

Pride and Joy

This reflection is not primarily about winning an argument. It is about understanding how we arrive at our beliefs, how those beliefs shape our treatment of others, and why I have come to affirm and celebrate LGBTQ people as fully beloved expressions of God's image.

When I was growing up in the 1970's and 80's, calling someone gay (or any related slur) was a serious insult. I know that it was even worse for previous generations. Gay characters were starting to show up in television shows, but were usually very flamboyant examples. Nothing wrong with being flamboyant, of course, but it created an exaggerated caricature of what being gay is. What do you remember from your earliest years of development? How were all things gay referred to, both spoken and unspoken?

I grew up as a pastor's kid. My father served as a pastor, college president, and regional denominational leader. My mother was deeply involved in American Baptist Women, and both of my sisters served in pastoral ministry. While our family occupied a relatively moderate space within the Baptist tradition, we still held many assumptions common to conservative Christianity, including views regarding LGBTQ people.

I was very aware of just how moderate we were as I progressed through college and my Master's degree. In more conservative Baptist churches, women were very important but never equal. And the idea of LGBTQ inclusion simply was never talked about. To be gay was to be damned (in tone if not literally). Because of my upbringing, this never sat well with me.

I must confess that for a handful of years after seminary, I leaned more conservative. I was welcoming of all people, but my approach to the Bible at that time kept me from being affirming. In the spaces I was pastoring, the issue didn't come up much, which meant the damage of my perspective was limited. But it also meant that I was not an advocate during those years when it was all the more difficult to exist for my gay neighbors. Sigh.

I share this so that you know that I, like every human being, have been and continue to be in process. I also share it to invite you to do your own reflection on how you were shaped to see the world in general, and this issue specifically. Because we have all been shaped by many forces – family, friends, culture, etc.

I was called to be the pastor of CrossWalk to bring change that would keep it from dying and hopefully thrive. Growth was to be the primary measure. The church was a firmly settled conservative, Evangelical church at that time. I've told the story many times over the years, but after a few years I was feeling less and less compelled by the Evangelical perspective on Christianity. So much so that I changed the focus of my doctoral work from a less theologically dense pursuit that was going to focus on situational leadership. I needed deep answers about my faith if I was to continue. I needed to know that faith was more than selling afterlife insurance. My focus was on soteriology – the study of salvation itself. I figured if there wasn't anything compelling, it was time for a career change. Well, I'm still here...

My doctoral work taught me a lot. Perhaps the greatest thing was an awareness that I didn't know as much as I thought I did about a subject I thought I had down. When my doctorate was wrapped, I turned my sights on two subjects that I thought I knew the answers to but wasn't so sure anymore. One of those was homosexuality – what Bible says and how we are to apply it to our day and time.

For people in the Christian faith, what the Bible says matters, even if those people don't read it at all. It holds power and authority in the minds of millions who do not know what it says, because in one fashion or another, it is deemed to be holy – God's Word – don't mess with it.

For many people struggling to get their faith reconciled with this subject, the nature of the Bible itself plays a role. If one's held belief is that it is intrinsically holy, to challenge any part of it feels risky (even though every single person disagrees with parts of it every single day based on their attitudes and behaviors). The paradigm we hold of the Bible matters. If it's untouchable due to its holiness factor, that becomes at least a speed bump and maybe even a road block. Even before critical analysis commences, some people need to wrestle with the old adage that *sounds* very faithful: "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it."

How has your understanding of the Bible's inherent value been shaped throughout your life? Is it too holy to challenge, too hot to handle? Were you ever taught that the Bible is inerrant and infallible, meaning that it is without error and is incapable of being wrong? This undercurrent belief is widely held and can cause significant angst.

I take the Bible seriously. I believe those who contributed to its creation took their work very seriously and prayerfully, inviting the Spirit of God into the process. I believe it offers incredible insight into how Judaism and Christianity were formed, what they believed, and how they addressed challenges along the way. I also believe the golden thread of God's shalom is woven from beginning to end despite lots of ugly violence and weird stories that are also present. I don't believe that God essentially wrote the text, guiding human hands. I do not believe the Bible to be inerrant or infallible. Given how Jesus and Paul challenged long-held interpretations and applications, I think they would feel comfortable with this assertion.

There are a lot of helpful resources on this. Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* is a winner. [Use this link to read some great quotes](#) from his work. Take time to reflect on this. If you're not sure how you feel about what he says, that's fine – own it! It will help you as you move forward.

So, what does the Bible say about homosexuality? Not a lot. There are only seven verses – out of tens of thousands – that are directly addressing same-gender sexual expression. Since the language appears to be very strong, however, and the Bible itself may be believed to be effectively written by God, not many verses are required. These few verses have been used to "clobber" gay people and their allies, assuring that God is against both. But what do they really say? In my study, none of the verses speak to the central issue facing us today, which is related to consensual sexual expression between two human beings who are not straight. Rather, they are either ambiguous or referring to exploitation and/or rape and/or horrific inhospitality.

If you'd like to get some scholarship on each of the texts, biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine has crafted an excellent article that brings it all together in one place: ["How to Read the Bible's "Clobber Verses" on Homosexuality."](#) How does the claim that none of the verses are relevant to today's issue affect you? What questions does it raise? Take some time to sit with this.

Some people get a little skittish at this juncture. Who are they to challenge people who have studied a lot more than themselves? If the authority figures say they're right, isn't that the end of the argument? We live in a time of binaries. Something is either wrong or right, black or white, republican or democrat, and on and on. When it came to biblical interpretation, however, Jesus and Paul were in a rabbinical

tradition that valued multiple perspectives on various texts. They weren't limiting themselves to one single viewpoint. Further, they valued all relevant information to help them understand an issue more fully, with the assumption that time and experience may shed new light on issues being addressed. In their view, the biblical text was not the end of God's revelation. What a contrast to our current situation where some completely dismiss non-biblical perspective when applying this ancient text to our current context!

To learn more about the rabbinical tradition of biblical study and interpretation that informed Jesus and Paul, follow this link: [The Rabbinical Way of Midrash](#). Jesus and Paul both challenged the held biblical and theological positions of their day without apology. How does this impact the way you think about biblical interpretation? How does it affect the way you think about this particular issue?

Sometimes, in our arrogance, we may be tempted to view our ancestors in faith as primitive simpletons. That is not the case! Jesus may not have known how to reset the clock on a microwave, yet the Way of life he taught and modeled is brilliant and as relevant as ever. In keeping with the rabbinical tradition, we must ask about what information is available to us that may shed light on this discussion? Especially in light of the time we are currently living in, when the rights of our LGBTQ family members, friends, and neighbors are being stripped away, follow this link to more fully appreciate the biological reality of gender, which our ancestors couldn't possibly appreciate: [Biology is not Binary by Rebecca Helm](#). How does this brief article shed light on this subject? How does it impact your thinking? How does it challenge our culture's rush to make gender and sexuality a binary issue?

With all of the biblical interpretation stuff acknowledged, there remains two other issues that I think are speed bumps or roadblocks. One of them has to do with the character, nature, and vision of God. Many – maybe most – people today have been shaped by a vision of God where we are on thin ice all of our lives with eternity hanging in the balance. If we mess up, an eternity of punishment will be our reward. Fear is a powerful tool that has been used by political and religious leaders from the beginning. It was largely this message that drove me to change my doctoral thesis to more fully understand what God was really up to. Based on my studies, I reject the classic, doom-and-gloom, fear-based paradigm.

I believe that God is the genesis of Shalom, that Jesus deeply embodied Shalom, and that the Spirit of God is Shalom's constant presence and guide encouraging us at every moment to choose Shalom. Shalom refers to deep peace, wellbeing, and healing on an individual, relational, and societal level. Shalom is what allows creativity and ingenuity to exist. God is Spirit is Shalom is Love – everything comes from God/Shalom/Love, everything is headed toward its completion, and the means by which it is encouraged to progress is Shalom/Love. Because this is the character, nature, and vision of God/Shalom/Love, this means that as followers of Jesus, we are called to move this forward. That means when we see situations and people who are not being treated with Shalom toward Shalom, we act. We recognize that the mistreatment or injustice suffered by any neighbor is suffered by all, because we are one, united, beloved human race. Liberation is a deep theme in the Jewish and Christian storyline. Is this vision no longer a part of Shalom's dream?

What vision of God have you inherited? What vision of God most resonates with you? How does that vision inform your response to the issue of LGBTQ welcoming, affirming, and respect?

A final issue that truly may be the most powerful and significant has to do with how our culture and human race has treated our LGBTQ neighbors from the very beginning: as "other." When we label and treat individuals and groups of people as "other", we dehumanize them. When we dehumanize them,

mistreatment becomes condoned because “othering” always means “less than.” People of color were deemed subhuman by the Pope a thousand years ago, making it okay to mistreat African slaves and indigenous peoples in horrific ways. It is entirely possible, and perhaps most likely, that our reluctance to fully embrace the LGBTQ community as equally beloved neighbors has little to do with the Bible and theology, as good as those covers may be. In the end, it is because we perceive that our LGBTQ neighbors are different, which often elicits fear, leading to resistance instead of welcome. Isn't this nearly always the case? What we don't know terrifies and threatens us. How does this resonate with your experience?

There are things we can do to eradicate our othering. Check out this article by Kim Samuel for tips: [How to Reverse the Psychology of Othering.](#)

A final thought. Author Bethany Meier-Evans in her book, [Queer Joy](#), impacted me. She talked about how the word queer developed over time, beginning as a somewhat benign designation, to a derogatory slur, and now as a unifying term for the LGBTQ community. Her writing calls for Queer people to fully own who they are: fully loved, fully Imago Dei. I find that deeply inspiring and compelling. How beautiful and paradoxical that our LGBTQ friends and neighbors who have suffered unwarranted abuse are leading the charge to celebrate their life, their uniqueness, their right to be included! May we join in the growing throng to rejoice with them for who they are in their very good expression of Divine incarnation, and may we dare have such courage to examine ourselves, embrace ourselves, celebrate ourselves, and do the same.