

GOD^{AND} THE GAY CHRISTIAN

*The Biblical Case in Support of
Same-Sex Relationships*

MATTHEW VINES



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To all those who have suffered in silence for so long



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Introduction

This is the book I dearly needed when I was wrestling with my beliefs as a Christian about same-sex relationships. After I came to terms with my sexual orientation, it's also the book I wish I could have given my parents when I came out to them.

At the time, the only Christians my parents knew who supported same-sex relationships did so by diminishing the Bible's authority, viewing Scripture as a helpful but dated guidebook.

That was not—and is not—my view of Scripture. Like other theologically conservative Christians, I hold what is often called a “high view” of the Bible. That means I believe all of Scripture is inspired by God and authoritative for my life. While some parts of the Bible address cultural norms that do not directly apply to modern societies, all of Scripture is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

When I began questioning my traditional beliefs about same-sex relationships, I was determined to base my study firmly in Scripture. I could embrace an affirming view only if it came from an honest assessment of the Bible itself. This conviction drove me to write *God and the Gay Christian*—both to share my own story and

to help other Christians seeking to faithfully interpret and apply the key biblical texts in this debate.

Since this book's initial publication in 2014, support for same-sex marriage has grown.¹ Yet changing views on this topic have also contributed to increasing numbers of people leaving the church altogether. In a 2024 survey, nearly half of those leaving the church cited negative teachings about gay and lesbian people as a key factor in their decision. Among former churchgoers under thirty, the number was a staggering 60 percent.² The church's stance on gay Christians is fast becoming a defining issue for its future.³

But the debate remains deeply polarizing. The divide between theological conservatives and progressives increasingly feels more like a chasm. As a result, many assume that affirming same-sex relationships requires overhauling one's entire belief system—if not letting go of one's faith completely.

That is why this book's core message remains vital: *Christians can affirm monogamous, covenantal same-sex relationships while continuing to affirm the authority of the Bible and orthodox Christian faith.*

This book distills many years of careful research, drawing upon decades of rigorous scholarship from leading historians, theologians, and biblical scholars. I am not a biblical scholar, so I have relied on the work of dozens of experts whose knowledge is greater than my own. My goal has not been to break new ground, but to bring credible, often-overlooked insights to light, and to synthesize those insights in clear and accessible ways for a broad audience.

Beyond this book, I have continued to pursue that goal through The Reformation Project, the nonprofit organization I started in 2013. Our work aims to engage and equip Christians with the theological knowledge they need to be effective voices for Bible-based inclusion in their church communities. Everything we do is rooted

in our three core values: love for God, love for the Bible, and love for the church.

Much of our work involves listening to the perspectives and concerns of non-affirming Christians, which remains a priority for me. In this revised edition of this book, I address key critiques I have received since its initial publication. I've refined and expanded my argument throughout, although my core thesis remains the same. Two new chapters explore how Christians can reinterpret Scripture while maintaining necessary moral boundaries (chapter 9) and how affirming believers can retain a robust orthodox theology (chapter 10). New appendices also address important historical questions about same-sex marriage and sexual orientation in the ancient world.

Regardless of your current perspective, I invite you to join me in exploring the biblical texts at the heart of this theological debate. What I learned in my study has changed both my mind and my parents' minds as well as the views of other committed Christians in my life.

My prayer is not only that this book may change minds, but also that it may help fortify the church's love for the Bible and our shared faith in Christ. Together, may we trust that the Holy Spirit will guide us as we seek to discern God's will for the church today.



GOD AND THE GAY CHRISTIAN



A Tree and Its Fruit

My knees buckled, my stomach turned, and I felt the strength drain from my body. It was my sophomore fall at Harvard, and after a long week of classes, I had stopped by the campus convenience store. Standing alone in the toothpaste aisle, I finally asked myself the question I'd managed to avoid for years. *Am I gay?*

The answer was obvious—it could have been obvious for years, if I hadn't worked so hard to ignore it. But it was also terrifying. Even though I was going to a school that embraced gay students and living in a state that had legalized same-sex marriage years earlier, I suddenly found myself feeling hopeless.

Life at college wasn't the problem. The problem was sixteen hundred miles away, in Wichita, Kansas. I'd been at school for only a little over a year, and Kansas remained far more important to me than Cambridge, Massachusetts. But for everything I enjoyed about my home state, most people I knew there made a significant exception to their midwestern friendliness: gay people. My Presbyterian church, in particular, was filled with kindhearted, caring Christians. But when it came to homosexuality, their views were set. If you were in a same-sex relationship, you were living in sin. Period.

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Still frozen in place at the back of the convenience store, my new reality triggered memories. With each one came a fresh wave of anguish.

Take the summer before I left for college. Our pastor had lamented from the pulpit that progressives in our denomination were advocating for the ordination of “practicing homosexuals.” Heads shook in dismay and disappointment.

My parents were opposed to the gay rights movement, even though my older sister and I had become more open to it. My final year of high school, my sister, Christine, returned from college with the news that one of her close friends had come out. (I’ll call him Josh.) Mom, who had known and loved Josh since he was born, was devastated. Dad questioned Josh’s judgment.

“How does he know he can never marry a woman?” Dad asked.

“He’s gay, Dad,” I said. “Why would he?”

“I’m not convinced he couldn’t overcome this. It just seems like he’s decided not to try.”

That night, Christine and I shared our frustrations. “They just don’t get it,” she said. “Josh marrying a woman would be a recipe for disaster.”

I still didn’t know what to think about gay marriage, but I wasn’t all that fazed by her friend’s revelation. The gay people I’d met at school seemed reasonably well adjusted, and criticizing them for not trying to be straight didn’t make sense. Whether it was a sin or not, I thought, gay people were still gay, and ignoring their orientation wasn’t going to help.

But my dad didn’t know any openly gay people, and he had always understood the Bible to be against homosexuality. If God was against it, Dad said, God wouldn’t make anyone gay. So even if

some people struggled with same-sex attraction, he was confident they could develop heterosexual attractions over time.

Other students came and went from the convenience store, but I stood there, ashen. I stared blankly at rows of toothpaste, thinking about the year Josh came out—and what would happen when I did too.

For Josh, coming out to his family had been agonizing. Our church, he rightly guessed, would not have been any happier to hear his news. Not wanting to subject himself to widespread rejection, he left town for his out-of-state college.

He left church too.

This was a young man who often shared his musical talents with our church, singing and playing original songs in front of hundreds on Sunday mornings. He was one of the smartest kids in high school, and he was voted onto homecoming court his senior year. Now when people talked about him, it was in hushed tones. The sense of shame over what people assumed to be his “decision” was palpable.

Feeling rejected by our church and alienated from God, Josh started much of his life over on the West Coast. In time, he found it impossible to keep believing in a loving God. As he saw it, the God of the Bible required him to hate a core part of himself. Not surprisingly, he also gave up on the Bible, since, in his view, it had taught others to reject that part of him too. Thankfully, his family came around over time, and they now embrace him. But much of the damage from our church’s stance had already been done. Josh’s faith, along with his place in the church community that first nurtured it, was already lost.

I walked home from the store that night feeling sick. All week-

end, I could barely eat or sleep. Trying to concentrate on my studies was impossible.

In the days and weeks ahead, I did my best to figure out a way forward. Josh's path—as much as I empathized with him—wasn't an option for me. My faith had been of central importance to me for as long as I could remember. When I was two years old, my parents bought me a children's Bible, which I studied diligently over the years. One Sunday, while riding home from church at the age of three, I asked Jesus to come into my heart. (I would repeat this request countless times before I made it to middle school, just to make sure it worked.)

My parents nurtured a faith in Jesus in me and my sister, giving us a moral and spiritual anchor as we grew up. Just as important, Mom and Dad lived out their faith in loving and authentic ways, daily confirming for us the value of placing Christ at the center of our lives. So even though I was now facing the fact of my sexual orientation, my faith in God was not in jeopardy. That was especially true because, after doing a Bible study on the topic the year before, I had already come to question whether God's views on gay people matched what many Christians back home seemed to think they were.

But while my faith felt secure, my relationship with my parents—and with our entire church community—had never felt more fragile. Homosexuality, to the limited extent it was discussed in our church, was little more than a political football, a quick test of orthodoxy. The “progressives” in our denomination supported it, but anyone who truly believed in the authority of the Bible, I was told, did not. In all this, the concerns, lives, and dignities of *gay people* were not mentioned. (As more than a few parishioners would later

tell me, they had never stopped to think whether there might be any gay people in our church.)

By some strange feat of the will, I had been able to suppress my own awareness of my sexual orientation until I was nineteen. But I knew that wasn't the case for many others, maybe most others. For a young kid who realizes she is gay and has no one at home or church she can talk to, it can be an impossibly heavy burden. For a young man like Josh, who internalized rejection from our church with barely a word spoken, it can drive a wedge between him and God.

And what would become of me?

Weeks passed. After deep prayer and several long conversations with my sister and with some friends, I realized what I had to do. I packed my bags that Christmas, boarded a plane home for Kansas, and anxiously peered out the window. Boston would soon be slipping away, replaced by the familiar terrain of the Bible Belt. But this time, going home would be different. This time, I was going to come out.

MY DAD'S WORST DAY

My dad would later tell me the day I came out to him was the worst day of his life. His sister had passed away the year before; his father years earlier. But the day I said "Dad, I'm gay" was the worst day of his life. To his credit, though, he didn't tell me that at the time. He hugged me and listened as I nervously stumbled over my words for an hour and a half. Then he told me he loved me.

My mom, too, responded with open arms, but the news was hard for her to hear. She could barely eat for several days afterward,

and she spent much of the next year deeply dispirited. Still, I was grateful for my parents' unfailing compassion and love.

What that love would ultimately look like, though, was unclear. At first, my dad wanted me to consider trying to change my sexual orientation. He'd heard of groups that claimed to change people from gay to straight, and he asked me to read some books he had borrowed from our church on the subject. I was skeptical, but I read them.

He read the books too, and we were both struck by how modest their claims actually were. These "ex-gay" organizations, for the most part, did not claim to be changing anyone's sexual *orientation*. They focused instead on changing people's *behavior*. For people who had been caught up in abusive relationships, drug addictions, or promiscuity, changing those behaviors was surely beneficial. But those changes had no bearing on their sexual orientation—and they didn't speak to my situation either.

I had never been promiscuous or suffered abuse. At an early age, I committed myself to abstinence until marriage. Coming to terms with being gay didn't change that. I wanted to honor my body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. But I also cherished the idea of one day having my own family, so I wanted to explore whether a committed same-sex relationship could be honoring to God.

As a lawyer, my dad weighed the evidence for the possibility of orientation change. Pointing to Matthew 19:26, he reminded me that all things are possible with God. Yet after reading a fair amount about "ex-gay" ministries, he realized that none of the evidence seemed to show God was changing gay people's sexual orientation. So whatever my path forward might be, orientation change was not likely to be it.

That realization answered one question for my dad, but it opened

up a host of others. If heterosexual marriage wasn't a realistic option for me, what should I do? Leviticus called male same-sex relations an "abomination," and Paul condemned same-sex behavior as "unnatural." As much as my dad loved me, he couldn't disregard what he saw as a clear teaching of Scripture.

SEARCHING OUT WHAT THE BIBLE REALLY TEACHES

The traditional interpretation of six passages in the Bible—Genesis 19:5; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10—has stood in the way of countless gay people who long for acceptance from their Christian parents, friends, and churches. I was blessed by my parents' continued love, but absent a significant change for my dad in particular, we were likely to end up stuck in the same place: compassion, but no support for a future romantic relationship.

I shared my parents' concerns about the importance and authority of Scripture. In my view, the Bible can't be reduced to a collection of great literature, stories, and poetry. It is God's written revelation to humanity, as the accounts of Jesus's life and ministry in the Gospels make clearer to me than anything else. Jesus said that "Scripture cannot be set aside" (John 10:35), and since childhood, I've made discerning God's will through prayerful study of Scripture a priority.

But while I'd once agreed with my parents' views on homosexuality, I didn't anymore. Even before I let myself acknowledge my own sexual orientation, I had been studying the Bible's references to same-sex behavior and discussing the issue with Christian friends. Some of what I'd learned seemed to undermine the traditional in-

terpretation of those passages. For instance, Leviticus prohibited male same-sex relations, but the Old Testament law code has never applied to Christians. And while Paul did describe same-sex relations as “unnatural,” he also wrote that for men to wear their hair long was contrary to “nature.” Yet Christians don’t regard men having long hair as sinful. A more comprehensive exploration of Scripture was in order.

I had another reason for losing confidence in the belief that same-sex relationships are sinful: it no longer made sense to me.

My mom taught her Sunday school students that sin was “missing the mark” of God’s will for our lives. But while the Bible helps us understand God’s will, neither my parents nor my church referred only to the Bible when I asked questions about morality. They also explained *why* something was right or wrong, and why the Bible said what it did. By understanding the reasons behind Scripture’s teachings, I could apply its principles to all circumstances in my life, including those it didn’t directly address.

But as I became more aware of same-sex relationships, I couldn’t understand why they were sinful, or why the Bible apparently condemned them. With most sins, it wasn’t hard to pinpoint the damage they cause. Adultery violates a commitment to your spouse. Lust objectifies others. Gossip degrades people. But committed same-sex relationships didn’t fit this pattern. Not only were they not harmful to anyone, they were characterized instead by positive motives and traits, like faithfulness, commitment, mutual love, and self-sacrifice.

What other sin looked like that?

But that wasn’t all. The church’s condemnation of same-sex relationships also seemed to be harmful to the long-term well-being of most gay people. By condemning homosexuality, the church was

shutting off a primary avenue for relational joy and companionship in gay people's lives. That wasn't the case with other sins. Avoiding other sins always seemed to work to the long-term benefit of ourselves and others.

I'll always be grateful that my parents were willing to take a closer look at this topic with me. But we all needed more time for study, prayer, and discussion with others. So instead of returning to Harvard for the coming spring semester, I decided to stay home. There, I set about finding as many resources as I could to better understand the Bible and homosexuality.

By the summer, my parents were more comfortable discussing the topic, and some of our friends from church had responded with grace and openness when I came out to them. But they were only a small fraction of our congregation's two thousand members.

"DO PEOPLE PICK GRAPES FROM THORNBUSHES?"

"You're elevating your experience over Scripture," a frustrated member of my church told me over coffee. "I don't accept that."

It was June, and my coming out to our larger church community was off to a mixed start. A worship team member had agreed to meet at a coffee shop, where he expressed concern about my openness to the idea that same-sex relationships may not be sinful. His study of the Bible had led him to conclude that both the Old and the New Testaments condemn homosexuality. While he could appreciate my distress over the harm that understanding may cause gay people, he said he could not allow mere experience to override Scripture's witness.

I agreed with that core point: Scripture should hold greater authority than personal experience. After all, our experience is a falli-

ble guide to truth. Proverbs 3:5 tells us, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.” So, too, Jeremiah 17:9 reminds us that “the heart is deceitful above all things.” If we simply do what feels right to us, we can be led dangerously astray.

This principle, however, also applies to how we study and interpret the Bible itself. “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16), yet *our understanding* of Scripture can be wrong. In fact, our fallibility as human interpreters is precisely why I was asking others to study the issue more closely. I didn’t want them to ignore the Bible based on my experience. I was simply asking them to reconsider their *interpretation* of the Bible.¹

While Scripture tells us not to rely solely on personal experience, it also cautions us against ignoring our experience altogether. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against false prophets, using a term that has long been understood to refer to teachers of false doctrines as well.² Jesus explained how his followers could determine true prophets from false ones. In Matthew 7:15–20, he said:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Jesus’s test is simple: If something bears bad fruit, it cannot be a good tree. And if something bears good fruit, it cannot be a bad tree.

Jesus applied this test specifically to false prophets or teachers, but Christians have long recognized that the principle also applies to teachings themselves. As the nineteenth-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote in his commentary on this passage, “[T]his is the best test of any doctrine, the practice to which it leads.” John Gill, an eighteenth-century English theologian, argued similarly, writing, “Their doctrines are here meant, and the effects of them.”³

You may be wondering: How can we apply this “fruit” test objectively? Might people be able to dismiss any challenging teaching by claiming it produces bad fruit?⁴

Fortunately, we don’t have to look far to find guardrails in Scripture on how to implement Jesus’s teaching. As both Augustine and Martin Luther noted in their commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount, the Bible itself defines what good fruit is in its discussion of the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23).⁵

What’s more, even our discernment of the fruit of the Spirit can be checked against Scripture. If an interpretation of the Bible appears to bear bad fruit, that isn’t a license to simply abandon that interpretation. After all, our assessment of the fruit could be faulty. Instead, discerning bad fruit should invite us to be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11 by returning to Scripture and studying it more carefully. While our experience can lead us to revisit our *interpretation* of Scripture, it cannot override Scripture itself.

The earliest Christians used a similar, experience-based test when making what was one of the most consequential decisions in church history: whether to include Gentiles in the church without requiring them to be circumcised and obey the Old Testament law. As Peter declared of early Gentile believers, “God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to

them, just as he did to us. . . . Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:8, 10). The early church made a profoundly important decision based on Peter’s testimony. His experience led them to read the Bible anew—interpreting the same texts both differently and more faithfully. As a result, Gentiles were included in the church, and the church recognized that the old law was no longer binding.

In the nineteenth century, experience again played a key role in compelling Christians to rethink another traditional—and supposedly biblical—belief. This time, the issue was slavery. Much as you and I might be repelled by the notion, most Christians throughout history understood passages such as Ephesians 6:5–9 and Colossians 3:22–25 to sanction at least some forms of slavery.⁶ But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian abolitionists persuaded believers to take another look. They appealed to conscience *based on the destructive consequences of slavery*—a bad tree producing bad fruit.

The Glasgow Presbytery in Scotland denounced the slave trade as “founded in cruelty and injustice, shocking to humanity, destructive of the rights and enjoyment of mankind, and of every moral and religious obligation.”⁷ William Wilberforce devoted his energies to exposing “the most cruel effects” of racism and slavery.⁸ The New York abolitionist minister George Cheever called upon the “common conscience of all mankind” to defend the cause of abolition.⁹

Neither Peter in his work to include Gentiles in the church nor the abolitionists in their campaign against slavery argued that their experience should take precedence over Scripture. But they both made the case that their experience should cause Christians to reconsider long-held *interpretations* of Scripture. Today, we are still

responsible for testing our beliefs in light of their outcomes—a duty in line with Jesus’s teaching about trees and their fruit.

A CONSEQUENCE AT ODDS WITH GOD’S NATURE

By sharing my family’s story, I have invited you to confront the theological and human questions that the experiences of gay Christians raise for the church today.

These stories also bring us together to wrestle with major questions. What is the gospel if it doesn’t bring transformation? How do we distinguish between passionate loyalty to God’s revelation and a misplaced allegiance to long-held interpretations? And one more: What is Christian discipleship if it may not require sacrifice?

Over the next year at my church, some elders and family friends I met with acknowledged that their position asks gay Christians to sacrifice something very significant: the possibility of romantic love and marriage. But, they stressed, that doesn’t mean their position is wrong. Sacrifice is an integral part of what it means to follow Christ, and Jesus and Paul both embraced celibacy as part of their callings. All Christians who do not marry are expected to be celibate—even straight Christians who would like to marry but can’t find a spouse.

As one elder said, “It depends on how you look at your situation, Matthew. I know several women in our church who held on to their hopes for a husband for years—maybe still do. But while marriage is a gift that God blesses, it isn’t a right for any of us.”

He raised an important point.

Much of our culture has indeed promoted the idea that our greatest fulfillment is to be found in sex and marriage. To the extent that Christians accept that view, we risk idolizing romantic love and

losing sight of our first love, Christ (see Revelation 2:4). It is true too that God does not promise us easy lives. We are called to deny ourselves, to take up our crosses, and to follow Jesus (see Mark 8:34).

Does that call to self-denial mean gay Christians should view mandatory celibacy as part of what it means for them to follow Jesus? Or should we view that approach as causing unnecessary suffering—bad fruit, in other words—that should lead us to take a new look at the traditional interpretation of Scripture in the same way our predecessors came to question Gentile exclusion and the institution of slavery?

In chapter 3, we will examine the calling to celibacy in more depth. But in the context of our discussion here—experience versus revelation, a tree and its fruit—I want to make an important distinction.

Mandatory celibacy for gay Christians differs from any other kind of Christian self-denial, including involuntary celibacy for some straight Christians. Even when straight Christians seek a spouse but cannot find one, the church does not ask them to relinquish any future hope of marriage.

Those divergent responses point to the fundamental difference between celibacy for Christians who cannot find a partner and mandatory celibacy for *all* gay Christians. For straight Christians, abstinence outside marriage affirms the goodness both of marriage and of sex within marriage. But for gay Christians, mandatory celibacy affirms something different: the sinfulness of every possible expression of their sexuality.

Jesus emphasized that sin does not encompass merely wrong actions. It also encompasses the desire for those actions. As he explained in Matthew 5, murder and adultery are sins, but so are

anger and lust. So from a Christian standpoint, if all same-sex relationships are sinful, all desires for them should be renounced as well.¹⁰

But as my dad came to realize, while gay Christians can choose not to act on their sexual desires, they cannot eradicate their sexual desires altogether. Despite the prayers of countless gay Christians for God to change their sexual orientation, exclusive same-sex attraction persists for nearly all of them. The failure of reorientation therapy is why the flagship “ex-gay” ministry, Exodus International, shut down in 2013 and apologized for the “false hope,” pain, and trauma it had caused.¹¹ This approach’s collapse has placed gay Christians who adhere to the traditional biblical interpretation in an agonizing, irresolvable tension. In order to truly flee from sin as well as the temptation to sin, they must constantly attempt what has proven impossible: to reconstitute themselves so they are no longer sexual beings at all.¹²

As we’ll see in chapter 3, that doesn’t match the traditional Christian understanding of celibacy. Functionally, it’s castration. Such an absolute rejection of one’s sexuality might make sense if one’s sexual desires were oriented exclusively toward abusive or lustful practices. But it makes considerably less sense when at least some of one’s desires are oriented toward a covenantal relationship of mutual love, care, and self-sacrifice. For gay Christians to be celibate in an attempt to expunge even their desires for romantic love requires them to live in permanent fear of sexual intimacy and love. That is a wholly different kind of self-denial than the chastening of lustful desires the church expects of all believers. It requires gay Christians to build walls around their emotional lives so high that many find it impairs their capacity to form deep, meaningful connections more broadly.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “I believe that the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God’s will than a self-invited and self-protective lovelessness.”¹³ Lewis’s insight resonated with me even before I embarked on my study of Scripture and same-sex relationships. Lewis, of course, wasn’t making a case for lawless loves. He was emphasizing the destructiveness of living in fear of love.

Given that we are created by a God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—relational to the core—such a consequence seems at odds with God’s nature. True Christian sacrifice, no matter how costly, should make us more like God, not less.

A MORE ACCURATE UNDERSTANDING

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “[God] will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” Mandatory celibacy for gay Christians, however, *is* more than many of them can bear. It produces bad fruit in many of their lives, and for some, it fuels despair to the point of suicide.¹⁴ Such outcomes increasingly made it difficult for my dad to see how the church’s rejection of same-sex relationships could qualify as a good tree that, according to Jesus, produces good fruit.

So instead of taking the Bible’s references to same-sex behavior as a sweeping statement about *all* same-sex relationships, my dad started to ask: Is this verse about the kind of relationship Matthew wants, or is it about lustful or abusive behavior? Is this passage about the love and intimacy Matthew longs for, or does it speak to self-centered, fleeting desires instead?

After much prayer, study, and contemplation, Dad changed his mind.

Only six months before, he had never seriously questioned his

views. But once he saw the fruit of his beliefs more clearly, he decided to dive deeper into the Bible. In that process, he came to what he now regards as a more accurate understanding of Scripture. He was convinced by biblical scholarship, historical evidence, and reason. His new views were confirmed by the good fruit they bore—both in my life and in the lives of other gay Christians he began to meet.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that if someone makes you go one mile, go with him two miles (see Matthew 5:41). Whoever you are, and whatever experiences or doubts you bring to this discussion, will you walk with me as I share the evidence that changed my dad's mind?

I ask as a brother in Christ—one who has sometimes been hurt by others' unwillingness to listen, and who continues to see fresh wounds open up in the body of Christ. Perhaps you are convinced your views will not change. Perhaps you hope they will.

Either way, I invite you to join me for the journey.

Notes

Introduction

1. According to PRRI, 37 percent of white evangelical Protestants supported allowing same-sex couples to marry legally in 2023, an increase from 28 percent in 2014: “Views on LGBTQ Rights in All 50 States: Findings from PRRI’s 2023 American Values Atlas,” PRRI, March 12, 2024, <https://www.prri.org/research/views-on-lgbtq-rights-in-all-50-states>. Likewise, Gallup reported that 40 percent of weekly churchgoers supported legal same-sex marriage in 2022, an increase from 29 percent in 2014: Justin McCarthy, “Same-Sex Marriage Support Inches Up to New High of 71%,” Gallup, June 1, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/393197/same-sex-marriage-support-inches-new-high.aspx>.
2. “Religious Change in America,” PRRI, March 27, 2024, <https://www.prri.org/research/religious-change-in-america>.
3. The survey did not ask about bisexual and transgender people specifically. That said, while my focus in this book is on gay Christians and same-sex relationships, my case in support of monogamous, covenantal same-sex relationships does not depend on whether the partners are gay, bisexual, or transgender. The theological questions regarding transgender people in particular overlap in various ways with those regarding gay people, but they are not identical. While a full consideration of those questions exceeds my scope in this book, I hope the relevant ground I cover can make this book a helpful resource for transgender Christians and their loved ones as well.

Chapter 1

1. As Charles Hodge wrote in his *Systematic Theology*, “It is admitted that theologians are not infallible, in the interpretation of Scripture. It may, therefore, happen in the future, as it has in the past, that interpretations of the Bible, long confidently received, must be modified or abandoned, to bring revelation into harmony with what God teaches in his works. This change of view as to the true meaning of the Bible may be a painful trial to the Church, but it does not in the least impair the authority of the Scriptures. They remain infallible; we are merely convicted of having mistaken their meaning”: Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1871), 1:59.
2. Albert Barnes wrote that “the word came to denote all who were religious teachers. . . . A false prophet is a teacher of incorrect doctrine, or one falsely and unjustly laying claims to divine inspiration.” Albert Barnes, *Notes, Explanatory and Practical, on the Gospels: Designed for Sunday School Teachers and Bible Classes*, 6th ed. (New York: Leavitt, Lord, & Co., 1835), 1:81. Likewise, Adam Clarke wrote, “By false prophets we are to understand *teachers* of erroneous doctrines”: Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1831), 1:82. The eighteenth-century biblical scholar John Gill explained that the phrase refers to “false teachers; for not such who pretended to foretell things to come, but such who set up themselves to be teachers of others, are here meant”: John Gill, *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, “Matthew 7:15,” Bible Hub, <https://biblehub.com/matthew/7-15.htm>.
3. Charles Spurgeon, *The Complete Works of C. H. Spurgeon*, vol. 39, *Sermons 2289–2341* (Harrington, DE: Delmarva Publications, 2013), no. 2312. John Gill, *Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible*, “Matthew 7:16.” Matthew Henry, a leading Bible commentator of the eighteenth century, also wrote, “Not that this is the only way, but it is one way, of trying doctrines, whether they be of God or not. What do they tend to do? What affections and practices will they lead those into, that embrace them?” Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 5th ed.

(Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour, & Neill, 1757), 1:49. John Wesley agreed that “the goodness or badness here mentioned respects the doctrine, rather than the personal character.” John Wesley, Notes on the New Testament, “Matthew 7,” StudyLight.org, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/wen/matthew-7.html>.

4. Denny Burk has critiqued my argument, claiming I believe that if an interpretation of Scripture “causes some people to feel badly . . . it must be done away with.” He wrote that this would “create ethical anarchy if applied consistently,” saying, “It may cause someone personal distress and psychological ‘harm’ to tell them that they should not murder their neighbor. That would be a ‘bad fruit’ on Vines’s definition. Nevertheless, no one would permit murder just to avoid that ‘bad fruit.’” However, I have never equated mere negative feelings with bad fruit. The problem with condemning same-sex relationships isn’t that it hurts people’s feelings. Such condemnations are linked to devastating consequences in gay people’s lives, including significantly elevated risks of suicide. Those effects are far more serious than merely having bad feelings. Denny Burk, *God and the Gay Christian? A Response to Matthew Vines*, ed. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. (Louisville: SBTS Press, 2014), 45, 55. Christopher Yuan contended that even suicide would not qualify as “bad fruit” according to Jesus. Citing John the Baptist’s equation of good fruit with repentance and bad fruit with unrepentance in Matthew 3:7–10, and claiming the Greek word *poneros* in that text refers only to morally evil or wicked actions, Yuan argued that “it’s not possible for ‘bad fruit’ to mean depression or suicide.” Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* (New York: Multnomah, 2018), 147–55. But both of those interpretations are narrower than the text supports. Jesus’s words in Matthew 7 are broader than John the Baptist’s in Matthew 3. While repentance would certainly qualify as good fruit and unrepentance as bad fruit, Jesus doesn’t limit his words to those matters alone. Moreover, while *poneros*—translated as “bad” here—often refers to evil actions, the leading Greek lexicons all acknowledge that it has a broader range of meanings. Most cite this passage in Matthew as an example of its being used more broadly to mean something useless, worthless, and of no value. The same word describes “painful” sores in

- Revelation 16:2 (ESV) and bad water, land, and food in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (2 Kings 2:19, Numbers 13:19, Jeremiah 24:8).
5. Augustine wrote, “The question, indeed, is most rightly put, What are the fruits He would wish us to attend to, whereby we might know the tree? . . . And what the fruits are by which we may know a good tree, the very same apostle goes on to tell us: But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount*, bk. 2, trans. William Findlay, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., vol. 10, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1888), at New Advent, rev. and ed. Kevin Knight, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/16012.htm>. Luther wrote, “These fruits are their works and behavior. Yet spiritual eyes are needed to see this, that one may learn well to know the really good works, which Paul mentions to the Galatians, 5.22, where he says: ‘But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control.’ Those are the true fruits of the Spirit.” Martin Luther, *The Precious and Sacred Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1904), 258.
 6. On the subject of slavery in Christian theology, see Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Molly Oshatz, *Slavery and Sin: The Fight Against Slavery and the Rise of Liberal Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Jack Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 18–25, 32–33. For the history of Christians’ support for at least some forms of slavery, see Hector Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 159–225.
 7. John M. G. Barclay, “‘Am I Not a Man and a Brother?’: The Bible and the British Anti-Slavery Campaign,” *The Expository Times* 119, no. 1 (2007): 3.

8. William Wilberforce, *An Appeal to the Religion, Justice, and Humanity of the Inhabitants of the British Empire, in Behalf of the Negro Slaves in the West Indies* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1823), 13.
9. George B. Cheever, *The Guilt of Slavery and the Crime of Slaveholding* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1860), 462.
10. As New Testament scholar James Brownson writes, “If same-sex erotic acts are always morally wrong, then the impulse to engage in those acts is also a manifestation of a disordered and sinful inner state. Focusing on behavior alone—and regarding as neutral the ‘preference’ or inclination toward such behaviors—simply cannot be justified from Scripture, particularly from the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. If the acts are sinful, all inclinations to such acts are to be understood as manifestations of a sinful nature, and are to be resisted as such.” James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church’s Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2013), 175.
11. Melissa Steffan, “Alan Chambers Apologizes to Gay Community, Exodus International to Shut Down,” Gleanings, *Christianity Today*, June 21, 2013, www.christianitytoday.com/2013/06/alan-chambers-apologizes-to-gay-community-exodus/.
12. James Brownson persuasively argues that the moral distinction between sexual orientation and sexual behavior made by many Christians who oppose same-sex relationships is “ultimately untenable . . . Where does one draw the line? Where does the sinful impulse begin? Is it when gay or lesbian persons experience a desire for friendship with others of the same sex, admiration for another’s physical beauty, the tendency to frequently think about another person, the persistent desire to be with another person, the desire to be touched by another, the desire to kiss or be kissed, or the desire for still more intimate contact? For most gay and lesbian persons, these desires are part of the same continuum, and they cannot always be readily distinguished from each other.” Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, 175.
13. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), 122.
14. According to the Family Acceptance Project, recent studies “have established a clear link between rejecting behaviors of families towards lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents and negative health problems in early

adulthood.” “Publications,” Family Acceptance Project, <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu/publications>. A 2009 paper in the journal *Pediatrics* found that “lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults who reported higher levels of family rejection during adolescence were 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression, [and] 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs . . . compared with peers from families that reported no or low levels of family rejection”: Caitlin Ryan et al., “Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Young Adults,” *Pediatrics* 123, no. 1 (2009): 346–52. Furthermore, a 2018 study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* revealed that, while religious faith was associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation in heterosexual youth, gay and lesbian youth who considered religion important to them were 38 percent more likely to have had recent suicidal thoughts compared to gay and lesbian youth for whom religion was not important. The study also found that young people who were questioning their sexuality and whose faith was important to them were nearly three times as likely to have recently attempted suicide compared to questioning youth for whom faith was not important: Megan C. Lytle et al., “Association of Religiosity with Sexual Minority Suicide Ideation and Attempt,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 54, no. 5 (2018): 644–51.

Chapter 2

1. Maurice A. Finocchiaro, *The Galileo Affair: A Documentary History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 28, 138.
2. Atle Næss, *Galileo Galilei: When the World Stood Still* (New York: Springer, 2004), 90.
3. Finocchiaro, *Galileo Affair*, 138.
4. Galileo Galilei, “Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany, 1615,” Internet Modern History Sourcebook, Fordham University, August 1997, www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/galileo-tuscany.asp.
5. Richard J. Blackwell, “The Bible at Galileo’s Trial,” in *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 120.