

THE WIDENING OF GOD'S MERCY

Sexuality within the Biblical Story

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Introduction

Samuel declares that God 'does not...change his mind' (1 Sam 15:29). But the immediate context twice states that he *does* do so (v11, 35). The Hebrew word is *nacham*. In fact Scripture regularly shows God changing his mind in order to expand the sphere of his love and mercy towards people.

Debate on sexual issues has reached an impasse for those who limit their approach to exegesis of the key passages on homosexuality. We need to move to 'a *more expansive reading* of the biblical story' to find the way forward. In doing so we find that:

- Aspects of the law (Torah) are under constant revision.
- There is a steady move from 'God's people' as a nation to God embracing all nations.
- God sometimes regrets the severity of his previous judgments or the unsuitability of previous laws.
- The NT is not the final word: Jesus says the Holy Spirit will continue to take things forward (Jn 16:12-13).

The Bible is thus the story of God's *expanding* grace and mercy. It is time to recognise that these extend to non-traditional sexual orientations. This book aims to give an ethical and moral 'map' of the Bible that leads in that direction.

Our stories

The authors, who are father and son, and both biblical scholars, tell their stories.

Richard's story

Richard (father and NT scholar). My brother refused to attend our mother's funeral because it was to be held in a church that was open to LGBTQ Christians. We changed the venue, but his stance reflected a certain way (a wrong one, in my view) of how the Bible speaks to us today.

In 1996 I published *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Its chapter on homosexuality became widely quoted by those claiming that acts of same-sex intercourse are always sinful. My thinking has changed since then, and I repent of my narrow vision. In this book I want to explain my understanding of the widening of God's mercy.

Chris's story

Chris (son and OT scholar). Fifteen years ago I was employed by Fuller Theological Seminary, which took a 'compassionate conservative' stance on the sexuality issue. Over time, my own views have changed to accept and include LGBTQ Christians without reserve, though my respect for the Bible remains unchanged.

Exegetical debates miss the heart of the issue, failing to see the broader picture of the developing revelation of God's mercy. It's really all about who God is, and how we should respond to that. Fuller's position tightened over the years and it expelled some progressive-minded staff and gay students. I want this book to inform future generations of the church and incline them towards full acceptance of LGBTQ believers.

Odds and Ends

'I' and 'We': the voices in the book

Chris has written the chapters on the OT, and Richard those on the NT. We checked each other's drafts.

A word about 'application'

We have not attempted to apply our findings to particular aspects of sexual variation. That has not been our purpose.

On 'mercy' in the title

We use this term in its traditional way to describe 'God's grace, compassion and favour', his love for all of his creation and desire to embrace and reconcile every part. Mercy in this sense is thus more than clemency to the guilty, though it includes it.

On gender and pronouns for God

We recognise that God is not gendered and that some readers are sensitive to this issue. But for the sake of convenience we have tended to stick with the traditional male pronouns.

On texts and translations

We mainly use the NRSV, but sometimes our own translations.

On history and narrative

We have not presented any *detailed* hermeneutical principles here. But, broadly, we have taken a 'narrative interpretation' approach to the biblical story.

Part 1: The Widening of God's Mercy in the Old Testament

1: Widening through Creation

If it's all about God, why does anything else exist? Why did anything come into being? Ancient religion takes its existence for granted and focuses on humans, saying they exist because the gods needed someone to work the land, a thought echoed in Genesis 2:15. According to Genesis 1:26-31 God made humans in his own image, to be his partners in the creation project.

To get a step further back requires some philosophising, as the Bible is not explicit. Jonathan Edwards held that such is God's nature that his love and grace expands to include things other than himself, and that his creative acts were an expression of this. But, at the same time, Edwards' calvinistic roots led him to extol God's sovereignty and *self-love* while neglecting his outreaching love and grace. As he saw it, we are all loathsome to God.

We should not overlook God's *personhood*. In Scripture he is portrayed as a loving Father, and as a Son who wept and died for humankind. In Genesis, he declares each facet of creation 'good'. In 'God saw everything that he had made, and—*hinneh!*—it was very good' (Gen 1:31), the *hinneh* is like 'Hey!' It conveys his enthusiasm at what he was making, and tacitly invites us to share it. There is an echo of this in Abraham and Sarah's laughter at the prospect of a promised son.

So we have creation because that's the kind of God God is: he enjoys making things and takes pleasure in them. Thus, 'the widening of God's love and mercy is arguably the reason that anything exists at all.' (p44)

2: Mercy for God's People

In Genesis, things soon take a dark turn. God warns *Adam and Eve* not to eat the forbidden fruit, 'for in the day that you eat of it you shall die' (Gen 2:17). They do eat of it, but they don't die that day. This has been variously interpreted, but maybe God simply *changed his mind and showed them mercy*. His clothing of them with skin garments certainly points in that direction.

Something similar happens with *Cain and Abel*. After failing to curb his anger and killing his brother, Cain is driven from the arable land, sentenced by God to wander the earth (Genesis 4:12). The Hebrew terminology in this passage suggests a natural 'cause and effect' result rather than a curse issued by God. The *lex talionis* is issued shortly after, and it seems right that God should treat Cain in accordance with it. Certainly Cain feared he would be killed himself. But Cain cried out and God apparently changed his mind (Gen 4:13, 15), putting a protective mark on him.

Then there is *the Flood*. Here is where we first meet the word *nacham*, in Genesis 6:6-7. Twice there God 'is sorry' that he had made humankind. The word connotes *a change of mind plus a feeling of regret*. He views his creation of humans as a mistake and determines to wipe them out.

Afterwards God has another change of mind, in the reverse direction. Hearing the cries of all who died in the Flood, he promises never to do it again (Gen 8:21), sparked by Noah's sacrifice. Life, he decides, has to go on (v22). He shows mercy.

The rest of Genesis outlines the creation of the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham. They eventually end up as slaves in Egypt but are rescued at the Exodus. In the wilderness the people rebel, to the point where God determines to destroy them all and start again with Moses (Numbers 14:12). He had done this once before, over the Golden Calf incident. Moses turns this idea down and reminds God of who he (God) is supposed to be (v15-19): slow to anger. As a result, God's heart is softened and he doesn't follow through on his own plans.

In all of this, the OT authors seem to be saying that humans are nothing but trouble, that God learns this, and decides to stick with them anyway. Two themes are prominent throughout. First, God's presence is meant to be a blessing for humans, and it hurts him when their folly takes them away from him into inevitable trouble. And second, God has a propensity 'to relent from punishment, to show mercy even at the cost of changing his mind and bending his principles of justice.' (p56)

3. Widening Justice

Numbers 26 presents the story of *Zelophehad's five daughters*, revealing that God *responds to human agency*, and also that *biblical laws can change*.

The context is a census. Their father had no male heir to secure the territory allotted to the family and tribe according to the patrilineal system, which is not stated here because it was taken for granted (Deut 21:15-17). So the girls publicly approach Moses and boldly request that they themselves be granted the inheritance. Moses takes their case 'before the Lord'. God is very clear: they were right to act the way they did, and Moses should grant them the inheritance they are asking for (Num 17:7).

Their action is reminiscent of Job, who challenged God openly and was approved by him in the end. *God can cope with being challenged!* We should not put him in a box, which is what our doctrinal systems and traditions tend to do if we are not careful.

After Moses had conveyed God's ruling on the matter of the daughters' inheritance, the principle was encoded in law (Num 27:8-11). So God is happy to see biblical laws and customs change.

There are many such changes in the OT. The three major collections of laws in the Torah often differ significantly from each other on the same topics. This is why the Jewish Oral Torah exists; it preserves different opinions and interpretations. So biblical laws are not unchanging and can't always be easily applied to ethical situations. God himself seems less troubled by this than many of us are. Jesus said the Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27)—God is *humanitarian*, that is, concerned for human flourishing, and his law should be applied accordingly.

Some interpreters of the Zelophehad's daughters incident argue that male interest still lay at the heart of the issue and that things didn't move far enough. That will probably always be the case in such instances. The work of change remains ongoing, and there is even the danger of slipping back—in Joshua 7:14 the girls present themselves to Joshua with a needed reminder of the earlier decision in their favour. Paul was still re-stating the principle about male and female centuries later in Galatians 3:28.

God continues to do 'a new thing' (Isaiah 43:18-19)!

4. 'I gave them statutes that were not good'

In Ezekiel 20:1-44 the prophet, in exile in Babylon, gives a long speech in God's name, recounting Israel's history. It recalls their problems and the wrong turns that led to the exile. In v25-26 God says, '*I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live. I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD.*'

The reference is to Exodus 22:29b-30, where the Israelites are to 'give' their firstborn to God, which was by blood sacrifice, as v31 makes clear. Child sacrifice was both commanded and carried out at that period. We have the examples of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22:2), and Jephthah and his daughter (Judges 11). King Mesha of Moab sacrificed his son at a time of war-crisis (2 King 3:26-27), and Micah 6:7 suggests that it might happen at other times of crisis.

The Ezekiel passage (v30-31) envisages people grasping at this straw when all else failed, including making their children 'pass through the fire', that is, burning them in the Ben Hinnom Valley, as Israelite kings Ahaz, Manasseh and others had done. It was originally a Canaanite practice, according to the biblical authors.

In the end, the Bible bans child-sacrifice. It is condemned by the prophets and prohibited in the law codes. *But this took time.* The command to sacrifice firstborn sons had come hard on the heels of the Decalogue and had later been reaffirmed. The Abraham and Isaac story shows that God doesn't actually want child sacrifices but does want worshippers who are willing to offer them. Child-sacrifice is forbidden in Deut 18:10, which is a correction of the earlier practice, as is Ezekiel 20.

Jeremiah has God saying that he did not command such sacrifices (32:35). This can't be reconciled with Ezekiel 20:25, which says he did command it. We have no way of settling the dispute between the two, but it does force us to reflect on how we read and interpret the law. Sacrifice of the firstborn may possibly have been later sublimated to circumcision. But many continued to admire those who sacrificed their children; Jephthah is among the 'faithful' in Hebrews 11. *Change is usually resisted.*

Many in the church similarly know that the traditional teaching about homosexuality can be harmful but because of their 'faith' they back off from rethinking the whole subject. The situation is especially hard for Christian parents of LGBTQ teens, among whom suicide rates are abnormally high. Supporters of the traditional view may argue, 'I didn't tell that young person to commit suicide', but that is to evade the real issues.

Like the child-sacrifice laws, the laws on homosexuality in the Torah have done undoubted harm to young people. Do we align ourselves with Jeremiah in stating we believe those laws to have been misunderstood and

misapplied or, less radically, with Ezekiel in just saying that they were ‘not good’? We should agree that, with their conflicted interpretations, they should not stand today, being superseded by the command to love, and by the expansion of God’s grace.

We have seen from Moses, Job, Zelophehad’s daughters and Abraham that even where God’s will is clearly stated, the faithful are empowered to argue. Abraham, however, didn’t argue with God over Isaac in Genesis 22 the way he had done over Sodom in Genesis 18. It is interesting that there is no record of Abraham ever having spoken to God after this.

Harming human beings can only be justified on the grounds of preventing greater harm, and the homosexual issue does not fit this criterion. Let us follow the spirit of the Hippocratic Oath which says, ‘First, do no harm’ as its basic principle.

5. Widening the Borders

Warfare is perhaps the best example of God changing his mind and doing new things.

The OT is full of tribalism, nationalism and violence. Their effects are seen from the crushing of Egypt at the Exodus to the genocidal wiping out of the nations in the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 7:1-4 is a prominent example of a command for the Israelites to be involved in this. We don’t believe God wants this today, but we can’t escape its presence in our ‘family story’. How, then, can we get from those OT instances to Paul in Athens telling his multi-ethnic listeners, ‘We are God’s family’ (Acts 17:29)?

The roots are in the OT itself. The ‘chosen people’ may be at the centre of the OT story, but there are plenty of *signs that God’s plans for other nations were more inclusive than we often imagine*. ‘The whole earth is mine,’ he declares (Ex 19:5-6), and Abraham’s calling is in order that ‘all the families of the earth will be blessed’ through him (Gen 12:2-3).

There is a call for those who respond to God to forsake their previous identity and connections. Abraham was told to leave his country and his father’s house; Moses had to break his ties with the Egypt in which he was reared; Jesus calls his followers to leave their family, as he himself did.

In reality, the nations of the OT, including Israel, had diverse origins. The Israelites left Egypt with ‘a mixed multitude’ (non-Israelites) among them. During the monarchy, kings like David chose many foreigners for key roles in their government and military (references given). Marriages between Israelites and people of other nations was forbidden in the law, but it happened anyway. Ruth the Moabitess is the most celebrated case. And Moses married a dark-skinned Cushite woman (Num 12:1). God condemns Aaron and Miriam for trying to capitalise on the popular bigotry attached to this.

The OT doesn’t deny family and national ties, but it relativises them. People are called to be a community formed around God’s service, regardless of nationality or other markers.

The prophets saw God at work in the nations around Israel and their histories. Amos 9:1-10 applies this to Egypt and Cush: Cush would be delivered from longstanding Egyptian domination just as Israel had been. Amos goes on to say that God had been at work among the Philistines and other enemy nations to shape their destiny, too. This must have been hard for Israelites to take in, which is why the prophets who spoke that way were often harried by the Israelite kings at the time.

Isaiah was in this category. He prophesied that God was at work among the Egyptians as much as in Israel and would call them to himself (Isaiah 19:20-21). Then he even goes on to include Israel’s arch-enemy, the superpower Assyria (v23-24): the Assyrians, too, are loved and chosen by God! If God’s grace can extend to these most fearful of enemies, there are no limits to his love and grace.

Going even further, Isaiah calls King Cyrus of Persia God's 'anointed one' (Messiah) (45:1). In other words, he was, in one sense, Israel's rightful king in his dealings with them. The anointing of a king who was a foreigner was expressly forbidden (Deut 17:15). That was God's word, but God had changed his mind.

If God's purpose is to save even enemy peoples, what is the point of going to war against them? The prophets look forward to the ceasing of all war and the beating of swords into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3). The total fulfilment of that must doubtless await Christ's return, but we are called in the meantime to move things in that direction as far as we can. We need, in the best sense, a *globally inclusive attitude*.

6. 'I knew that you are a gracious God, and merciful'

The OT authors did not live in peaceful times. Like the nations around them, under God they brought disaster upon themselves by their sin. In particular, Israel suffered the devastation of defeat and exile.

But the authors clung nonetheless to the idea of God's grace and mercy. God, they insisted, is full of mercy, grace, patience, love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6). The prophets applied this not just to Israel, but to the nations around them. God often repents of his wrath towards them, and changes his mind about his methods and decisions (see Isaiah 40:1-2; 10:5-19; 14:16-17).

'The idea that God does not foresee and control everything, and feels pity and regret even concerning his past judgments, is troubling for some theological views, but if we take the Bible seriously, it is hard to deny.' (p92)

Sometimes God changes his mind about judgment even before carrying it out (e.g. Amos 7:2-3). So a prophet may announce judgment, only for God to relent and not do it (Jeremiah 18:7-10, where *nacham* is once again the word). Jonah is the best example of this. He declares God's judgment over Nineveh, only to be peeved when they repent, thus causing God to change his mind and let them off (Jonah 4:2, *nacham* again).

Some theologians have never been happy about this concept, notably John Calvin, who quotes 1 Sam 15:29. 'So although God and the narrator both say in 1 Samuel 15 that God changed his mind about Saul, Calvin takes the irritated Samuel's word for it that he doesn't.' (p95) Balaam echoed Samuel in Numbers 23:19. But this conviction that God never changes his mind can't be the last word on the subject in light of all the other evidence. Calvin also quotes Malachi 3:6, 'I the LORD do not change'. But this is in the perfect tense: 'I the LORD *have not changed*'—about the specific list of sins mentioned, not as an enduring principle governing all his actions.

The *tension between God's plan and its surprises* is hard-wired into the OT. His purpose is said to stand (Isaiah 46:10) but he can, at the same time, introduce 'new things' (42:9; 43:19). Samuel and Jonah were content with the first, but not with the second. Many Christians are like them, unwilling even to ask questions that might upset their doctrinal cart.

The prophets wait for, and pray for, mercy, which is often long delayed or is followed by further episodes of sin and judgment. But they tend to finish on a hopeful note (e.g. Amos 9:14-15; Zech 8:11-15). This holds true in different ways for both the Hebrew Tanakh and the Christian OT, which arrange their books in different orders. The finishing-note is in both cases one of *hope and widening mercy*.

7. 'Besides those already gathered'

Contrasting biblical traditions seem to have co-existed comfortably in early OT times. Later, as a canon began to be formed, new words from God would be scrutinised more carefully where they conflicted with older ones. The prophets after the exile were quite forceful in their witness, as they were seen to be speaking messages that contradicted earlier scripture.

Isaiah 56:1-8 is a prophetic re-envisioning of the divine will that undermined existing revelation. It calls people to act justly and keep the Sabbath. Then in verses 7-8 comes God's promise that he will gather people so that the temple will be 'a house of prayer *for all peoples*'. Isaiah answers some of the expected objections. The foreigner and the eunuch must not be excluded (v3-5), he insists. Both were excluded on the grounds of earlier laws—eunuchs, a sexual minority, in Leviticus 21:17-23 and Deut 23:1. There is good reason to believe that Nehemiah was a eunuch on his return from Babylon.

Foreigners were also excluded and are often condemned in biblical law, even though Israel arriving in Canaan from Egypt had a 'mixed multitude' of foreigners among them. In the land, the ethnic boundaries were under constant review. Later, after the exile, both Ezra and Nehemiah took a strong line against foreigners, even requiring Israelites who were married to them to put away their spouses. But Isaiah (chapter 56), using the most extreme Hebrew term for 'foreigner', pushes all this aside at a stroke. Indeed, he appears to be opening up the Levitical service to them, and even the priesthood, in spite of Exodus 29:9, which made the limiting of it to a specific group of Israelites a 'perpetual ordinance'. God's mercy is widening.

Down the centuries, Jewish scholars tussled with Isaiah's radical stance. Many of the manuscripts show evidence of attempts to modify them to better match the old rulings. When we come to the NT, we find Jesus clearly fulfilling Isaiah's declaration by reaching out openly to the marginalised in Jewish society. 'A lot of what Jesus walked around shocking people with was straight from the Hebrew scriptures. In particular, a lot of it was from Isaiah.' (p113)

Part 2: The Widening of God's Mercy in the New Testament

8: Jesus upsets people

Jesus upset many of his contemporaries by his demonstration of the widening of God's mercy.

Israel at the time was under Roman rule, and had been under the domination of one Gentile empire or another for centuries. The Jewish resistance movement operated against a background fear of being totally crushed by the Romans if it went too far (John 11). Some Jews, like the Qumran community, withdrew from society as the best tactic. Most others looked for a messianic deliverer, in line with prophetic promise.

Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, saw this with the eye of faith (Luke 1:68-71). Later, as Jesus began his public ministry, he portrayed himself as the promised deliverer (Luke 4:16-21). But he hinted at an interpretation of the prophets that would broaden the scope of God's deliverance to include foreigners and outcasts (v25-27), which did not go down well with his nationalistic listeners. And he stood in the line of Isaiah and Jeremiah in his declaration that the beloved Temple would be 'for all nations'.

Mary, in her Magnificat, also rejoiced that God's mercy was 'for *all* who fear him', and Jesus echoed this in the Beatitudes, which expressly embrace the ostracised and marginalised. Jesus demonstrated this approach. He taught that, while the fullness of the 'great reversal' promise remained in the future, already the kingdom of God had invaded the present age. That is still the case, and we are called to reach out to the marginalised just as Jesus himself did. That will include the sexually marginalised.

9: Sabbath as a time for healing

'Are there times when the human desire for conscientious obedience to biblical law actually produces actions contrary to the spirit and intent of God's commandments?' (p126) Yes, and Jesus' healings on the Sabbath illustrate it well.

These are prominent in all four Gospels and say much about Jesus' interpretation of Israel's law on the subject, given initially in Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15, where the Sabbath practice is founded on creation and liberation respectively. The Pharisees were keen to uphold the sanctity of the Sabbath and, while there was no written law about the details of it, they took this to forbid healing on that day.

In Mark 3:1-6 Jesus heals the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, and takes the initiative in the debate about it with the Pharisees, challenging them to see its *purpose* as human flourishing. Their silence may reflect our own on matters of sexuality in that context. They refuse to change their mind and they stick with the hard-line approach.

Luke 13:10-17 is the woman bent over for eighteen years whom Jesus liberates by healing her in the synagogue on the Sabbath. It upsets the leader of the synagogue. But Jesus calls out this hypocrisy and underscores the liberating purpose of the Sabbath, again echoing Isaiah (58:6). The ordinary folk in the synagogue, by contrast, rejoice in the manifest blessing they have witnessed. Jesus demonstrates that 'actions done for healing and human wholeness should be welcomed rather than forbidden, even if they appear to violate a particular scriptural prohibition.' (p133)

10: Mercy, not sacrifice

Jesus was criticised not just for appearing to break the Law, but also for associating with *others* who were seen as lawbreakers, or just disreputable.

Jesus called *Matthew*, a tax collector, to follow him, and was later taken to task for dining with him and others like him (Matt 9:9-13). Tax collectors were despised for collaborating with the Roman authorities and lining their own pockets in the process. 'Sinners' was a broader term, often referring particularly to those of dubious sexual behaviour, but broadly including all who failed to keep the Law rigorously.

In addressing the Pharisees' criticism of him for associating with such people, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 (LXX). He says, 'Go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy [*eleos*], not sacrifice.'" The Greek word translates the Hebrew *chesed*, meaning 'passionate, steadfast love'. Mercy of this kind is at the heart of all Jesus' teaching (e.g. Matt 5:7; 12:7). He sees it as 'the overriding message of scripture' (p137). It belongs to 'the weightier matters of the law: justice and *mercy* and faith' (Matt 23:23), which the Pharisees were missing in their desire to be nit-pickingly scrupulous about its letter. He was 'a friend of tax collectors and sinners' (Matt 11:18-19; Luke 7:33-34).

In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus tells the parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the tax collector. The latter throws himself on God's mercy. And Luke, lest we miss the point, adds that Jesus told it because he was speaking to 'those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.' Do we maybe need to examine ourselves to check our own attitudes regarding people with different sexual orientations?

Zacchaeus was 'a *chief* tax collector' (Luke 19:1-10) and thus particularly offensive to ordinary Jews. Jesus' self-invitation to his home for a meal scandalised not just the Pharisees but 'all who saw it'. They saw him as guilty by association. But salvation came to Zacchaeus as he repented and righted his own economic wrongdoings.

Jesus fraternised equally with other 'sinners', like the weeping woman who anointed his feet (Luke 7:36-50). He forgave her sins, but upset his host, Simon, who was a Pharisee. This story has aspects in common with the Prodigal Son (Luke 15), where the father, seeing his messed-up boy heading home, was 'filled with *compassion*' for him and welcomed him warmly. This reflects God in Hosea 6, who desires 'mercy and not sacrifice' and, later in that book, expresses his compassion for his people (Hos 11:8-9). And the older son in the parable has much in common with Simon the Pharisee, proving judgmental and petulant.

Who do we ourselves reflect?

11: Mercy to foreigners and outsiders

We saw how, early in his ministry, Jesus suggested that in ‘the year of the Lord’s favour’ God’s liberating mercy would extend beyond Israel to foreigners—*gentiles* (Luke 4:19ff). Jews generally avoided contact with them.

In his ministry, Jesus did not have a specific mission to gentiles but restricted himself to ‘the house of Israel’ (Matt 10:5-6). But the Roman presence meant that contact with gentiles was unavoidable. Jesus encountered some, and his contacts anticipated the church’s later mission to the gentile world.

In Matthew 8:5-13 a *Roman centurion* respectfully begs Jesus to heal his servant. Jesus immediately offers to come, but the centurion says Jesus just needs to say the word of healing, and so draws Jesus’ warm approval. This incident, says Jesus, points to a time when gentiles will come to God in large numbers.

In Matthew 15:21-28 Jesus is in Tyre and Sidon, which is gentile territory. A *Syrophoenician woman* seeks his help to cure her demonised daughter. Matthew, by calling her ‘a Canaanite woman’, draws out traditional prejudices going back to the Canaanites whom Israel had to expel from the Promised Land. Her insistent and pointed remarks about the crumbs under the table elicit Jesus’ approval, and he heals her daughter.

Earlier, Jesus had hinted at a widening of the circle when he quoted Isaiah 42:1-4, where there are two specific mentions of the coming inclusion of Gentiles into God’s circle of mercy.

John 4 recounts Jesus’ extended conversation with a *Samaritan woman*, even though, in Matthew 10:5 he had told his disciples they should ‘enter no town of the Samaritans’. This time, Jesus himself starts the conversation, asking for a drink of water. He goes on to say that a time is coming when the issue of where people worship (the Jerusalem temple or Mount Gerizim) will be inconsequential. And he confirms that he is the promised Messiah. Jesus then breaks another boundary by spending two further days with the Samaritans, many of whom had come to believe in him.

This reminds us of the parable of *the Good Samaritan* (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus’ conversation with the Torah scholar shocks by making a Samaritan the one who abides by the command to love one’s neighbour. The whole point is to broaden the definition of ‘neighbour’ and do away with longstanding ethnic separation.

At the crucifixion, the curtain of the temple is supernaturally torn in two. And at that very moment it is a *gentile* observer at the cross, the centurion, who declares, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son! (Mark 15:39; Matt 27:54). According to Mark’s account, this foreigner is the first human to confess Jesus as the Son of God, leaving us to ponder its significance.

Matthew’s Gospel, by contrast, can be seen as an *apologia* for a Gentile-inclusive church. It is full of allusions [many are listed] to the coming gentile mission, concluding with the commission to ‘make disciples of *all nations*’ (Matt 28:18-20).

In the Gospels, nowhere does Jesus reject Israel’s scriptures; ‘instead, like the prophets before him, he insists on reinterpreting them in light of the conviction that love and mercy lie at the root of God’s purposes.’ (p154) That brought him into conflict with others equally committed to those scriptures, but who interpreted them in a more restrictive way. Should the church perhaps see here an indicator of how we should read them in respect of current conflicts over sexuality?

12: The Holy Spirit begins to change the church’s mind

The church’s change of mind is a key feature of the first half of Acts. ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ were not clearly distinguished at that period, and the big question was whether gentiles could join the church without first becoming converts to Judaism, with all the observances that this implied.

There were factions taking sides on the issue, just as there are today on aspects of sexuality. In general, Jesus' followers were slow to take the hints that Jesus had left about God's widening mercy. They were, after all, Jews reared on convictions about Israel's covenant specialness (Exodus 19:3-6).

But before his ascension Jesus had commissioned his followers to be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8). At Pentecost, their speaking in other languages by the Spirit betokened that mission. Peter's sermon on that occasion quoted Joel, that 'the promise is for you, for your children, and for *all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him*' (2:39), though Peter clearly hadn't yet seen that as extending to gentiles; he was probably thinking of the *diaspora*.

In Acts 8, persecution and the ministry of Philip see the message extending to *Samaria*—a real boundary-crossing move. Then the *Ethiopian eunuch, a gentile*, responds to Philip's message. While he was evidently drawn to worship in Jerusalem, the law forbade him to enter the Lord's assembly there because of his sexual condition (Deut 23:1). But Philip embraced him gladly and baptised him.

13: The conscripted apostle

In contrast to Philip, Acts portrays *Saul of Tarsus* as policing the boundaries of God's people zealously. He later said in his letters that he saw this at the time as an achievement to be proud of (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-6). He was an ardent defender of 'the traditions of my ancestors', maybe seeking to emulate Phinehas (Num 25:6-9). He was a self-appointed vigilante out to crush any departure from the traditional Jewish way of reading scripture and understanding its teaching.

Acts 9 describes how God intervened directly to stop him in his tracks and turn him, in time, into the apostle to the gentiles, for whom there was no difference between Jew and Greek. He had been transformed by what he would later call 'the renewing of the mind' (Romans 12:1-2)—a radical re-seeing of all he had previously believed and practised.

'That transformation of mind led Paul ultimately to embrace those he had once feared and hated, and to articulate this summary of the entire meaning of Israel's law: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law"' (Romans 13:10).

14: 'Who was I that I could block God?'

People can, sadly, 'block God's gracious action by insisting on the strict application of God's own biblical commandments.' (p171) Acts 10 shows this happening, and tells how God broke it open.

This is the account of the conversion of *Cornelius, a Roman centurion*, in response to Peter's preaching. Later chapters relate how the church took the significance of this on board. The accounts show 'how the church discerned what the Holy Spirit was doing, and what practical decisions followed from that discernment.' (p172)

Peter and Cornelius receive simultaneous complementary visions, which result in Peter going, against all his traditional instincts, to the centurion's house. He is frank with his gentile listeners about his earlier reservations, but says the Holy Spirit has convinced him, contrary to everything he had previously stood for, 'that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean' (Acts 10:28b). He knew from the scriptures that God 'shows no partiality', but had understood that, in line with the context of Deuteronomy 10:17-18, to refer to economically deprived Israelites. Now the Holy Spirit has *broadened his interpretation* to include all people of any nation.

There follow wholesale conversions and baptisms in response to the falling of the Spirit on them, and Peter stays on with them for a few days—which would have been absolutely unthinkable to him a short time earlier. On his return to Jerusalem he had some difficulty bringing the other apostles round to see the rightness of his

actions. But they all eventually came to see that God was doing a new thing. Peter had said, ‘Who was I to *hinder* God?’ (Acts 11:17). The word is *kōluō*. We could say ‘block’ God; it is the same Greek verb used by the Ethiopian eunuch (‘What can *block* me from being baptised?’ in Acts 8:36) and by Peter himself at Cornelius’s house when he asked, ‘Can anyone *block* the water for baptizing these people who have received the Spirit just as we have?’ (Acts 10:47). This repetition is not coincidental and is meant to make us see the connection.

And so the apostles in Jerusalem accepted Peter’s account and recognised the Holy Spirit’s work.

15: The Jerusalem Council: community discernment

But disputes about the inclusion of gentiles continued to fester. Some more conservative Jews still believed converts needed to be circumcised and adhere to the whole Jewish law (Acts 15:1). Paul & Co argued strongly against this.

The so-called *Jerusalem Council* was convened to examine the matter (Acts 15). After much debate, James offers a resolution. He quotes a prophetic text (Amos 9:11-12 LXX, plus echoes of Isaiah 45:21) to show that gentile inclusion was always God’s plan, and he offers a compromise proposal on Torah observance. James was accepting the reported evidence of God’s blessing on gentile believers, then *reinterpreting the scriptures in line with it*.

As for Torah, gentiles were not required to be circumcised, nor were they bound by Sabbath-keeping, Jewish festivals and the food laws etc. But they were asked to ‘abstain’ from certain practices common in their cultural environment, including ‘sexual immorality’, which James and the others would see in line with the illicit relations in Leviticus 18, including lying ‘with a male as with a woman’. All the four requirements classified the new gentile converts ‘as analogous to aliens who reside among the people of Israel’. (p185)

The letter listing these compromise proposals says, ‘It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...’ We note that:

1. ‘The community’s discernment depends on an *imaginative reinterpretation of scripture*.’ (p187)
2. ‘The community’s discernment depends on *paying attention to stories about where God was currently at work*.’ (p187) The letter-writers were referring to the actual falling of the Holy Spirit on gentiles in the accounts they had listened to at the Council.
3. ‘The discernment is *made in and by the community*.’ (p188) It wasn’t just James’s decision (Acts 15:22, 28).

This could be a good model for approaching our attitude to the inclusion of sexual minorities in the church today. ‘The model suggests that just as the early Christians deliberated together and decided to remove barriers to gentile participation in the community of Jesus-followers, so also the church today should open its doors fully to those of differing sexual orientations.’ (p189)

Conversation will be required about this. If a key factor is the marking off of Christians from society around them, ‘one reasonable suggestion is that same-sex relationships should aspire to the same standard of monogamous covenant fidelity that the church has long commended and prescribed for heterosexual marriage.’ (p189)

16: Mercy all the way down

In spite of the Jerusalem Council and its conclusions, the issue of gentile inclusion and its implications continue to cause ripples for years afterwards, as the rest of the NT reveals. Argument continued over inherited cultural assumptions like social status, eating and sharing food, sexual practices and customs associated with idol worship.

Basic to the resolution of such issues is Paul's call to 'the *ministry of reconciliation*' (see 2 Cor 5:17-19), in which we are all to share. That is why, for him, the *unity* of the church was so vital (1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:1-3; Gal 5:13-15; Phil 2:1-4; Eph 4:1-6). He clearly felt such unity was possible, in spite of all the obstacles to it. The basic message of Romans is 'Paul's passionate appeal to the Christians at Rome to accept one another in love despite strong differences of opinion and cultural norms.' (p195)

[There follows a concise outline of Romans] in which 11:29-32 is seen as a key passage in that it points to God's ultimate intention to 'be merciful to *all*'. The gospel is a word about mercy, all the way down. And that mercy prompts us to offer ourselves wholeheartedly to his service (12:1 '...on the basis of God's *mercy*').

Paul goes on to note that, in spite of this, the church in Rome is troubled by disputes between 'the weak' and 'the strong' in respect of whether or not Christians should eat meat (which had been routinely offered to pagan idols). The strong despise the weak for their excessive scrupulousness. The weak 'pass judgment on' the strong for being too liberal in their approach. The same kind of disputes extended to the observance of special holy days. It is likely that the two positions reflected the gentile and Jewish groups in the church respectively. Paul commands both to stop condemning the other and to treat each other lovingly.

'The "strong" ones today are the liberated advocates of unconditional affirmation of same-sex unions; they are tempted to "despise" the "weak," narrow-minded, rule-following conservatives who would impose limits on their freedom. And the "weak" ones today are the devout, strict followers of what they understand to be God's law given in scripture; they are tempted to "pass judgment" on the sinful laxity of the "strong" who condone same-sex unions.' (p202)

Paul makes it clear that he personally aligns with 'the strong'. But he doesn't issue a judicial ruling for the believers in Rome. He points them to Christ, to whom all are ultimately answerable, and urges them all to act lovingly and considerately. 'Welcome one another, therefore...' (15:7).

Part 3: The Widening of God's Mercy in the Present Day

17: Moral re-vision: what we must say about human sexuality

'Because God sometimes changes his mind and his approaches to the world, faithfulness to God means sometimes doing the same.' (p207)

What we have seen about God's widening mercy so far requires us to consider how he wants us to think and act today regarding sexuality. We are no longer to see sexual minorities as 'strangers and aliens' (Eph 2:19). Nor should we engage in yet more fruitless exegetical argument about the meaning of the half dozen key texts (Gen 19:1-9; Lev 18:22; 20:13; 1 Cor 6:9-11; 1 Tim 1:10 and Rom 1:18-32). 'Drawing conclusions based only on these passages would be like basing a biblical theology of slavery on Exodus 21:2 (which assumes one can buy a slave) and 1 Peter 2:18 (which tells slaves to be subject to their masters), or a theology of immigration on Ezekiel 44:9's exclusion of foreigners from the sanctuary.' (p208)

Instead, we should re-envision our approach to focus on *the larger 'narrative patterns and precedents'* in the Bible, noting how frequently God's mercy overflows earlier prohibitions and restrictions on certain classes of people. This 'deeper logic' of the Bible should shape our discussions.

Throughout its history the church has had to face many crises of re-envisioning, and has eventually responded, because without vision we perish (Proverbs 29:18). Dreams and visions feature prominently throughout the Bible. They were exciting, but at the same time caused anxiety as people rightly feared 'false prophets'. And, indeed, accusations of false prophesying were sometimes levelled against genuine prophets like Amos. The same Holy Spirit who inspired him is still at work in his people today.

‘Why should God’s mercy trump and override the Levitical laws about same-sex intercourse?’ (p213) First, *the church has long abandoned or overturned other biblical laws or teachings*, such as the ones on slavery. It has also turned away from the ‘eating blood’ in meat enjoined in the same holiness code that prohibits same-sex intercourse. Christians eat non-kosher meat without scruple, despite its reaffirmation at the Council of Jerusalem in the NT. Other cases are the subordination of women, head-covering and hair instructions, and Jesus’ prohibition of divorce (Mark 10:2-12). Same-sex relations could similarly come into this category.

Second, *the impetus for change has often come ‘from careful and compassionate attention to human experience’*. (p214) Slavery was seen to cause suffering, as did keeping women in subordination in both family and church. It clearly inhibited human flourishing, and that was seen to *override the traditional proof-texts* in their favour.

The evidence is increasingly solid ‘that sexual orientation is (in a way that remains mysterious) deeply ingrained in individuals and not susceptible to change.’ (p214) It remains true that it is not good that we should be alone (Gen 2:18). Some individuals may be able to embrace celibacy, but it is something else to impose it on an entire group of humans on the grounds of their orientation. We should make room for appropriate relationships.

Third, and most decisive, *‘the vision that informs this book rhymes with the Bible’s pervasive portrayals of God’s ever-expanding mercy.’* (p215) There is a correspondence between the embrace of LGBTQ people and ‘God’s previously unexpected embrace of foreigners, eunuchs, “tax collectors and sinners,” gentiles, and people with conflicting convictions about food laws and calendrical observances.’ (p216) In our own welcoming of them as they are we are discerning where the Spirit is at work.

Theologian Karl Barth once observed that we should be asking ‘not what the apostles and prophets said’ but ‘what we must say *on the basis of* the apostles and prophets.’ Many Christians are concluding that what we say about human sexuality should reflect the pattern of God’s widening mercy. The authors ‘believe that sexual minorities who seek to follow Jesus should be welcomed gladly in the church and offered full access to the means of grace available to all God’s people: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, ordination, and the blessing of covenanted unions, with the same expectations as for heterosexuals.’ (p217)

Working out some of the practicalities will not be straightforward, especially with same-sex marriage, where new guidelines and liturgies may need developing. While that process goes on, we should heed Paul’s call to welcome one another in love, despite differing opinions and approaches, in the interests of the unity of the body of Christ and the furtherance of the gospel. The church is being summoned ‘to repent of its narrow, fearful vision and to embrace a wider understanding of God’s mercy.’ (p222)

‘This goes out as an invitation to readers who may have felt sympathy with LGBTQ friends and neighbours—perhaps along with some uneasiness about the church’s traditional exclusionary practices—but felt constrained by their understanding of “the authority of the Bible” from offering a full welcome. For such readers, we hope that this book offers encouragement to see that the inclusion of sexual minorities is not a rejection of the Bible’s message but a fuller embrace of its story of God’s expansive mercy.’ (p222)

Epilogue by Richard B. Hays

In my book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, which covered a variety of ethical issues, I proposed we should look beyond stated rules and general principles to find in its pages analogies with our current situation to guide us.

I recognise now that I was blind to the application of that approach to the question of homosexuality. Others had previously proposed it, particularly in connection with Acts 10-11 and 15, but I rejected that in light of ‘the

New Testament's few but emphatic statements—especially Romans 1:24–27—that portray same-sex intercourse as a tragic distortion of the created order.' (p225) I have come to think that I was wrong. God's gracious inclusiveness draws upon a far wider pattern of precedents than the Acts passages. I was so drawn to the straining out of exegetical gnats that I neglected 'the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith' (Matt 23:23).

This book attempts to focus on those weightier matters. For me, the change was a *metanoia*, a deep transformation of mind. I regret the impact of what I wrote before in the chapter on homosexuality, which, contrary to my intention, caused great harm to many over a quarter-century. Sure, I called for the acceptance of gay and lesbian people in the church, but stated that *all of them* should remain single and celibate. I failed to listen well enough to those people themselves.

My proposal was intended to stimulate conversation, but many readers took it as ending it. I am sorry it took me so long to change my mind.

DM September 2024