping. It was a reminder of the reality I lived daily. It was one more guarantee that I would forever live on the theological margins of Christianity.”

“One elderly couple, whom the pastor had not realized were a couple, were told they could no longer participate in the many things that they had once led in at that church. Except they didn't have anyone else who could direct the choir. And so B. was told to continue to direct the choir but could no longer turn to face the congregation when up front.”

“I prayed so hard for God to change me that I literally broke teeth. I always prayed for God's will, not my own to be done. I thought for a long while that even God had abandoned me.”

“Not long after I found myself a divorced single mother, I was befriended by a gay man who was my co-worker. He was receiving horrible treatment from others who worked there. For the first time, I understood what it might be like to be a Christian with some "unpardonable" sin (like divorce, or being gay). He had attended Bible college, had a very strong faith, was helping start a church for others who felt frozen out of traditional churches.”

“For us in Christian higher education, this is an issue that we deal with every semester. I've got 28 years of coming out or hiding stories from a host of former students.”

“Your book gives me hope and encouragement that maybe one day my partner and I can know the support and acceptance of our families.”

“I was in your ethics class years ago. I've been reading about your new book in tears. Good tears. I have spent my years in college through now painfully "in the closet." I've only this past year come to hope/plan a way out.”

“I am a psychologist and I have many times found myself sitting across from a homosexual client who has been ostracized by their religious community and family. I hope that your thoughts will contribute to a more sensitive understanding of the LGBTQ community.”

“I was struggling with many issues involving my faith and my closeted gay existence. I remember seeing the campus counselor, who told me that I probably wasn't gay, just going through a "phase." I can't count the times I went to the campus chapel late at night or early in the morning, praying that I could be forgiven for those unspoken feelings I had, and receiving momentary peace, which never lasted long.”

“I was raised a fundamentalist. When I gradually discovered my orientation, I immediately had to separate and live two different lives. The resulting mess was horrific.”

“I'm a [late middle age] man. I remember the countless trips to the altar I made as a teenager, the troubling nightmares I had of going to hell, the desperate fear I had of being found out, and total confusion I had when, as a Christian, I chose to come out only to find that there was no one there.”

“I'm a pretty damaged guy who still struggles with bitterness towards my church and I haven't really decided if I want to ever fully embrace Christianity again... You brought me to tears when you asked forgiveness for taking so long to realize how the church should treat LGBTQ people. It made me envision what it would sound like and feel like if I ever heard that from my parents or church - it made it seem possible, even if only remotely. I pray that I hear it one day, sooner than later.”

“I am the Christian mother of a gay son. God has taken us on such a journey. I just can't tell you how my life has been changed for the better with my acceptance of our son. I felt like for far too long I needed permission to love my own child. Our son has been so hurt that I'm not sure where he stands with Christ currently. Breaks my heart that people felt they had the right to say who can and can't be loved by God.”

“Just seeing the amount of gay people (including my daughter) who really do want to seek and honor God but are stopped from doing so by well-meaning Christians... It breaks my heart to see how many have been afraid to enter a church. I am committed to stay in our church to respectfully work on this and my pastors seem to be willing to as well, but I'm sure they are very afraid, too.”

“And my brother? He said "Why would I have ever chosen to be discriminated against, ridiculed, shunned, bullied, and beaten up by choosing this sexual orientation?" Yes, beaten up – I visited him in hospital and saw the bruises.”