

*Jesus, the Bible,
and Homosexuality*

Revised and Expanded Edition

Explode the Myths, Heal the Church

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Preface to the Second Edition

In 1959, I was a new seminary graduate heading overseas to do doctoral study in the Netherlands. I asked my presbytery to ordain me so that if an opportunity to minister overseas developed, I would be able to accept the call without having first to travel back to Nebraska to be ordained. So the Presbytery of Nebraska City ordained me as a “traveling evangelist.”

As it happened, I did serve as organizing pastor of an English-speaking congregation in the Netherlands on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church. However, I feel that I have only really entered into my vocation as a “traveling evangelist” since the initial publication of this book in March of 2006. Friends and allies began to hear about the book and invited me to come and speak at their churches, in their communities, and at universities around the country. What started out as a short trip up the coast to speak at a gay and lesbian bookstore and a few churches eventually turned into a nationwide book tour that has taken the better part of two years.

This book tour has been one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. In those two years, I spoke at 142 events in 22 different states. As you might imagine, I was invited to speak to many progressive congregations on the west coast and in the northeast. But my tour also took me to some of the most conservative states in the country—Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. Usually in these states my host pastor would pull me aside before the speech and explain, “We hope you won’t be disappointed, but I don’t imagine we’ll have very many people tonight. People just aren’t ready to talk about this topic.” Then we would arrive at the event and discover a large enthusiastic crowd made up of people from throughout the community. It showed the widespread yearning people have to talk about this matter and understand it on a deeper level.

I have been moved by the courage and compassion of the local organizers who invited me in to speak. In the fall of 2007, I was scheduled to speak at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri. I had heard that Springfield was a rather conservative town. At dinner with local

hosts before the event, I met Jolie Cave, a remarkable student organizer who was the vice president of Allies, the gay/straight alliance at the university. Jolie explained that the group had posted five hundred flyers advertising my speech the night before the event only to discover that most of them had been torn down and thrown into trash cans by the next morning. Allies responded by creating another flyer, this one proclaiming, “We will not be silenced; closets are for clothes, and trash cans are for ignorance,” which they posted around campus along with the crumpled flyers they rescued from the trash cans.

The Drury University event took place on National Coming Out Day in an historic Baptist church where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly had preached. Peter Browning, the university chaplain, estimated that we might have thirty or so people in attendance. I arrived early to do some book signing and discovered the room was quickly filling as organizers dashed about to put up additional folding chairs. By the time the event started, about 125 people had crowded into the room, filling every pew and the choir loft, with still others standing in the back and sitting in the aisles. The atmosphere was electric. When Peter introduced the members of Allies and explained the courage and determination they had shown in organizing the event, they received a standing ovation. The energy just built from there. Students seemed to connect with my remarks, and afterward they asked thoughtful questions that showed a deep understanding of how their faith calls them to social justice. Seeing the courage and commitment of these students lets me know that the future of the church is in good hands.

Out on the road I have met extraordinary, faithful people dedicated to Christ. I have heard their stories, and they have touched my heart. I am now in a pastoral ministry of the kind that I haven’t had since I was a pastor in the Netherlands. This ministry has three aspects. First, it is a ministry of comfort and encouragement to people who have been terribly hurt. Second, it is a ministry that supports marriage and family life. Third, and interwoven with the other purposes, it is a ministry of evangelism, in which people come to Christ and the church.

A MINISTRY OF COMFORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

At almost every event my presentation is followed by a question-and-answer period and a book signing. Usually as I’m sitting at a table signing books, people bend down very close to me and tell me their stories.

Hearing people's stories, I have come to appreciate on a much deeper level the enormous pain that has been caused by the church's exclusionary policies.

In April of 2006, at a book signing at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California, an older woman came through the line to ask me to sign a book. She was exactly the sort of person you'd want for a neighbor—kind, gentle, soft spoken. She told me about her family. She had five daughters. Her middle daughter was a lesbian, who was so convinced that God didn't love her that she committed suicide. I just wanted to hold this woman and cry with her.

In North Carolina an older man told me that his gay son had shot himself twice but lived because he missed his heart. That son is now a successful businessman, living with a partner. He was just ordained an elder in a More Light Presbyterian church. This father said that he and his wife had always loved their son unconditionally, but the church had not. He told me what a thrill it was for them to lay hands on their son at his ordination.

On the book tour, I met bright church and professional leaders who had lost their jobs because someone found out they were gay. I met couples who have been together for ten, twenty, even forty years, who have raised children and cared for each other in sickness and in health, who are barred by the church and forty-seven states (at the time of this writing) from consecrating their union through marriage. I met faithful Christians who have excelled at some of the most conservative colleges and seminaries in the country yet were later shunned when it was revealed that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

In the summer of 2008, I spoke to about two-hundred LGBT evangelical Christians at the West Coast conference of Evangelicals Concerned, a group founded by Dr. Ralph Blair, a New York psychotherapist, gay man, and evangelical Christian. Blair founded this organization to meet the needs of conservative Christians who also know themselves to be gay. At the conference I became reacquainted with three former students from my teaching days at Fuller Theological Seminary. I had not known that the three men were gay. Each of them shared with me essentially the same story: when he had finally acknowledged that he was gay, people who had previously loved and admired him suddenly rejected him and refused to allow him to participate in church leadership.

These men had all participated in so-called "ex-gay" groups or therapy. They had been told by their church leaders that the Bible condemned homosexuality and that their salvation was at risk. So they had turned to

organizations that promised to help them change their sexual orientation. One man had tried for three years. Another had stayed in an “ex-gay” group for ten years. They had each spent enormous time in prayer, therapy, and self-loathing. But they all finally came to realize that they had not chosen nor could they change their sexual orientation, no matter how hard they tried. When these three former students finally accepted their sexual orientation, they were able to find meaningful relationships and personal stability, and they were able to start building a healthy family life.

This book tour has shown me firsthand the enormous pain caused by the church’s unjust policies. All of this suffering is completely unnecessary and preventable. As I show in this book (and as countless other scholars have shown in their work), the Bible, properly understood, does not condemn people who are LGBT, and it does not prohibit faithful same-sex relationships. The church’s historical prohibitions against marriage and ordination for people who are LGBT are an anachronism—much like the church’s previous policies that prohibited interracial marriage or ordaining people of African descent, women, or people who are divorced and remarried. Indeed our faith calls us to do justice, provide hospitality, and embrace equality for all God’s people.

A MINISTRY OF SUPPORTING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Supporting people who are LGBT is also about supporting families. One of the most striking things for me is the number of families I meet that are led by same-sex couples. The 2000 United States Census counted 594,391 families led by same-sex couples.¹ Research by other organizations suggests that the actual numbers may be higher. “A 2004 analysis by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, DC, estimated that the census figures on same-sex households may be 25 percent too low.”²

When people know that God loves them and can accept who they are as a gift from God, it can be wonderfully healing for families. I was in Louisville, Kentucky, speaking at the national Presbyterian Women’s Gathering. An elderly African American woman stopped me in the hall after my speech. She asked me to sign her book there so she would not have to walk down the stairs to the bookstore. I pulled up two chairs so we could sit for a moment. “This is relevant to me,” she said as she handed me the book. “How so?” I asked. The woman sat in silence for a moment, then said, “I was so worried about my son. He seemed so confused and

wild. Now that he has accepted who he is and has settled down with his partner of two years, he is happy. His partner is like another son to me.”

In Fort Worth, Texas, I met a bright, well-behaved four-year-old boy and his two fathers. One father gave up his law practice to stay at home and raise the boy, while the other father works as an engineer. Over lunch, after church on Sunday, I learned from the stay-at-home dad that he and his partner had been active members of a church in Houston for ten years. The pastors knew they were gay and all seemed to be well. And it was—until they asked the church to baptize their son (born to a surrogate mother). The pastors refused. The parents asked, “Surely you will take this to the session?” An associate pastor informed them, “No, that will never happen in this church.”³

Eventually the engineer’s career moved the family to Fort Worth, where they found a new church home. The couple are very supported and valued now at St. Stephen Presbyterian Church, where their son was baptized. That night I called my wife, Sharon, and told her about this family and what they had been through. She said that earlier on that same day, at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, one of our copastors, Barbara Anderson, “baptized the two babies of a lesbian couple in the church. They were accompanied by members of their family and were supported in love by the congregation. It felt like we were all one family. It was beautiful.” One couple who came for the baptism inquired afterward about becoming members of the church.

Churches like St. Stephen in Fort Worth and Pasadena Presbyterian and many other congregations I have visited give me hope. Our churches and nation are being transformed. Everywhere I go, I meet pastors, elders, and church members who truly embody Christ’s love and who freely embrace all kinds of people, just as Jesus did.

I have seen firsthand that most people in the church deeply believe that everyone should be treated equally. They just have not always had the information and support they need to counteract the inaccurate things they have been told about the Bible.

A MINISTRY OF EVANGELISM

Thanks be to God, my book tour has also turned into a ministry of evangelism. After my remarks at a large conservative church, an Asian American woman and her boyfriend, both in their midtwenties, came up to me. The young woman said, “I haven’t been able to give my life

to Christ because of the hateful attitude toward gay people by the church.” Gesturing toward her boyfriend, she said, “It has been a problem between us.” I replied, “You *can* give your life to Christ. Jesus accepts gay and lesbian people whether a particular congregation does or not.” She looked thoughtful for a moment and then visibly relaxed and smiled. I believe she gave her life to Christ in that moment while her boyfriend beamed.

At the Presbyterian General Assembly, shortly after the book came out, I talked with a friend and former student who is a professional fund-raiser. She keeps balance in her life by being a commissioned lay pastor of a very small church near her home in Redlands, California. She told me that a member of her church had taken my book and given it to a gay friend at work. The man read it and came back and said, “This book changed my life. My whole life, I thought God hated me. But this book is telling me that Jesus loves me.” Then he paused and said, “I wonder, could I come to your church?” “Of course!” was the answer.

One of the most deeply moving aspects of speaking to diverse audiences across the country is to see the reactions on people’s faces as I tell them that Jesus loves them. That should be obvious, right? Jesus loves you. It is the fundamental message of Christianity. Yet somehow in all the hate-filled rhetoric of the debate about homosexuality, the central message of Christ’s redemptive ministry sometimes gets lost. As I remind people that Jesus loves them, I can see the glimmer in their eyes as they reconnect with their faith.

One story, for me, sums up the extraordinary experiences that I have had during this book tour. I was in Richmond, Virginia, teaching an adult church school class. During the discussion period, a well-dressed middle-aged woman with dark hair, sitting in the second row, shyly raised her hand. She asked if she could tell her story before she asked a question. She explained that she was a psychiatrist and a lesbian who had been with her partner for twenty-one years. She had grown up in a different faith but had stopped practicing it long ago. Her partner was raised in a rigid Southern Baptist home and had likewise turned away from her faith.

This couple decided to move from downtown Richmond out to the country for more peace and quiet. Their nearest neighbor was a young Southern Baptist minister with a small, rural church. As good neighbors do, this minister paid them a visit. He just wanted to get to know them as people. And, over time, these neighbors became friends.

Something transformative happens when we really get to know someone. We drop our categories and our preconceived notions. Peter and

Paul and Barnabas discovered it with Gentiles out in the mission field (see my discussion of Acts 15 in chapter 5). And this young Southern Baptist minister discovered it in rural Virginia. He came to realize that this lesbian couple was okay just as they were. They didn't have to change their sexual orientation. In turn, they became interested in his gospel message. The result was that this woman asked to be baptized, and she and her partner joined the little church. She had been a Christian for one year. That is evangelism. Accepting all people as children of God, as Jesus did, gives us the opportunity to share the good news of the gospel.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

A large part of the success of this book is due to the many committed Christians who supported its message and me. Prior to the start of the book tour, the copastors of our church, Mark Smutny and Barbara Anderson, arranged a small gathering to raise money to help get the book out to others. At that event, Barbara said, "This is about saving lives. Telling people about this book will help save lives."

I now know from personal experience that what Barbara said is true. Sharing the good news that Jesus loves people for who they are saves lives, reunites families, and brings people back into relationship with Jesus and the church. It is a privilege to be engaged in this ministry. My life has been forever transformed by the people I have met over the course of this journey.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present this second, revised and expanded edition of *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. In the last two years the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has taken several important steps toward equality for all of its members. I have revised and added new material to chapter 7 to reflect these new developments. Chapter 8 is completely new and explores three biblical stories that show how Jesus' teachings illuminate God's extravagant welcome for all who have faith. I have also added an appendix that documents the remarkable progress toward LGBT equality over the last forty years in denominations throughout the United States.

Jack Rogers
September 28, 2008

Studying Homosexuality for the First Time

Dean Thompson was faced with a problem.

As pastor and head of staff at the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, Dean (as he was affectionately known by his congregation) was confronted with an issue that he would rather have avoided. In the spring of 1993, a gay man, who had earlier been elected a deacon, wrote to the session,¹ the local governing body, of the Pasadena Presbyterian Church. He asked the session to initiate a program of study and, at the end of a year, formally consider designating Pasadena Presbyterian Church a More Light Church—a congregation that was willing to ordain gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people to all offices in the church, despite a denominational prohibition against it.² The gay man's action was supported by the deacons and a number of elders.³ Consequently, the session asked the three pastors on the staff to establish a task force to create an educational program that would sensitize the whole congregation to gay and lesbian issues.

Dean had grown up in West Virginia and earned both an MDiv and a PhD in American church history from Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. He served pastorates in West Virginia and in Austin, Texas, before accepting the call to Pasadena Presbyterian Church in California. A genial and humble person, he was known for loving his congregation and for preaching biblical sermons, grounded in the Reformed tradition.

Pasadena Presbyterian Church was older than the city itself. It had a history of great preachers. It had been a leading voice in the community during the civil rights struggle.

Now Dean was in a no-win position. If the task force recommended in favor of becoming a More Light Church, several more traditional families would surely leave the church. If the task force recommended against becoming a More Light Church, members who supported equal rights for people who are gay and lesbian, including openly gay members and their families, would feel alienated and possibly leave. To his credit, Dean assembled a diverse task force that included a broad representation of different people and viewpoints.

Dean knew that I was opposed to the ordination of gay and lesbian people. He asked me to be a member of the task force.

I said no.

I thought I had a perfect excuse. Although I worshiped regularly at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, as an ordained Presbyterian minister, my membership was not in the local congregation, but in the presbytery, the regional denominational governing body.

Then Dean put his request on a personal level: "If you are my friend, you will do this." I probably had many reasons for resistance, but they all came down to my not wanting to be involved in studying the issue of ordaining gay and lesbian people to church office. It just was not a problem that I wanted to take on. Reluctantly, I acceded to Dean's request and agreed to serve.

The three pastors on the church staff appointed a task force of fifteen members who, among them, covered the whole range of opinions. It included the gay man who had requested the task force and the mother of a lesbian young woman who had grown up in the congregation. One more-conservative couple on the task force left the church when we began to look at more than what they considered the only biblical perspective. A retired missionary also on the task force said he would stand in the church door to bar a lesbian evangelist, Janie Spahr, from entering the building.

After nearly a year of study, the task force presented a twelve-week adult education course at Pasadena Presbyterian Church. More than one hundred people attended each class meeting. We devoted three sessions to biblical interpretation and three to psychological and sociological perspectives. We heard from gay and lesbian members of the West Hollywood Presbyterian Church and looked at videos on different responses by family members. We spent one session discussing what was in the best interests of children. We listened to people who said that sexual orientation or behavior could be changed. We studied the denomination's form of government to see how it affected this issue. And we designed the final session with two opposing speakers, again to balance the viewpoints. We tried very hard to be balanced and fair to every perspective, but invariably some thought we had not given their view enough support.

As an educator, I thought the curriculum was excellent, but the results of the study were mixed. The congregation as a whole did seem more comfortable with the issue.⁴ The session did not vote to become a More Light Church. The gay man who had initiated the process was disappointed and left the church. And for the first time in my career, I had been forced to study the issue.

During this period I did not change my Reformed theology or my method of biblical interpretation. For the first time, however, I had to apply them to the issue of homosexuality. That has led me on a journey that in many ways has been uncomfortable. In other ways it has resulted in growth and satisfaction. I want to share that journey with you. I hope it will encourage you in your own journey.

MY FORMATION AS AN AMERICAN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN

Let me begin by putting my own life experience in context. In 1934 my devout, Christian parents had a healthy, white, male baby. In Nebraska, at the state fair each year, there was a judging, not only of pigs and calves, of apple pies and bread-and-butter pickles, but of children. My parents entered me in a contest. I don't know what the criteria were, but I do have a silver trophy inscribed "1935, NEBR STATE FAIR, MOST PERFECT BOY." When I looked at that trophy many years later, it was a visible confirmation for me of what most white, American males experienced. We knew that in some intangible but very real way we were superior. As I grew older and became aware of an attraction to girls, I subconsciously added another element to my personal list of male superiority: I was heterosexual.

The culture of the 1940s and 1950s reinforced that stereotype of superiority. The jokes, the ways teachers related to us, the opportunities we were given—all made us know that boys were better than girls, that whites were better than coloreds, and that straights were normal and queers were not.

It took the civil rights movement of the 1960s to begin to crack the facade of white racial superiority. In the 1970s, the women's movement forced a grudging acknowledgment that women were of equal value to men. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, the first awakenings began to come for many people that gay and lesbian people were different in some respects, but of no less worth than people who were heterosexual.

During all of this time I was also an evangelical. I was baptized a Methodist. I became a Presbyterian by geography after my father was drafted into the Navy in World War II and we were forced to sell our car. There was a small neighborhood United Presbyterian church just a block and a half from our house. We began to attend there and continued after the war. I grew up in that church until I left home to attend seminary.⁵

The old United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) was a small denomination (about 250,000 members). It was conservative but not fundamentalist.⁶

The pastor under whom I joined the church was named Harold (Shorty) Irwin. I was about twelve years old and was impressed that, as a former cheerleader, he could walk on his hands. He also made us study and memorize large sections of the Bible. Those of us in his communicants class understood that we were lost in sin and that Christ had paid the penalty for our sins and that by trust in Christ we received our salvation. I believed it then, and I believe it now. As I grew older, I also sometimes attended the local Youth for Christ meetings. I went “down the aisle” several times, confirming my sense of being saved.

That small church gave me many opportunities for leadership. I was the president of our presbytery youth organization. I also had the opportunity to attend several national youth conferences. My first was at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. There I met attractive young people and capable pastors who encouraged me in my Christian growth. One summer I won the national Bible reading contest. The speakers at these conferences were often professors from our one denominational seminary, Pittsburgh-Xenia. I was drawn to their message as I was drawn to them personally.

Those national youth conference experiences were a significant factor in my feeling called to the ministry as a sophomore in college. During Christmas break I counseled with my pastor about my sense of vocation. His advice was, “Don’t go into the ministry if you can be happy doing anything else.” That did it. I decided that I couldn’t be happy doing anything else. The most dramatic moment for me came one evening when, after praying, I got up off my knees, walked into my parents’ bedroom, and announced that God had called me into the ministry. The conviction of that calling has never left me.

Given my background, it was natural for me to head to Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary when I graduated from the University of Nebraska. I knew that I was a conservative Christian. At seminary, I learned that in the larger Christian culture we were called evangelical.

At seminary I learned a particular Anglo-Saxon, American, Presbyterian tradition that was presented as Christian orthodoxy. This orthodoxy was defined confessionally by the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Confession was interpreted theologically in the tradition of Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, of nineteenth-century Princeton Seminary.⁷ Practically, orthodoxy was defined as the most adequate

understanding of life and reality. Our task was to defend it reasonably and to preach it using interesting illustrations and practical applications.

My view of orthodoxy was that it had come down in an unbroken line from the apostle Paul to Augustine to Calvin to the Westminster Confession to Warfield and then to my professors of theology and church history. I believed that all of them were treating Scripture in the same way. I always felt that the key to the Christian life and a better world was understanding and interpreting Scripture. The doctrine of Scripture was always my chief academic interest.

When I graduated from seminary, I wanted to go on to study for a doctorate in theology, and I had the good fortune to receive a modest scholarship for one year of study overseas. One of my seminary professors, John Gerstner, urged me instead to go to Harvard, as he had, where I would be confronted with liberal theology and become stronger by fighting against it. That didn't appeal to me. I wanted a deeper understanding of the Reformed tradition.⁸ I consulted with Cary Weisiger, the senior pastor of a large church where I was interning. He suggested that I study with G. C. Berkouwer at the Free University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Dr. Weisiger felt that Professor Berkouwer was deeply Reformed and also fair in his assessments of others. Berkouwer was engaged in writing a series of volumes on the main topics of theology. That sounded like just what I wanted.

I identified with Abraham! One of my favorite verses in Scripture is, "And he set out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). Since my wife and I were going overseas, I requested ordination by my presbytery on the grounds that if I had an opportunity to serve while I was in the Netherlands, I couldn't come running back to Nebraska. So they ordained me as a traveling evangelist!

Four years in the Netherlands were transformative in our lives. I did my course work and comprehensive examinations. In our second year, my wife, Sharon, got a job teaching school for English-speaking children of Dupont engineers in Dordrecht. I became the organizing pastor of an English-speaking congregation for the Dutch Reformed Church, serving the same English-speaking community. Our first son, Matthew, was born. Then we moved to New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, so I could teach at Westminster College (one of the six UPCNA colleges).

After two years there, I took an unpaid leave of absence to finish my dissertation. Sharon and Matthew and I spent the summer in Princeton, where I made use of the Speer and Firestone libraries. Then we flew to London for six months of research at the British Museum

Library. I took twelve metal boxes, each with a thousand quote cards, back to Holland, where I could work with my doctoral professor. After another ten months of writing, I graduated in January of 1967 with a printed dissertation entitled *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* and returned to teaching at Westminster College.⁹

TEACHING AT FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Four years later, I received a call to teach philosophy of religion at Fuller Theological Seminary, a multid denominational, evangelical seminary in Pasadena, California. I was then engaged in translating and editing G. C. Berkouwer's two-volume work on *Holy Scripture*, so in my first quarter at Fuller I gave a seminar on Berkouwer's doctrine of Scripture.¹⁰ My memory is that four students signed up. We had a good time and I was continuing to pursue my longtime interest in interpretation of the Bible.

As a professor of philosophical theology at Fuller I was immersed in the culture of the evangelical world. The struggle to develop an evangelicalism distinct from its formation in fundamentalism was played out at Fuller Seminary.¹¹ In the late 1940s, Billy Graham, Harold John Oken, Carl F. H. Henry, and others developed a movement called evangelicalism, which was distinguished from the militant fundamentalism that separated from the mainstream churches and stood against changes in American society.

I would define an evangelical theologian as someone who accepts three propositions: (1) People can and should have a personal relationship with God through trust in Jesus Christ. (2) The Bible is the final authority for salvation and living the Christian life. (3) God's grace in Jesus Christ is such good news that everyone should hear about it. If you add something to these affirmations, you are becoming denominational or fundamentalist. If you take away one of these affirmations, you could still be a Christian, but you would not be an evangelical.

Sociologically, evangelicalism was a movement, not a church. It was a loose coalition of people within the mainstream churches, independent associations of Christians, and parachurch organizations. Fuller Seminary was founded as its intellectual center. *Christianity Today* was its magazine. Billy Graham's revivals were a source of its members.

I am an evangelical theologian and have always been so. I am not, and never have been, completely comfortable in the evangelical subculture. I am distrustful of movements. I prefer established organizations

where there are clear lines of responsibility and accountability. I need to be in a congregation that is related to other congregations in a denomination with publicly known processes for handling problems. I believe in representative democracy, where there are clear procedures and checks and balances so that the majority may move forward while the minority is able to continue to advocate for its view. I am distrustful of self-appointed leaders and of informal organizations, held together by commitment to charismatic individuals. I want equitable processes for dealing with disputes, rather than some individual guru acting as arbitrator.

Too often the media lump together evangelicals and fundamentalists—leaving the general public confused as to the distinctions between these two groups. Within evangelicalism there are a right, left, and middle regarding political and cultural issues.¹² Fundamentalism is more politically monolithic and more theologically conservative than evangelicalism. Fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell know that.¹³ But the confusion serves the fundamentalists' purpose by making it appear that they have a larger constituency, and thus influence, than they do.

The doctrine of inerrancy was and is a hallmark of fundamentalism.¹⁴ For some of its proponents, inerrancy is a symbol for the authority of the Bible and simply affirms that the Bible is true. For others, inerrancy is a particular theory about the interpretation of the Bible. Inerrancy holds that the Bible gives accurate and up-to-the-minute information, not only on religious matters, but also on all things that the Bible addresses, including science and history. It encourages a literal reading of Scripture.¹⁵

Shortly before I joined the faculty at Fuller, the faculty had removed a clause in the seminary's statement of faith referring to the Bible as inerrant. The Fuller faculty preferred to use the word "infallible," which had historically been used in the church to mean that the Bible accomplishes its purpose of bringing people to a saving knowledge of God and guiding them in living the Christian life.

This theological change evoked an attack on the Fuller Seminary by its former vice president, Harold Lindsell, in a book entitled *The Battle for the Bible*.¹⁶ My evangelical credentials were apparently strong enough for President David Hubbard to ask me to edit a volume in reply to Lindsell and to write the historical chapter in it; that book was *Biblical Authority*.¹⁷ I asked my friend and former student Don McKim to assist me in preparing the historical chapter, with the promise that later he and I would publish a major book on this topic. Following my yearlong sabbatical in 1977–78, the book that Don and I coauthored appeared

in 1979 as *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach*.¹⁸ It engendered a cottage industry of books by people intent on retaining and rehabilitating the concept of inerrancy as the only acceptable descriptor of the Bible.¹⁹

Fundamentalists and those on the far right of evangelicalism were not happy with me.²⁰ However, Fuller Seminary was the leading institution at the center of evangelicalism, and I was a fully acceptable representative of that centrist evangelicalism. I was frequently called upon to speak at evangelical churches and conferences.

Upon returning to Fuller after my sabbatical in 1978, I discovered that many of our Presbyterian students were being pressured by their presbytery committees on preparation for ministry to transfer to a Presbyterian seminary. In response, with administration support, I created an Office of Presbyterian Ministries and became its director. We created four courses in Presbyterian distinctives and a Monday morning meeting for Presbyterian students, and I acted as liaison between the seminary and the presbyteries. I interpreted Fuller Seminary to the Presbyterians, and I interpreted the Presbyterians to Fuller Seminary.

President Hubbard supported my efforts to bring about a better relationship with the Presbyterian Church. While at Fuller I had the good fortune to serve on three national committees of the denomination, including the Task Force on Biblical Authority and Interpretation that met from 1978 to 1982 and produced official guidelines for interpreting Scripture in times of controversy. In all of these endeavors I felt privileged to be working on the issue that I cared most about: biblical interpretation. I felt a harmony between my role as a theological evangelical and my position as a Reformed theologian in the Presbyterian Church. Either as a member of a denominational committee or at the behest of Fuller Seminary, I attended the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church almost every year.

THE CHURCH DEBATES BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND HOMOSEXUALITY

In 1976, the issue of the ordination of people who are homosexual was first broached at the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (UPCUSA) General Assembly in Baltimore.²¹ I was there and followed discussions in committee and the debates in plenary session. The Presbytery of New York City asked the assembly for what is called “definitive guidance,” an official counsel on whether a candidate for the ministry,

who was in all other respects well prepared for ministry, could be ordained if that person was a “self-affirming, practicing homosexual.” The assembly responded by creating a Task Force to Study Homosexuality.

I was also present in 1978 when the task force reported. The 1978 assembly in San Diego, California, was rich with discussion of biblical interpretation. The Task Force to Study Homosexuality had submitted a 201-page study document including majority and minority recommendations.²² It included data from psychotherapy and the empirical sciences. What captured the attention of most members of the assembly, however, was a 70-page section entitled “Homosexuality and the Bible: A Re-examination.” A subsection on “How to Read the Bible? Problems and Models of Biblical Authority and Interpretation” evoked the most comment, because, for the first time in decades, Presbyterians had in hand four alternative approaches to biblical interpretation. Each was supported with theological assumptions, cited authorities, and suggested applications.

The report labeled the four models A, B, C, and D; each model had a rough correlation with an identifiable theological school of thought. Model A was the scholastic theology of the Old Princeton School of Charles and A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, which dominated the northern Presbyterian Church from 1812 to 1927. Model B could be likened to the neo-orthodoxy of the 1930s through the 1960s, citing Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Confession of 1967. Model C was a form of liberation theology, supported by Gordon Kaufman, Dorothee Soelle, Paul Lehmann, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, among others. Model D continued the liberation motif but added emphases of process theology represented by Norman Pittenger, John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and Daniel Day Williams.²³

Model A proposed that ordination of people who are homosexual be forbidden on grounds of the law of God. Model B came to the same conclusion but attributed it to the Spirit of Christ. Model C argued that ordination of people who are homosexual should be permitted on the basis of justice. Model D supported that view and added love as a further reason.

The Task Force majority of fourteen people found the biblical and theological grounds in Models C and D adequate to advocate for the ordination of qualified gay and lesbian people. A five-person minority reported that homosexual behavior was sinful and that ordination should be denied on grounds given in Models A and B. The minority argued that a homosexual orientation was not sinful in itself and that gay and lesbian people could therefore be members of the church, but

sexually active people who are homosexual could not be ordained to office because the “practice” of homosexuality was sinful.²⁴

The assembly chose, not the majority report, but the minority report of the Task Force to Study Homosexuality. At the same time, it endorsed civil rights for people who are homosexual. The assembly’s pronouncement was in the form of “definitive guidance,” as counsel rather than law. It acknowledged that for ministers of Word and Sacrament, ordination was the province of the presbytery, not the national church.²⁵

An additional reason for the sensitivity of the assembly is that Presbyterians are the only Protestant denomination for whom the rules of government that apply to ministers of Word and Sacrament apply to deacons and elders as well. All three groups of ordained officers must answer affirmatively the same eight ordination questions.²⁶ Then each group takes one additional vow that applies to its specific function—service for deacons, governance for elders, and preaching, teaching, pastoral care, and governance for ministers of Word and Sacrament. Thus Presbyterian denominational rules that prohibit people who are homosexual from being ordained to church office apply more generally than rules in some other Protestant denominations, where only ministers are affected.

Studying Biblical Authority and Interpretation

A second report that came to the 1978 UPCUSA Assembly further focused attention on Scripture. In 1976 a Committee on Pluralism had been created to study sources of conflict in the church. The report concluded:

Of all the factors that contribute to divisiveness in our denomination, the Committee found none is more pervasive or fundamental than the question of how the Scriptures are to be interpreted. In other words, the widely differing views on the ways the Old and New Testaments are accepted, interpreted, and applied were repeatedly cited to us by lay people, clergy, and theologians as the most prevalent cause of conflict in our denomination today. . . . It is our opinion that until our church examines this problem, our denomination will continue to be impeded in its mission and ministry, or we will spiral into a destructive schism.²⁷

(This last statement proved to be predictive. Between 1979 and 1981 approximately sixty churches left the UPCUSA. Most of these churches claimed a “higher view” of biblical authority as their reason for leaving.)

The confluence of these two reports, on homosexuality and on Scripture, demonstrated great diversity in biblical interpretation within the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (the northern stream) and caused the assembly to set up a Task Force on Biblical Authority and Interpretation in 1978. I was privileged to be appointed a member of the task force, which reported to the UPCUSA in 1982.

The most important mandate of the task force was to present “recommended guidelines for a positive and not a restrictive use of Scripture in theological controversies.”²⁸ A subcommittee of the task force carefully studied the UPCUSA *Book of Confessions* that at the time contained nine theological documents, from the Nicene Creed to confessions of the Protestant Reformation to twentieth-century theological statements. From these sources the subcommittee derived six guidelines for interpreting Scripture. When our report came to the General Assembly, the committee of delegates assigned to this report developed an appropriate seventh guideline. As you will see, I use these guidelines in chapter 4 of this book.

In 1979, the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS, the southern stream of the Presbyterian church) set up a parallel study on “The Understanding and Use of the Bible in the Presbyterian Church in the United States.”²⁹ The resulting 1983 PCUS report incorporated the seven UPCUSA guidelines but reorganized and expanded them into nine. Using extensive citations from the *Book of Confessions*, the report documented the sources of the guidelines. This report, “Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture,” proved to be a helpful study document that was in harmony with the guidelines adopted by the UPCUSA in 1982.

In identifying guidelines for interpreting Scripture, both northern and southern denominations had anticipated the reunion in 1983. Their task forces on the Bible exchanged papers, sent visitors to one another’s meetings, and produced reports that were intentionally in harmony. The two reports were later published in one booklet.³⁰

The Developing Debate on Homosexuality

In 1993 gays and lesbians at the General Assembly pushed for greater recognition and acceptance. At one point, some thirty gay and lesbian people were given the opportunity to come to a microphone on the stage and state simply, “My name is _____. I am gay (or lesbian). I want to offer my service to the church.” It appeared later that this peaceful and respectful demonstration influenced enough commissioners to

prevent passage of a motion that would have put a prohibition against homosexual ordination into the *Book of Order*, thus making it church law. Instead, the assembly asked the church to study the matter for three years. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church all attempted similar study processes in the 1990s.³¹

Concerned with the apparent growing acceptance of gays and lesbians, some conservatives pushed back. A group of pastors of large, theologically conservative churches met and formed an organization that later grew into an umbrella group called The Coalition.³² Its first public action was a letter, prepared at the General Assembly in Orlando, dated June 8, 1993. In the letter the group stated that it regretted the request to study the issue of the ordination of homosexuals but noted that the three-year study period could be an occasion to speak with “conviction and clarity” in support of the traditional position of the church. I joined nearly two hundred Presbyterian members, elders, deacons, missionaries, and ministers in signing the letter.

By 1996, less than 3 percent of Presbyterian congregations reported having engaged in a congregational study of the issue.³³ My experience suggests that the reason for this extremely low percentage is that many people think there is nothing to study, while others just feel uncomfortable talking about sex. The culture of most Americans, including church people, has taught them that homosexuality is sin. They feel no need to investigate further. Indeed, one highly placed Presbyterian official said in my presence, “My grandma told me it was wrong, and that’s good enough for me.”³⁴

From 1993 to 1996 the Presbyterian Church made no effort to mount any official denominational study, and as a result there were no new official documents to which people might respond. Writers both progressive and conservative attempted to fill that vacuum. Pressure for a decision regarding the ordination of people who are homosexual began to build as the period of study was coming to an end. The 1996 Presbyterian General Assembly in Albuquerque received fifty-one overtures (proposals for legislative action) relating to the ordination to church office of gay and lesbian people.

New scholarly work often appears in response to changes in the ecclesiastical or cultural scene. Writing and publishing books takes a long time. In 1996, only a half dozen books by recognized scholars were available on this subject. Two of them, collections of essays by Presbyterian seminary faculty, *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Lis-*

tening to Scripture, edited by Robert L. Brawley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), and *Homosexuality and Christian Community*, edited by Choon-Leong Seow (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), were not published until just before the July 1996 assembly and thus had little influence on its decisions.

Since 1996, there has been a steady flow of new works, both in support of and opposed to ordination of people who are homosexual. Scholars representing a wide range of church backgrounds are probing for new approaches to interpreting the biblical tradition. These are live issues for scholars in the Episcopal Church, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, American Baptist Church, and Roman Catholic Church, to name only some of those whose work I cite in this book.

In 1996, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) tightened its prohibition on ordaining gay and lesbian people to church office by putting the prohibition into its *Book of Order*, thus taking it from “definitive guidance” to church law. The statement reads:

Those who are called to office in the church are to lead a life in obedience to Scripture and in conformity to the historic confessional standards of the church. Among these standards is the requirement to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman . . . or chastity in singleness. Persons refusing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament.³⁵

Other denominations have enacted similar prohibitions in words that reflect their polity and tradition. The debate over homosexuality crosses all religious lines and is of critical interest in American culture. It is not going away anytime soon. We need to be as informed as possible in order to cope constructively with what affects all of us.

AN ISSUE FOR ALL OF US

I want to share with you some of what I have learned through studying this issue. I will naturally speak from my own context as a Presbyterian. Yet the issue of accepting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as fully human and equal to other people in the eyes of God is not exclusively a Presbyterian issue. By 1991, more than one hundred statements

on homosexuality had been published by forty-seven denominations and religious organizations.³⁶

Because of our different forms of church government, the focus of concern may differ among denominations. For Presbyterians, the issue comes to focus in the question of ordination to church office as deacons, elders, or ministers of Word and Sacrament. For Episcopalians, the issue doesn't become critical until someone is elected a bishop. That emotional chasm was crossed for Episcopalians with the consecration of an openly gay man, the Rev. Gene Robinson, as a bishop in November 2003. For some Southern Baptists, the issue is avoidance of any appearance of approval, through ordination, employment, or granting civil benefits, to people who are homosexual. In every case, however, we are debating the fate of faithful Christian people who are members of our churches.

These church contexts have parallels in our social and political life as a nation. Now, in the first decade of the new century, debate over the issue of same-sex marriage has moved to center stage in politics and the public mind. On July 1, 2000, Vermont became the first state legally to recognize civil unions between same-sex couples. On June 26, 2003, the United States Supreme Court, in *Lawrence v. Texas*, overturned a Texas law that had criminalized sodomy only for people who are homosexual.³⁷ On November 18, 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that same-sex couples had a legal right to marry under the Massachusetts Constitution.³⁸

Less than two months later, on January 20, 2004, President George W. Bush, in his State of the Union address, declared that the nation must "defend the sanctity of marriage."³⁹ On February 12, 2004, San Francisco mayor Gavin Newsom authorized city clerks to grant marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Following that, on February 24, 2004, President Bush called on Congress to pass an amendment to the federal Constitution defining marriage as between one man and one woman.⁴⁰ Republicans in Congress made such an amendment a top legislative priority.

In the elections in November 2004, voters in eleven states approved referenda defining marriage as between a man and a woman. Legislating who can be married, or who has the right to care for children, go to the hospital with a loved one, or enter into civil contracts as a couple, impacts all of us. Every American is aware of the issue of marriage between people of the same sex, and most recognize that we are all affected in some way by the struggle between maintaining the status quo and moving in a new direction.

Some fear that any change in attitude toward people who are homosexual would mean the end of Western civilization as we know it.⁴¹ For example, James Dobson, of Focus on the Family, exclaims, “Barring a miracle, the family as it has been known for more than five millennia will crumble, presaging the fall of Western civilization itself.”⁴² For others, a new openness to LGBT people would fulfill our commitment as a nation to liberty and justice for all. Extending equal rights to people who are homosexual is a critical issue for our time. How we deal with it will determine, to a large degree, the kind of people, church, and nation we will become. This book is intended as a contribution to that important discussion.

How My Mind Changed

I have had a change of mind and heart. I had never really studied the issue of the status in the church of people who are homosexual. I opposed homosexuality reflexively—it was just what I thought Christians were supposed to do. However, studying this issue in depth for the first time brought me to a new understanding of the biblical texts and of God’s will for our church. The process was both very serious and painful. I wasn’t swayed by the culture or pressured by academic colleagues. I changed my mind initially by going back to the Bible and taking seriously its central message for our lives.

Since then, my new conviction has been reinforced from many sources. I have studied how the church changed its mind on other moral issues. I worked through how the church, guided by the Holy Spirit in understanding the Scriptures, reversed our prohibitions against ordination to leadership for African Americans, women, and divorced and remarried people. I saw a clear picture of a shift from a literalistic method of biblical interpretation to one that looks at Scripture through the lens of the redeeming life and ministry of Jesus Christ. I studied the principles of biblical interpretation found in our Reformed confessions and discovered a continuity through history to our best practices today. I have wrestled with the biblical texts usually cited in this discussion and come to a new understanding of them. I came to know many gay and lesbian people and have had my Christian life enriched by their profound witness to the gospel. I now know many people across all theological and ideological lines who are convinced that the Spirit of Christ is leading us, based on our best understanding of the Bible, to be consistent

in allowing all of our baptized members eligibility for positions of leadership.⁴³ My desire is to reframe the discussion regarding people who are homosexual so that we can better understand one another, heal our divisions, and move forward together in our churches.

I did not arrive at my conclusions overnight. I do not expect you to do so, either. If you, as was the case for me, have not given this issue much attention, I hope this can be the occasion for you to investigate it more fully. If you feel sure that people who are homosexual, including Christians, should not have equal rights in the church and society, I urge you to walk with me through these chapters and at least to give yourself permission to consider what I am reporting, rather than to reject it before you begin. Jesus said to his disciples: “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31–32). Those disciples had to change their minds a lot of times as they learned from Jesus. I had to as well.