

Ending the Teaching of Contempt against the Church's Sexual Minorities

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I would like to begin with a text of scripture that has been really speaking to me. I've been finding myself going back to it again and again.

I keep being driven back to Jeremiah, and in Chapter 1, Jeremiah is commissioned with a call to speak an unpopular word to his own people. And he is not especially happy about that calling. but he does what he's called to do. And there's a word of challenge at the end of Jeremiah Chapter 1 that may speak to all of us in one way or another. (By the way, if you're tweeting, it's @DPGushee. I mean, Jeremiah and Twitter all in there together. It is the year 2014 after all. So maybe this speaks to you as you prepare to go back to your places of service, to your families and friends and churches.)

God says to Jeremiah, in verse 17: "But you, gird up your loins." Got to love that expression. "Stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you."

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Lord God, I believe most of us in this room are confident that we are participating in something far greater than ourselves, that your spirit is all over what is a movement for the gospel, even when people say it's contrary to the gospel. That it is a movement for justice. It's a movement for love. It's a movement for a more Christlike church. And I pray that all of us in our own way will do what you have called us to do in that movement. And that we would stand up tall and strong. that we would not be afraid of anyone and that we would play our part in finally ending the discrimination and hurt that has come to our LGBT brothers and sisters for far too long.

Lord, thank you for your forgiveness of me for my tardiness on this issue. Thank you for welcoming a family as big as your love. And thank you for this chance to gather tonight. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I've called this address "Ending the teaching of contempt against the church's sexual minorities." I want to talk tonight about a small minority group that was for almost 2,000 years the object of a tragically destructive, religiously motivated contempt on the part of the church of Jesus Christ.

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The church's teaching about this group was grounded in a number of biblical texts drawn from across the canon of scripture as they had been interpreted by Christian leaders and reinforced by centuries of Christian tradition. This destructive pattern of interpreting these texts went back near the origins of Christianity and eventually was very broadly shared by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant strands of the church. One could even describe it as a rare point of unity for these warring groups. They could agree on little, but they did agree on this.

It was hard to find many dissenters to this tradition as it was grounded in knowledge sources at the very center of Christianity, scripture, tradition, and major church leaders. What they said generation after generation.

Everyone just knew that the group that was the object of this negative teaching was well worthy of the church's rejection and disdain. Everyone just knew that this disdain was biblical and that it was attested by the highest authorities of the church. Indeed, expressing rejection and disdain for this group became a core part of Christian identity, even Christian piety.

The church's negative teaching about this group was comprehensive. The church taught a disdain for this group as a whole and for all individuals in this group. The church taught that this group was morally inferior. The church often taught that this group was evil and had a particular association with Satan. The church taught that all members of this group would be eternally separated from God. The church taught that the worship practices of this group were worthless. The church warned its adherents about associating with this group. The church ascribed particular vices to this group, including sexual degeneracy and violence, especially against children. Even the term used to name this group became a slur in itself.

While other even more derogatory slurs were developed against this group, the church at times was willing to welcome individual members of this group into its fellowship, but this welcome was equivocal. Converts from this group were often relegated to second-class status, if they were welcome at all. Often their group background came up, especially in relation to questions of leadership or ordination. This reflected a lingering taint associated with this group. A taint that even conversion could not wash away at least some of the time. Often this half welcome was withdrawn, and members of this group were exiled not only from the church but from the communities in which they lived.

While the leaders of the church almost never explicitly taught that its members should perpetrate violence against this group, this unfortunate group was indeed regularly victimized by violence. Because these outbreaks of violence were so frequent, a special term was coined to name them, a term which survives to this day.

Meanwhile, in everyday life, bullying was common against the members of this group. Name calling was constant. Social separation was routinely enforced. Preaching regularly

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communicated contempt for this group. No Christian wanted to be seen as too cozy with this group for fear of sharing in its moral taint and losing the support of their own family and friends.

When this group was targeted by the state, few Christians could be found who would stand in solidarity with them. From the perspective of the members of this targeted group, Christianity was everywhere and Christianity was dangerous. The church's Bible, cross, tradition, clergy, and scholars carried not positive but negative associations, associations of harm.

Members of this targeted group sometimes knew of the beautiful and do unto others as you would have them do unto you." And as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me. But members of this targeted group, very much the least of these in Christendom, rarely experienced any golden rule, any love, or any mercy from the Christians who heard and proclaimed these beautiful words.

Have you figured out who I'm talking about yet?

Eventually, the centuries-old tradition of disdain for this group, which lay deep in the marrow of Western civilization and survived the transition into secular modernity, metastasized into a massive eruption of state-sponsored violence. By the time it was over, one-third of all members of this group in the entire world had been murdered. I am one of the scholars who have sadly documented that most Christians stood by doing nothing to help the targeted group while they were being targeted for death.

Perhaps you have by now figured out that the targeted group I am talking about is the Jewish people: victims of an un-Christlike body of tradition generally called Christian anti-Judaism, which fed into and married up with a broader economic, cultural and political antisemitism. I discuss this un-Christlike body of Christian tradition in many of my writings, including my first book, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*.

Note, I will say the word un-Christlike 14 more times in this address. When you hear it, think: violation of the nature, ministry, and teaching of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Or just think harmful and unloving, the opposite of what Christ was and is like. I chose the term very carefully.

Anyone looking at the ubiquity of Christian antisemitism in, say, 1935, could never have imagined that it would ever change, would ever get better. Certainly, Jews who had been documenting and protesting this tradition for millennia had very little reason for hope in 1935. But amazingly, within about 20 years of this murderous assault of antisemitic state violence during World War II, most branches of an appalled Christian world intentionally began changing their teaching about Judaism and the Jewish people. It was a profound transformation involving

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both subtle and overt repudiation of past teaching along with the development of new teaching. and it is very relevant to our gathering this evening.

During this Christian repudiation of two millennia of anti-Judaism and antisemitism certain things happened. You might be interested in what happened and how it happened. First, biblical passages that everyone had interpreted a certain way were now interpreted in new ways or contextualized more seriously or treated as secondary to more important texts and themes.

I will name three pivotal New Testament texts whose interpretation changed dramatically, had been damaging before and then was changed. But there were many, many other texts whose reading had contributed to this destructive tradition of Christian anti-Judaism. Consider the line in Matthew 27:25 where the crowd crying for Jesus' death says, "His blood be on us and on our children." That passage, that verse, used to be taken to mean that every Jewish person in the world then or later bore responsibility for the death of Jesus. All Jews were viewed as "Christ killers." And this became a common derogatory term for Jews. Christian kids would call Jewish kids "Christ-killers" on the playground.

Because of the concerted efforts of Christian leaders, in dialogue with Jewish leaders beginning around 1960 or 1965, almost no Christian after that point taught or believed that Jews as a people bore responsibility for the death of Jesus. Probably none of you have ever heard Jews derided as Christ-killers. I hope not. And that's a really good change.

Or John 8:44, which reports Jesus saying this to the Jews: "You are from your father, the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature. For he is a liar and the father of lies." For centuries in Christendom, that text was taken to mean that Jews, as a people, were the children of Satan and that they shared their diabolical father's characteristic behavior such as murder and lying. Pious Christian children in Europe, and apparently here as well, sometimes used to check their Jewish playmates' heads for the horns that they had been told were shaved off and were under their hair. I met a lady from Poland who told me about that story; she was a Holocaust survivor.

But because of the concerted efforts of Christian leaders in dialogue with Jewish leaders beginning around 1965, almost no Christian taught or believed that Jews are the children of Satan after that point. This passage is now taught very carefully, and it is not taught as applying to the Jews as a people. And that's a really good change.

Here's another one. Acts 7 tells the story of the church's first martyr, Stephen. Have you ever noticed that just before the rocks start flying at his head, he says this to his Jewish questioners? He says, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears. You are forever opposing the Holy Spirit just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not

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persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the righteous one and now you have become his betrayers and murderers.” For centuries in Christendom, this text was taken to mean that the entire history, the entire history of the Jewish people had been a story of rebellion against God. There was nothing good in it. It was all rebellion. This was called the “trail of crimes” tradition and it was widely shared.

But because of the concerted efforts of Christian leaders, eventually, in dialogue with Jewish leaders, after 1965 almost no Christian taught or believed the “trail of crimes” teaching that almost everybody had believed 100 years before. Leaders now emphasized God's election of the Jewish people, their covenant with God, the grandeur of the Jewish religious tradition, and its continued significance in the world today. And that's a really good change.

And it wasn't just biblical passages that had to be considered. Has anybody ever said to you, "But it's tradition?"

So, let's talk about tradition a little bit.

Historians at the same time began digging into the writings of the church fathers and other great leaders of the church. Eventually, a Jewish historian named Jules Isaac coined the phrase “teaching of contempt” to describe how Christians – the church fathers and other Christian leaders – used to write about Jews. Leaders as famous and diverse as Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Hippolytus, Justin Martyr, Eusebius, and Augustine himself, all have deeply problematic passages about the Jewish people in their writings.

Scholars saw that the problem came forward through the Middle Ages and into Protestantism despite the reformation. In fact, one of the most atrocious teachings ever about the Jewish people was offered by Martin Luther. In 1543, he wrote a text called “On the Jews and Their Lives.” In that text, Luther said that the synagogues of the Jewish people should be burned down, their religious books should be destroyed. And even the most infamous line in this text is: “We are at fault in not slaying them.” Martin Luther 1543.

But meanwhile, leaders of Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism carried forward their own teachings of contempt against Jews. Christians wondering during the Holocaust whether to rescue Jews found little support in their faith for doing so. Many responded to the Jewish person in need at the door by quoting Bible passages to them and teachings from the church fathers. I write about that in my first book.

But after the war, many church bodies eventually abandoned or explicitly repented of this body of tradition. For example, the Lutheran churches of both Germany and the US repudiated Luther's terribly damaging writings about the Jews. Now, wherever Luther's book, “On the Jews and Their Lives” (which was over 200 pages, by the way, and is a long book) is in print, it is accompanied by a warning and very careful contextualization.

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The Catholic Church also steered sharply away from its former teachings. These wonderful changes, far too long in coming, have undoubtedly saved Jewish lives all over the world. Christian understandings of Judaism have been transformed. Now, antisemitism is by no means dead. Far from it. Indeed, in many places, it is disturbingly on the rise, which all Christians must oppose.

But here's my point. The un-Christlike body of Christian anti-Jewish teaching that grounded this contempt has been rejected almost everywhere, especially in the Western world. Today, at my seminary, the McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University, Jewish rabbis participate in teaching our students about Judaism in the Hebrew Bible and no one thinks twice about it. Simply impossible 50 years ago or 100 years ago. And now here in 2014, probably very few, if any of you, have ever heard passages like Matthew 27, John 8, and Acts 7 taught in the way that they were taught for almost 2,000 years. And probably the great majority of you did not know that there was a centuries-old teaching of contempt by the church against Jews. You didn't know it because most of you are blissfully young. You never had to hear it. You never had to sit under a preacher spewing that stuff at you.

You never had to hear it because this un-Christlike body of Christian teaching – rightly labeled a teaching of contempt – was repudiated 50 years ago. And I hope you never have to encounter it again after tonight. But I also hope you will never forget what I've told you.

And now I make a turn.

I've been talking about the church's teaching of contempt against Jews for 2,000 words to match up the 2,000 years of tradition. Why in the world would I be talking about this for 2,000 words? Maybe you can figure it out.

I am fully aware of the limits of all historical analogies. As a longtime participant in Jewish Christian dialogue and scholarship, I am especially aware of the sensitivities of this particular historical analogy: very much aware of that. In fact, those tempted to critique my comparison, and I do have some critics these days, you might have gathered might be interested to know that I have checked my text with very highly placed friends in the American Jewish community to be sure that I did not offend or overreach or state the history wrong.

So let me proceed to lay out what I believe to be the appropriate analogies that can be drawn. I believe today I believe with all my heart that the Christian church has inflicted a damaging and ultimately un-Christlike body of Christian tradition amounting to a teaching of contempt against its own sexual minorities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons.

This teaching of contempt has been grounded in what is actually a relatively small number of biblical texts as they have been interpreted by Christian leaders and reinforced by Christian tradition. It has been hard to find many dissenters to this tradition as it has been grounded in

knowledge sources seen to be at the very center of Christianity scripture, tradition, and the loudest leaders of the church.

Everyone just knew. They just knew the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people were worthy of the church's rejection and disdain. Not just in their sexual desires or practices, but in their persons. For some Christians even today, and this is really sad, being anti-gay became woven into the heart of their understanding of Christian identity and their practice of Christian piety. The church's anti-LGBT or anti-sexual minority teaching was comprehensive. The church taught a disdain for LGBT people as a whole and for all individuals in the group. The church taught that LGBT people are morally inferior. The church sometimes taught that LGBT people are evil. Certainly, it taught and sometimes still teaches, that LGBT people are, by definition, excluded from heaven. Ever had a certain passage quoted at you related to that?

The church warned its adherents about associating with LGBT people. The church at various times ascribed particular vices to LGBT people, including sexual degeneracy. The church at times was willing to welcome individual LGBT people into its fellowship, but this welcome was equivocal. LGBT people were often relegated to second-class status, which surfaced especially in relation to questions of leadership in the church, and often this half welcome was withdrawn.

Here one Jewish reader of this lecture commented to me that in this sense, it was easier in most eras of Christianity for Jews to find full and unequivocal welcome in the church than it has ever been for gay and lesbian people to find full and unequivocal welcome. He said conversion meant that a Jew became a Christian, but conversion doesn't mean that a gay person becomes a straight person. Not that people haven't tried.

While the leaders of the church almost never explicitly taught that its members should perpetrate violence on LGBT people, they were, and sometimes still are, victimized by outbreaks of violence. Schoolyard bullying was common. Name calling was constant. Social separation was enforced. Preaching regularly communicated disdain. Few Christians wanted to be seen as too cozy with LGBT people for fear of sharing in their moral taint and losing the support of their own family and friends. The very words used to describe LGBT people functioned as slurs.

When LGBT people were excluded or targeted by the state, few Christians would stand up for the victims of this targeting. From the perspective of our sexual minorities, Christianity has been both ubiquitous and dangerous. The church's Bible, cross, tradition, clergy, and scholars have brought harm or have been read to bring harm.

LGBT people, millions raised in the church and deeply committed to Jesus, have certainly known of the beautiful teachings of Christianity. They've heard the great sayings, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. As you did it to the least of

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these, you did it to me.” But LGBT people, very much the least of these in Christendom, rarely experienced such love toward themselves.

No golden rule, no love, no mercy – from the Christians who heard and proclaimed these beautiful words and then withdrew them quickly in the presence of LGBT people.

So now I have made a historical analogy but immediately I again know that analogies have their limits. So let me make a couple of comments about that. I am not claiming that LGBT people have faced genocide, but it is true, as you know, that it remains physically dangerous to be a sexual minority or gender identity minority in many places not just around the world but here. I have students from other parts of the world who come to my seminary who tell me of routine violence inflicted against sexual minorities in their home countries and such I understand such violence has been discussed here as well. Yes, there has been no genocide but still we speak of a group of people that even today even in our country sometimes hear people speaking about them with quotes from scripture suggesting that they should all be executed.

I once was to be the next guest on a Christian radio show and while I was waiting, I heard a Christian preacher say, "Well, I just think they should all be executed." And this was just a few years ago. Unbelievable. Unthinkable. I think the analogy holds.

The analogy breaks down in an interestingly different way. When a Jewish child discovered the contempt of the Christian world in which he or she lived, they could at least go home and find support with their family. But a gay or lesbian child, or a transgender child, in discovering the contempt of the wider Christian world, has often faced an even more devastating lack of support at home. There was no refuge, not even at home.

And here is one more way the analogy breaks down, but this time more constructively, and I think in a way that gives us hope. The un-Christlike teaching of contempt for Jews has been discredited. No mainstream Christian leader that I know of teaches it anymore. At least not here. People have been saying to me, “you know, the Bible doesn't change. The Bible doesn't change.” No, the Bible doesn't change. But what the Bible was understood to mean in relation to the Jewish people changed a very great deal in a very short period of time.

In my view, the un-Christlike teaching of contempt for LGBT people is in the process of being discredited, of breaking down even as we speak. It is breaking down. Every year elements of this tradition lose ground. You can actually watch it happen. I am now confident that Christianity is in the process of undergoing the same repudiation of an un-Christlike body of tradition today, in regards to our sexual minorities, as happened 50 years ago in regards to antisemitism.

It is happening – which is one reason people are so uncomfortable, because the change is visible.

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So this is the point of my comparison, and I want everybody in the world to hear me say this. Tweet me, Facebook me, video me. I am comparing two different un-Christlike bodies of Christian tradition. One of which has been discredited and abandoned. The other of which needs to be and is in the process of being discredited and abandoned. Amen.

We must celebrate the progress that is being made day by day in repudiating the teaching of contempt against that part of the human family that is LGBT. But we also must finish the job as quickly as we can, before another child gets kicked out of their house, another child feels like they have to kill themselves, another family gets fractured, another gifted Christian is booted out of the church. We have to finish the job. And that's what this is about. In my book, *Changing Our Mind*, I talk about how change is happening, how the discrediting and abandoning of parts of the anti-LGBT teaching of contempt is happening. This is progress.

Today, leaders of many traditionalist Christian communities try not to verbally stigmatize or demonize gays and lesbians, transgender people anymore. That's progress. Some.

Today, some of the previous culture wars, fights that traditionalist Christians once led, have almost been forgotten. You remember the Disney boycott, gays in the military? Anybody talking about that anymore? No. Some traditionalists are suggesting that the fights over gay marriage are doing the church's mission more harm than good. And they're calling for the church to stand down on that.

Change is definitely happening in relation to accepting well-established clinical research and scientific claims about sexual orientation and gender identity. This is undoubtedly related to straight people more often getting to know lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In 1993, 22% of Americans, reported having a close friend or family member who was gay or lesbian. In 2013, that number had risen to 65%. That's been transformative. More traditionalist Christians than ever accept that some portion of human beings simply are of same-sex orientation. Fewer make the ungrounded claim that sexual orientation is willful perversity, chosen, and changeable. Reparative or ex-gay treatment has collapsed in credibility.

Even on the traditionalist Christian side, more and more people will agree that there is such a thing as gay people. Imagine that! And, in fact, that some are Christians. I actually have a chapter in my book called *Gay Christians Exist* just to kind of help people, you know, get there. More and more are realizing that they need to really not do any slurs, or the derogatory language needs to stop, that relationships of LGBT people should not be criminalized, that there should not be employment or housing discrimination, or job discrimination, that they should not be bullied, that that they shouldn't have to be afraid of violence that they should not be

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blamed for Hurricane Katrina or the next bad thing that happens. that they should not be stigmatized or treated with contempt.

That's progress. That is ground that needs to be held.

But still, all is not well. Teaching and behavior that harms our own sexual minorities, especially in the life of the church, has not disappeared. Not by a long shot. LGBT people are still not treated as equals, as kin in the family of faith. They are often rejected by their families in churches and schools and friends. Their spiritual gifts continue to be blocked.

In just the two weeks since my own announcement that I have decided to stand in full solidarity with LGBT Christians, I have heard from scores of young people all over the world telling me their harrowing tales of rejection and harm. It's been amazing. But this harm must not continue.

Increasingly, my focus moves to the continued suffering of young people. I actually think that strategically and humanly, this is a part of the story that needs to be lifted up. So, let me tell you what I'm saying these days. Have you considered the Center for American Progress's research on LGBT homeless youth? Let me tell you about this. Homeless youth are defined as unaccompanied young people between the ages of 12 and 24 for whom it is not possible to safely live with a relative or in another safe living arrangement. Generally, the research says there's two major types of homeless youth: runaway youth and what are called, sadly, throwaway youth.

The Center for American Progress cites estimates there are between 2.4 million and 3.7 million homeless youth in America right now. probably some in this city.

LGBT young people are vastly over-represented among the homeless youth population. Did you know that? I bet you did. Several state and local studies from across the United States have found shockingly disproportionate rates of homelessness among LGBT youth compared to non-LGBT youth. One standard estimate is that about 40% of the homeless youth in America are LGBT. In studies undertaken since 2000, here's the percentage of homeless youth in some specific locations who identify as LGBT. In New York City, it's 33%. In Seattle, it's 39%. In Los Angeles, it's 25% and in Chicago it's 22%.

It's not hard at all to figure out why LGBT kids constitute such a high percentage of homeless youth. The most common reasons that they themselves cite for being out of their homes are family rejection and family conflict. And much of this family rejection is religiously motivated.

It is based on this very same un-Christlike body of Christian teaching that I've been talking about. Parents, not having a better way to respond from what they have been taught in their churches or in their tradition, all too often reject and hurt their own children, destroying their

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lives or harming them and fracturing their families in the name of faithfulness to scripture. They create despair and destroy their own families.

Now that's tragic.

Caitlyn Ryan, a friend of mine, directs the family acceptance project at San Francisco State University, which I have now joined as a faith consultant to help them with their message to the evangelical community and others. She described to me a tragic vortex. More and more children and youth are coming out as LGBT at younger ages. The Family Acceptance Project has found that the average age of coming out now is around 13. And increasingly in her research and family support work, she reports that children are identifying as gay at much younger ages between ages seven and 12.

That's new.

Because they are younger, these kids have fewer coping skills, fewer options for finding support outside the home. So their self-identity and sense of self-worth are even more vulnerable than they would be if they were older. Thus, when their families learn that their children are LGBT, if those families reject them, it comes as an even more crushing and debilitating blow than if these kids were older.

It affects their ability to love and care for themselves, to avoid dangerous and high-risk behaviors, to have hope, and to plan for the future.

The data are clear that all too often when young people come out or are found out, they are met with family rejection, which can include violent responses.

Doing evidence-based research, the Family Acceptance Project has identified and researched dozens of different specific family responses and measured them to show the relationship between experiencing either highly accepting, or highly rejecting, or somewhere in between responses from family with the health and well-being of LGBT people as young adults. Consider this. The higher the level of family rejection, the higher the likelihood of negative health, mental health, and behavioral problems on the part of LGBT young people. And the converse is also true.

As I read through the list of most destructive behaviors, think about the good Christian people that you know. Think about what it would be like to help every Christian family in America never do any of the things I'm about to say.

The most destructive family rejecting behaviors include hitting, slapping, and physical harming, verbal harassment, and name calling, exclusion from the family and from family activities,

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blocking access to LGBT friends, events, and resources, blaming the child when he or she experiences abuse or discrimination. "It's your fault. It's your fault you're being bullied." Pressuring the child to be more masculine or feminine, threatening God's punishment, making the child pray and attend religious services to change their identity and sexual orientation, sending them for reparative therapy, declaring that their child brings shame to the family, and not talking about their LGBT orientation or identity or making them keep it a secret from family members and others.

The Family Acceptance Project has found a direct correlation between highly rejecting families and the following. Kids from highly rejecting families are more than eight times as likely to have attempted suicide at least once. They are more than six times as likely to report high levels of depression, more than three times as likely to use illegal drugs, and more than three times as likely to be high risk for HIV and STDs.

The Family Acceptance Project found that even being a little less rejected, down to moderate levels – "I only moderately reject you, my child" – just a little less rejecting, a little more accepting. Even saying little things like, "You're still a part of our family. I love you. I am proud of you." Even mixing the messages a little bit reduced the harm dramatically. Youth from moderately rejecting families were only twice as likely to attempt suicide compared to LGBT peers from non-rejecting families.

You know what we're looking at here?

This is the direct consequence of a teaching of contempt that has been poured into the brains of Christian families.

It's got to stop. It's got to stop.

I received this text from the program director for the Family Acceptance Project. She said, "This is the kind of stuff I've been getting recently on Facebook. It's like a rush. I hear stories every day that are heart-rending, children sleeping in snowbanks because there are no youth shelters. Last January, I had five children kicked out of religious homes with literally nowhere to go. One girl slept in the snow in front of her school. She was 16." In the name of God.

Runaway or kicked out LGBT kids who end up on the streets as homeless youth are more likely to be homeless for longer periods than their peers. According to the Center for American Progress, the problem appears to be especially severe for transgender youth for some reason.

You know, not much good comes out of homelessness and not much good comes out of being homeless when you're 13 years old. The Center for American Progress reports some specific problems that all of us should know and talk about. For example, LGBT youth are much more

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likely to end up in child welfare or institutional care systems after being removed from their home due to conflict over LGBT related issues.

Leaving home because of family rejection is the greatest predictor of ending up in the juvenile justice system for LGBT youth. Placements in foster care or other housing all too often end in further homelessness because of bias against LGBT people or abuse and mistreatment. Once in the justice system, LGBT youth and young adults are at increased risk of being labeled sex offenders, even when not convicted of sex-related crimes.

That's just bias.

There is a disproportionate difficulty for LGBT youth in accessing safe shelter while homeless. They are disproportionately likely to engage in survival sex to meet expenses, increasing their vulnerability to rape, disease, and violence. Disproportionately, they are victimized by high rates of robbery, assault, rape, and hate crimes while on the streets. Disproportionately, they have bad health outcomes, including drug and alcohol abuse. Disproportionately, they are subject to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

This has to stop. And the only way, or at least a major way to make it stop is to turn the hearts of parents again to their own children.

This un-Christlike Christian teaching about LGBT people, thoughtlessly imbibed by good Christian parents, has to stop. We need a reformation. Perhaps a project devoted to a reformation.

I think that there are some lessons to be learned from how the Christian teaching of contempt against Jews was ended – lessons relevant to ending this un-Christlike teaching of contempt against our sexual minorities: maybe about 1/20th of the human population. Therefore, 1/20th or so, everywhere we go: hidden, closeted, wounded, exiled, beloved by God. Beloved by God.

We must highlight the human costs, which involves attending to the real human beings affected. We must engage people's hearts, not just their minds, with the real human beings who suffer under this teaching.

This is something that really surprises me about responses I've been getting. Any effort to say, "Can we describe to you the harm that you're teaching is doing?" is met by a certain slice of the Christian community with: "You're emotionalizing the issue. You're sentimentalizing the issue."

We're humanizing the issue. Human beings made in the image of God, sacred in God's sight, loved by God, people for whom Christ came and lived and died? That's emotionalizing the issue? Charge me with that all day long. if you want.

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No conversation about the LGBT issue should any longer take place without hearing the voices of LGBT people themselves and all their diversity and all their various experiences, all their experiences, lifting up voices of hurt and triumph, joy and sorrow, victory over all this junk, but also hurt. And actually, even some of the most conservative sectors of the Christian world are realizing, well, by golly, if we're going to talk about gay people, we might need to have a few of them there, you know? How about that?

So, we must highlight the human beings involved.

Secondly, we must call people, especially religious leaders, on it when they slip back into the old derogations and slurs and stereotypes. This involves identifying what the current decent minimal standard is and never allowing people to get away with slipping below that. A sort of monitoring. No, we're not allowed to be a reputable Christian leader in 2014 and say stuff like that. It's not okay. It puts moral pressure on people not to slip back into patterns that are already so destructive.

Third, we must engage the destructively cited biblical texts in the ways done by the reformers of Christian anti-Judaism beginning in the 60s. Others, like Matthew Vines and James Brownson, bringing effort and fresh research on the background and meaning of the biblical passages most commonly cited, broader contextualization of the circumstances in which they were written, and constructive reinterpretation in the spirit of Christ.

But now I'm going to be a little contrarian. One major lesson that I draw from the long struggle related to Christian anti-Judaism is that it is best not to get too fixated on the six or seven big passages most commonly cited in the anti-gay teaching tradition. Because when change happened on Christian anti-Judaism, it wasn't just about going back to John 8, and Matthew 27, and Acts 7, and other passages and saying, "Let's look at them really closely and come up with a new interpretation." Instead, it involved changing the conversation to the more central texts related to the following of Jesus Christ, what it means to be the people of Christ.

So, we must change the conversation. Not that we'll duck those other texts, but we must change the conversation to what it means to live in the way that Jesus taught us.

I noticed this when I was studying Christian rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. One thing I looked at was if you got 1% of the Christian population who is risking their lives to save Jews, what's different about them? How did they read their Bible? And it was never because they read John 8 and Matthew 27 and Acts 7 differently, not in 1942.

It was because they believed that Jesus taught us the golden rule. And Jesus said that if you if you want to love God, if you want to be my follower, you love God with everything and you love your neighbor as yourself. And Jesus taught about good Samaritans attending to the bleeding ones by the side of the road, and themes like being our brother's keepers and the sacred worth

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of every person and our obligations to be compassionate, merciful, and just. I now increasingly wonder that if we spend all of our time arguing about Leviticus 18, and 1 Corinthians 6:9 and Romans 1, we may be missing the opportunity to call Christians back to the central texts and themes that are supposed to be central in our lives as Christians anyway.

I mean it isn't like there are very many Christians who wake up in the morning saying how am I going to live my life today? What's going to be central for me loving treating people right and following Jesus? They don't go to Leviticus 18. They just don't.

They go to “take up your cross and follow me. Love your neighbor as yourself. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and all kinds of other richly meaningful central themes. If we allow people to move the debate to the margins, in a sense, we're giving up ground we shouldn't give up.

What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? It looks more like that. And then when we're challenged, double down. Cling to Jesus' example and the way he conducted his ministry. Spend a lot of time in the Gospels. Maybe if we did that, we might notice his warnings about religious self-righteousness and contempt for others, about his embrace of outcasts and marginalized people, about his attacks on religious leader types who block access to God's grace, about his elevating as examples those who simply and humbly pray for God's mercy like repentant tax collectors, and his teachings about God's prodigious grace. Perhaps, above all, about his death on the cross for the sins of all of us, beginning with each of us, the chief of sinners. We must focus tightly on Jesus Christ, our savior and Lord, and ask, “What is the most faithful path of following Jesus?”

And we must listen for and be ready for the Spirit of God, which looks like our hard hearts melting, our calcified minds changing, our spirits repenting. It looks like our church is growing more inclusive, our courage deepening, our love for the unwanted growing fierce. It looks like joyful cross bearing for Jesus' sake. It looks like solidarity with the oppressed. It looks like abundant joy.

But this work is hard for a couple of reasons. One is you have the issue itself, but then there's also the authority problem in the church, and we really have to be sensitive to this. It's never just about a few Bible passages and how they should be interpreted. It's about capital 'A' authority: the authority of scripture, the authority of tradition, the authority of those well-coiffed church leaders you see on TV telling you the authoritative interpretation of this or that passage. It's about who gets to say who's got it right.

That issue is hard enough. It's really hard in evangelicalism. It's also about the general unwillingness of Christians to admit they might have gotten something wrong either individually or collectively. The idea is very unsettling. It's hard to face. Have you ever heard anybody say, "If

we're wrong about this, what else might we be wrong about?" The cognitive world begins to shake. So that's not about the LGBT question. That's about how do I know anything? It makes people nervous and antsy.

It's especially hard for those who are responsible for institutions to admit prior error. "We were wrong. Our church was wrong. Our policy was wrong." That might involve repentance. And that's a problem. We don't want to do that. We've got an institution to protect. But the church has repented before. It's really important to remind people that the church has gotten some key things wrong before. Not to make them feel bad, but to say, "Look, the church repented of anti-semitism and of supporting slavery and some horrible teachings about women and race.

And you know what? We can repent now. And we can survive repentance and end up better on the other side." Breaking open a settled paradigm seems to take transformative encounters with God and with people empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is what happened to me. People want to know my story. I had the privilege of getting to know and love LGBT people who God sent my way. And the old biblical paradigm simply could not hold up anymore.

It included my own sister who you may have heard about but lots of other people too. Mainly in my local congregation, sisters and brothers in my church. It was not an issue anymore after that. But not everyone has such encounters or is open to them. One reason we all need to come out as LGBT or allies is so we can make such transformative encounters available to more of those who have not had them yet.

Everyone who comes out makes it harder for evangelical America to believe that this is someone else's problem. Meanwhile, it's hard for Christians to change their minds and their hearts if they have never had a meaningful conversation with an LGBT person or a fiercely committed ally.

So, so let's get out there.

Finally, people have woven the LGBT narrative into a broader cultural decline narrative that goes something like this: "Our culture has turned away from God, sliding down the slippery slide. And we need to stop it right here. And the way we'll stop it is by blocking any advance for inclusion for LGBT people." Here once again, LGBT people turn into symbols, not people. Symbols.

Bringing an end to the marginalization and mistreatment of sexual minority Christians and others requires helping our sisters and brothers in the church see that LGBT Christians are not agents of cultural decline but marginalized brothers and sisters in Christ who just want full inclusion in the community of faith just like everyone else. This is not Rome burning.

The goal, I think, is pretty clear now. Ultimately, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians must be accepted and welcomed in the church on the same basis as any other sinner

saved by the love of God in Jesus Christ. Nothing harder than that. Just that right there. Can I say it again?

Ultimately, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians must be accepted and welcomed in the church on the same basis as any other sinner saved by the love of God in Jesus Christ.

This means that your, their, our participation in Christian community must be governed by the exact same principles that apply to any other believer. This is not a revolution. This is just bringing the church into contact with its own deepest commitments. It shouldn't have to be a revolution anyway to get the church to be the church for all.

For many, such a claim is an obvious truth. But as you well know, it is not a truth universally acknowledged.

In the end, incremental progress toward partial conditional half acceptance is not enough. You are right to ask and to require full unequivocal equal acceptance in the Christ's church on the same terms as everybody else. And, by the way, this includes the fierce debate over sexual ethics. If LGBT participation in Christian community were governed by the same principles that applied to every other believer, believers of every tribe, tongue, race, and nation, that would settle the sexual ethics debate once and for all.

What does that look like for me? I'm pretty conservative on these matters. As my book indicates, it looks like celibacy outside of lifetime covenant commitment, and monogamous fidelity within lifetime covenant commitment, which the church has historically called marriage.

This norm, as I argue in my book, applies to all Christians. It is demanding, countercultural, and essential to the well-being of children and adults. I now see that the same covenantal, marital norm should apply to that particular minority, the 1/20th or so of the human and Christian population whose difference from the majority relates to sexual orientation and gender identity. They too should be held to the same standard as every other Christian. Celibacy outside lifetime covenant marriage, monogamous fidelity within lifetime covenant marriage. The opponents of this gathering think that what we are about is moral chaos and the weakening of Christian morality.

I think what we are about is inclusion of the LGBT minority of the church into the same rigorous Christian morality that applies to every other Christian believer.

Maybe this is our moment to bring all Christians out of a kind of a moral sloppiness into the high standard of faithful covenantal monogamy. That is my agenda on that issue. And I truly apologize that it took me 20 years to figure out the simple truth.

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Let me close by saying I applaud you. Matthew Vines and friends, you impress and inspire me. You are a movement within the church, a cross-generational movement, demanding a better future for the whole church because what we have now is not okay.

You are a movement for the liberation of the oppressed like many of the most important movements for human dignity in history. You are a movement of high energy and distinctively evangelical hopefulness, based on the power of God to advance the reign of God. You are a movement whose time has come.

I will henceforth oppose any form of discrimination against you in the church or in the state. I will seek to stand in solidarity with you who have suffered the lash of countless Christian rejections. I will be your ally in every way I know how to be. And I will ask your forgiveness for how long it took me to get here.

I will view what got us here as one of those tragic situations in Christian history in which well-intentioned Christians, just trying to follow Jesus, misread scripture causing great harm to oppressed people in what turned out to be a violation of the character, teaching, and example of Jesus Christ.

It has happened before.

We have repented before. We have changed before. We can do it again. I believe it will happen sooner than many think. This debate will be over and many will wonder what the fuss was about.

One day, all of us will dine together at the banquet table of the Son of God. We will be asked, when we go to meet the Son of God, whether we loved and served Jesus with everything that was in us. And then together we will have a really great party.

Do you remember this text? (Rev. 21:3-4) "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them. They will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. Mourning and crying, and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

And on the day, we shall all be one at last. God bless you.