

“I’m a Theological Conservative. So Why Do I Now Support LGBTQ Clergy?”

This is probably the deepest issue dividing our church today. And from what I have observed, whether we are in favor of the inclusion of LGBTQ people in the Ordained ministry or not, is largely due to three things:

- 1) how literally you choose to interpret the Bible and the place it has in your decision making.
- 2) your position on whether you believe homosexuality is a choice or a born trait.
- 3) how much contact and personal experience you have with LGBTQ persons.

I don’t have any data to back this up excepting the sum total of my life experience and observation.

As a theological conservative and one who favors the traditional evangelical doctrines of the faith, I can understand how the issue pushes item 1 in the above list pretty hard. It has caused me to really examine things in ways I have not before – even in seminary. That’s good. My hope is that this is doing the same for all of us. I hope each of us continually examines what we believe and why.

Scripture, the Traditions of the church and traditional Scriptural interpretation have been the dominant influencers in my life of faith. But I have noticed as I have matured that Reason and Experience have taken on a more important role in my decision-making. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by that as I now have more experiences in my life to call on, and through those experiences, I am now better able to discern what is reasonable from what is not. On the issue of LGBTQ from birth clergy, I choose the influence of Reason and Experience.

(Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience are the four pillars of the Wesley Quadrilateral that I use as a decision-making guide. The position of the church is that Scripture is primary with which I agree. But it is not Scripture alone. Some might say that simply because I choose to elevate the influence of Reason and Experience over Scripture and Tradition in this issue would push me out of the evangelical conservative camp. Obviously I do not agree. My Reason and Experience have caused me to re-evaluate the traditional interpretation of Scripture on this issue. More to come later in this document.)

With regard to Biblical interpretation, I think we need to always be on guard because a) often times what we may believe God said, he didn’t, and b) our biblical interpretation may indeed be flawed and incorrect, making it hard to know just what the Bible does say. Orthodox Christianity itself maintains that though the Word is infallible, interpretation is fallible. God’s Word is dynamic, not static, and revelation comes in many places and at different times.

Something that challenged my thinking recently on this issue was an internet article reporting a debate between two leading evangelical scholars that lays conflicting interpretations of the most often cited Scripture passages used in the homosexual debate

side by side in an easy to read format. (*Google: Debating Bible Verses on Homosexuality – it's an easy to read side by side debate between Caleb Kaltenbach and Matthew Vines*).

Another challenger was the book “Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays vs. Christians Debate” by Justin Lee. This not only challenged my thinking on Biblical interpretation of the homosexual issue, but challenged me to consider something else: If time and change were created and used by God in the creating, sustaining and redeeming of the world, could the same realities be at work in our interpretation of Scripture? Is it conceivable that God may have something different to say now than before.?

Reason and Experience have opened me up to thinking it is not reasonable to believe that God had exactly one chance to say everything God was ever going to say to us in Scripture. If we believe our experience with scripture is dynamic, in that the Spirit gives us new understanding each time we open it, it reasons then to me to believe that our interpretation could change and be expanded as well. It seems to me that if we would claim anything other than this, we identified something God can't do. (*actually, the one thing the Bible does say God can't do is lie.*)

Not all in the Bible is as dictated from God's mouth. Even the authors confess their own insights, reflections and ideas in their work. Biblical interpretation (Hermeneutics) uses the best available scholarship to understand the words, and more importantly, the MEANING those words had to the people who first heard them.

The big fear for we theologically conservative folk is that to change to a position of inclusion makes us feel that we are being disloyal to the Scriptures. We grew up with a sacredness about the Scriptures and treated them as such. But in the back of my mind, particularly as I hear conversation from Biblical literalists, I sometimes wonder if I have made the Bible an idol to be worshipped instead of the God behind the Word.

I believe we need to take the Bible seriously. But I think we all have this tendency to only take the parts we like seriously. We need to guard against this. It's also an issue of integrity. If I am going to be vigorous against homosexuality, I need to be equally vigorous against gossip, adultery, lying, cheating, stealing and all other things the Apostle Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. I am trying to think of the last time I saw a gossip unwelcomed.

To be fair, there is much in the Bible that is very straightforward, plain and uncomplicated. From what I have seen and experienced, the problem is that if we disagree with that part of the Bible, it's usually because we don't like what God said.

What I have seen and heard in discussions about the issue at hand from those with a literal preference, is a tendency to use the Bible as some kind of force to win arguments, settle debates, pass judgment and end discussion, rather than use its words to engage and encourage conversation and sharing. I wonder if in an effort to protect, preserve and be loyal to the Scriptures, we can be found guilty of giving up the central message of Jesus who is the chief messenger of the will and heart of God. We all need to step carefully and be aware of the log in our own eyes as we engage with others.

I understand why folks want things to be cut, dried and clear – it makes understanding this thing called life easier. But that's just not the goal of the Bible. I wish Jesus would have talked about this issue. It sure would clear things up for us. But he didn't. In reality, there is not a lot in the Bible about homosexuality, especially when compared to the whole of the Bible. Jesus spoke far more about faithfulness and fidelity in heterosexual marriage than he did about homosexuality.

As Christians we consider Jesus to be the ultimate interpreter of God's Will and Law. And the one thing I know Jesus was clear about is, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). This command is second only to loving God.

I know my evangelical conservative brothers and sisters would challenge my understanding of how to express the love of Jesus. Some of them would have me consider that sharing the Scriptural truth on this issue, as they interpret it, that living a gay lifestyle is a sin and that hell awaits IS a loving act. My experience has shown me that almost none of the people who claim such belief ever bother to speak in such ways to the people they claim to love.

I believe the goal of the Bible is to teach us about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It does so in a variety of voices spread across an expanse of time – with each author using different descriptions and metaphors and even points of view. The Bible is more of an anthology – a library of 66 books – not one book. Its one consistent theme is that God loves us and will not let anything interrupt that love, not even death. And his desire is that as we love him, and each other.

I think the Gospel writer John says it best as he writes in 20:30-31: "³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." John makes it clear that the purpose of his book is to point to Jesus. I expand that to the whole of Scripture. With that, understood, I determined some years ago to preach Jesus and use the Bible as a tool to illuminate Him.

(Google the sermon preached by Perry Noble, a great evangelical preacher, titled "The Bible Isn't Important" – boy there's a title! It's something to think about.)

I used to describe myself solely as a "theological conservative." Not any more. I am still theologically conservative as I hold fast to the traditional evangelical doctrines of the faith. But now I add the term "social liberal" because that's what Jesus was. If I profess to be a follower of Jesus, I need to be one too. My liking or understanding of it is not the important point of it all.

Ordination

I am not concerned about the ordination of LGBTQ from birth individuals. I know the process and the promises required of an ordained pastor in the UMC. The requirements are the same whether gay or straight: Jesus is the priority and understood to be the only way to salvation. Everything else is second, including sexuality. No one expects inclusion without restriction. It is the same for heterosexuals and gay – fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness.

Somehow the inclusion of ordained LGBTQ persons has mistakenly assumed that it means an inclusion of the exaggerated lifestyles we see depicted on television or the movies that seems undisciplined and self absorbed. They are separate issues.

Every one of us who follow Jesus are called to costly sacrifice. The Gospel demands everything from us no matter who we are. In fact, if following Jesus has NOT caused you to reprioritize and to change your lifestyle, it's quite likely you are not really following Jesus.

If you are able to show a demonstrable commitment to Jesus as the way, the truth and life as the priority in life, and a willingness to live the Jesus way, I don't care what color you are or if you're from Mars... we need more followers. The Apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians concerning the universality of the Gospel of Jesus, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28 NIV). I figure the same applies to those ordained for ministry as long as they are first followers of Jesus.

I have no problem with ordination under these conditions. My concerning fear would be a change in the evangelical doctrines of our faith, especially one that would eliminate the salvific necessity of Jesus because it is "too exclusionary." That is a MUCH BIGGER and concerning issue to me.

My goal in leadership of the church is to gather people committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and affirm everyone's sacred worth. Period. The next step is to then create a space where we can all worship, grow, and serve as we connect with God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and one another without barriers of any kind.

Marriage:

I must admit that this part is still "under construction" in some regard. I am still struggling to fully embrace it. I have no problem at all with civil unions. To me that is a justice issue. But in the church, the logic I apply to the criteria for the ordination of LGBTQ from birth clergy would seem to logically apply here as long as couples are able to exhibit "a demonstrable commitment to Jesus as the way, the truth and life as the priority in life, and a willingness to live the Jesus way" Then making a covenant with God before the altar should be welcomed.

One of my great laments is that I have performed weddings for heterosexual couples who came no where close to this criteria. I would like to recapture the sacredness and significance of a wedding in the church before the altar of God. Through my pastoral experience, I have come to believe culture has influenced the wedding ceremony more than the church.

Yet as I consider this, there is a clear pro-creative directive in the Scriptures as one of the reasons for marriage that can only be accomplished through male and female. But the scriptures also make clear that marriage has a relational directive. In other words, the covenant of marriage forces us to be in a committed and dedicated relationship with another person. It's here that God brings us together to learn what it means to live in a relationship like the relationship God says He wants to have with us, and the kind of relationship we will live in in heaven. I believe that's the intention of the use of the word "cleave" in Genesis 2:24 and Matthew 19:5. The earthly experience that comes closest to showing us the kind of relationship God wants to have with us is as in the marriage relationship. And the earthly experience that comes closest to showing us the depth of love God has for us is as a parent to their child.

At first thought, it seems clear that gay marriage cannot meet the pro-creative function of marriage. And yet I struggle a bit as in this day and age there are ways for gay couples to be pro-creative through science or the adoptive process. It forces me to think. But gay marriage could achieve the committed and dedicated aspects of what it means to live in relationship.

This way of thinking is new to me. I am not totally comfortable with it. Could I attend a wedding of a gay couple who confess their love for Jesus and each other? Yes. Could I perform one? I must confess, not yet. I am still under construction. But who knows what tomorrow will bring.

Closing thoughts:

Sometimes I wonder if this hot topic issue is an ingenious plan of the devil: Let's get the Christians to divide and fight amongst themselves so they will never be organized enough to actually share in the mission of Jesus. I lament that we have lost our motivation to share the salvific message of Jesus and the cross decades ago. I am doctrinally conservative, but have become more socially liberal as I age (and hopefully) mature. My move to more social liberalism is largely due to my conviction that that I need to actually live the words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:18: "to as far as possible, live in peace with others." I find when I do that, it's easier and more natural for me to follow Jesus than when I don't. It's a practical issue in that sense.

But to do that, I have discovered that I also have to be willing to put my own life under the microscope of what Jesus says in Matthew 7:1-5. To me, in the whole scope of what is going on in the world and it's problems, this does not rise to the level of what we should really be focusing our efforts on.

I am pretty simple and practical in application of my theology. It seems to me that debating scripture on this issue only winds up in a tie. For me, Jesus breaks the tie. I am also hopelessly selfish: as long as I don't have to change the way I feel called to live out my walk of discipleship – I am okay.

Pastor Jim

P.S. If it turns out that I am wrong about all of this, I believe in a God who will catch me because his love is stronger than my sin.

For those of you who may not share my understanding, I hope you will continue to welcome my friendship as a brother in Christ.