

The Secular Creed: Engaging Five Contemporary Claims
Copyright © 2021 by Rebecca McLaughlin

Published by The Gospel Coalition

The Gospel Coalition

P.O. Box 170346

Austin, Texas 78717

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Art Direction: Steven Morales

Cover Design: Gabriel Reyes-Ordeix

Typesetting: Ryan Leichty

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN:

978-0-9992843-0-8 (Print)

978-0-9992843-2-2 (Mobi)

978-0-9992843-1-5 (ePub)

Printed in the *United States of America*

“Addressing five key cultural topics of the day in this vital book, Rebecca McLaughlin deftly examines the pernicious lies that have insidiously infiltrated our world, including the church, and gives a solid and biblical rebuttal to each lie. Every Christian needs to read this book.”

BECKET COOK, author of *A Change of Affection: A Gay Man's Incredible Story of Redemption* and host of “The Becket Cook Show”

“In this book, Rebecca McLaughlin offers a gentle, yet powerful biblical corrective that calls readers to holistic Christian love—a higher calling than the call of the culture, and, often, a harder calling. She examines popular cultural mantras and answers each one with the truth and application of the gospel of Christ. In her balanced and gracious approach, she paints our culture's arguments in the most compassionate light possible—and then shows the beauty of a more excellent way!”

JASMINE HOLMES, author of *Mother to Son: Letters to a Black Boy on Identity and Hope*

“Rebecca McLaughlin's first book was the best all-round defense of the Christian faith I had read in a decade. This one is the perfect complement. In it the author points the way to a different kind of ‘muscular’ Christianity, one that is able to flex the *muscle of conviction* and the *muscle of compassion* at the same time. For a church—and a world—too often forced to choose between smug conservatism and acquiescing liberalism, McLaughlin recovers the genius of Jesus Christ, showing us how to love the truth and humans with equal passion. The result is an utterly compelling and humane treatment of five vital contemporary issues.”

JOHN DICKSON, author and historian, Distinguished Fellow in Public Christianity at Ridley College, Australia

“THE GAY-RIGHTS MOVEMENT IS THE NEW CIVIL-RIGHTS MOVEMENT”

“Can you untangle this for me?”

My daughter’s hands were filled with wool. She wanted to start a project, but two different colors were twisted together. It had reached the point that if you pulled on any one thread, the knot grew tighter. So I started the slow, careful, painstaking process of teasing the various knots apart. Every time I seemed to be making progress and was winding one color neatly round my hand, I’d come to the end of the thread. It turned out she’d been extracting wool by pulling on random ends and then cutting the thread when she came to a knot.

In chapter 1, we explored the biblical big picture of love and unity across racial and cultural difference. In chapter 2, we saw the biblical big picture of sex and marriage and how the Bible has a different beautiful vision for same-sex relationships. In this chapter we’ll examine how the historic failure of white Christians to love their black neighbors has propelled the powerful claim that the gay-rights movement is the new civil-rights movement. This is the tape that tethers

"love is love" to "black lives matter." We'll look at why this claim is so persuasive, as well as why it ultimately fails. And we'll see that shortcuts only make the slow, careful, painstaking process of untangling this knot more difficult.

'YOU'RE ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY'

On November 14, 1960, a 6-year-old girl named Ruby Bridges was escorted into an elementary school in New Orleans. The year Ruby was born, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled public school segregation unconstitutional. But many were still resisting integration. This brave 6-year-old's small steps into William Frantz Elementary School were part of an attempted giant leap for America: a leap toward educating black and white children together, a leap toward equality, a leap toward the day when "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers."¹ But rather than joining with this great leap, many white parents took another step. When Ruby Bridges entered school, she faced death threats, racist slurs, and a white crowd chanting, "2-4-6-8, we don't want to integrate." Five hundred white children were pulled from school that day, and as more and more schools became integrated, many white parents moved their children to segregated private schools.

Today, we're all appalled by this behavior. But those of us who are Christians should be more appalled. Many of the all-white private schools had "Christian" or "church" in their name. It wasn't just that white parents didn't want their children in integrated schools. White *Christian* parents didn't want it. These "segregation academics" are one example among many in American history of when white Christians have sided *against* love across racial difference. Not every white Christian, to be sure, but far too many.

Today, when people see Christian opposition to gay marriage, they think it's just the same song, second verse. The reasoning runs like this:

1. Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, August 28, 1963, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlk/havendream.htm>.

just as Christians have oppressed and terrorized African Americans, so Christians have oppressed and terrorized gay and lesbian people. Just as we are now ashamed of 1960s segregationists, so one day our descendants will be ashamed of us, if we continue to oppose gay marriage. I recently read a *New York Times* column titled "Choosing The Right Side Of History" in which Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nicholas Kristof made the usual move to tie gay rights to civil rights.² Those who oppose any progressive ideal, he argues, are on the wrong side of history. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. declared, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."³

Given the history of white Christian racism, I can see why people think Christianity is the problem. In the minds of many of my secular friends, if we're going to become more just, we must become less biblical. Perhaps a progressive form of Christianity can survive in the modern world. But traditional, Bible-based Christian faith—the kind that cannot affirm gay marriage—has failed. The gay-rights movement picked up the torch of the civil-rights movement and ran. We must run with it or be left behind. Or so the thinking holds.

But there are multiple problems with this perspective.

First, as we saw in chapter 1, without the God of the Bible, our ideals of human equality and justice have no foundation. Thus Yuval Noah Harari declares, "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings."⁴ From an atheist perspective, there's no reason to believe in human rights, no basis for love across difference, and no meaning to right and wrong beyond our shared imagination at a certain time. If this is true, then race-based slavery and segregation laws were not absolutely *wrong*. So long as they were right according to the "shared imagination" of enough people at the time, that's good enough, because there is no universal, timeless

2. Nicholas Kristof, "Choosing The Right Side Of History," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2020, A27, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/14/opinion/amy-coney-barrett-health-care.html>. The online version modified the title: "Will We Choose the Right Side of History?"

3. Martin Luther King Jr., "Out of the Long Night of Segregation," *Missions: An International Baptist Magazine*, February 8, 1958, <https://thekingcenter.org/archive/document/out-long-night-segregation>.

4. Harari, *Sapiens*, 28.

moral standard. As Richard Dawkins puts it, "moral values are 'in the air' and they change from century to century, even from decade to decade."⁵ The very idea of human rights is, as Harari argues, a Christian invention. So we need Christianity to be *right* for human-rights abuses to be *wrong*.

Second, the idea that minorities should be protected, not oppressed, also came to us from Christianity. As historian Tom Holland points out, such protection would have seemed quite strange in the first-century Greco-Roman empire in which Christianity was born, where the ethic was essentially this: "The strong do what they have the power to do. The weak must suck it up."⁶ But when a poor man from a historically oppressed racial and religious group claimed to be God in human flesh, commanded love for society's most vulnerable and died a slave's death on a Roman cross, he made the poor, oppressed, and victimized forever central to God's moral plan.

Third, without belief in a creator God, there is no story to the universe. When King asserted that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, he said it *because* he was a Christian, who believed in Jesus's death and resurrection:

Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy a palace and Christ a cross, but that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C., so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. Yes, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."⁷

If there is no God who made the universe, there is no moral universe to bend. There is, as Dawkins puts it, "no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference."⁸ If there is no justice-loving God who made the world, there's no reason to believe the world will finally be just. In fact, there's no way of even knowing what that would mean.

5. Richard Dawkins, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner's Guide* (New York: Random House, 2019), 159.
6. See Holland, *Dominion*, 41. Quoting from Thucydides, 5.89.
7. Martin Luther King Jr., "Out of the Long Night of Segregation," *Missions: An International Baptist Magazine*, February 8, 1958.
8. Richard Dawkins, *A River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 133.

Fourth, the problem with Christians who supported segregation was not that they listened to the Bible too much, but too little. While the Bible cuts firmly against gay marriage for believers, it cuts equally firmly in favor of racial equality and integration. Repenting of racial injustice means turning back to the Bible. Affirming gay marriage for believers means turning away. In the time before abolition, slaveholders often either stopped those they enslaved from reading the Bible at all, or drastically edited it. As Esau McCaulley puts it, "Part of them knew that their exegetical conclusions could only be maintained if the enslaved were denied firsthand experience of the text."⁹ It takes as much careful editing to make the Bible seem like it supports segregation as to make it seem like it affirms gay marriage. In both cases, it's like editing a "Do Not Enter" sign by crossing out "Do Not."

The fifth problem with the claim that Christians who don't affirm gay marriage for believers are on the wrong side of history is that (in purely demographic terms) it seems unlikely to be true. Today, 31 percent of the world identifies as Christian, and that proportion is set to increase slightly to 33 percent by 2060, while the proportion of the world not affiliated with any religion is set to decline from 16 percent to 13 percent.¹⁰ Christianity's closest global competitor is Islam, which is set to grow from 24 percent to 31 percent and which also does not affirm gay marriage. Many expected progressive Christianity that affirms gay marriage to thrive while Bible-based faith declined. But across North America, mainline churches have seen a steep decline while evangelical churches have fared much better.¹¹ Globally, evangelical and Pentecostal churches (mostly composed of believers of color) are growing, while more liberal churches (mostly composed of white people) are declining.

9. McCaulley, *Reading White Black*, 170.
10. See "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050>, and "Projected Change in Global Population, 2015–2060," Pew Research Center, March 31, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/pf_17-04-05_projectionsupdate_changepopulation040ppx.
11. "The Changing Religious Composition of the U.S.," in America's Changing Religious Landscape, Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/>.

Finally, the claim that anyone who opposes gay marriage for Christians is equivalent to a '60s segregationist fails when we look at the actual beliefs of black Americans.

AWKWARD VIEWS OF BLACK AMERICANS

In 2001, roughly a third of American adults supported same-sex marriage. By 2013, it was half. When gay marriage was legalized across the country in 2015, 55 percent of Americans agreed. Since then, support has grown further, with 61 percent of Americans affirming gay marriage in 2019.¹² This change in a single generation is one of the most remarkable cultural shifts of our age. It's important to note that someone could oppose gay marriage for *believers* while not thinking it should be against the law. As a comparison, I believe that frequent prayer, weekly church attendance (except in extreme circumstances), generous giving to those in need, and living as either faithfully single or faithfully married are vital for Christian discipleship. But I don't think they should be enforced by law. I believe that Christian ethics are most attractive when they are undertaken freely. Still, to the extent that not believing gay marriage should be legal is some kind of proxy to underlying beliefs, we see a significant difference between black and white Americans.

In many people's minds, the fact that gay marriage was legalized across all states under America's first black president solidified the idea that the gay-rights movement is the natural heir of the civil-rights movement. But while President Obama supported the change, at the time only 39 percent of black Americans agreed. By 2019, only 51 percent of black Americans supported same-sex marriage versus 62 percent of whites.¹³ This difference is the more remarkable as the average age of black Americans is younger than whites, and younger people

12. Numbers quoted from "Changing attitudes on same-sex marriage," Pew Research Center, May 14, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/fact-sheet/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage>. A Gallup poll found slightly higher levels of support, but a similar trajectory across time: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/311672/support-sex-marriage-matches-record-high.aspx>.

13. "Changing attitudes on same-sex marriage," 2019.

are more likely to support gay marriage.¹⁴ Moreover, black Americans are far more likely to vote Democrat, and Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to support gay marriage.¹⁵

So, what keeps so many black Americans from affirming gay marriage? There are likely several factors. One is that Americans with college degrees are far more likely to support same-sex marriage than those with high-school degrees or less, and African Americans have historically had less access to higher education.¹⁶ But another significant factor is the much higher levels of Christian faith and practice among black Americans.¹⁷

As we saw in chapter 1, black Americans are more likely to identify as Christians than their white peers are. They poll higher on every measure of Christian practice and tend to be theologically conservative.¹⁸ While black Protestants considered as a whole (without separating theological progressives from conservatives) are significantly less likely than white evangelicals to oppose gay marriage, they are far more likely than white mainline Protestants to do so.¹⁹ Which ever way you read it, the fact that nearly half of all black Americans *still* do not support gay marriage is a major problem for the claim that the gay-rights movement is the new civil-rights movement. It certainly discredits the idea that anyone who does not support gay

14. In 2019, 83 percent of Americans age 18 to 29 supported gay marriage versus only 47 percent of those 65 and older.

15. In 2019, 79 percent of Democrats supported gay marriage versus only 44 percent of Republicans. In 2016, 68 percent of Americans with a college degree said same-sex marriage should be legal versus 45 percent of those without. Hannah Fingerhut, "Support steady for same-sex marriage and acceptance of homosexuality," Pew Research Center, May 12, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/12/support-steady-for-same-sex-marriage-and-acceptance-of-homosexuality>.

16. For a discussion of this from 2015, when same-sex marriage was being considered by the U.S. Supreme Court, see Frank Newport, "Religion, Race, and Same-Sex Marriage," Gallup Blog, May 1, 2015, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling/polling-matters/182978/religion-race-sex-marriage.aspx>.

17. The faith statements of the largest black protestant denominations testify to this.

18. A 2020 survey found that 34 percent of white evangelicals supported gay marriage versus 57 percent of black Protestants and 79 percent of white mainline Protestants. See "Dueling Realities: Amid Multiple Crises, Trump and Biden Supporters See Different Priorities and Futures for the Nation," Public Religion Research Institute, October 19, 2020, <https://www.prii.org/research/amid-multiple-crises-trump-and-biden-supporters-see-different-realities-and-futures-for-the-nation>.

marriage for religious reasons is like a '60s segregationist. Of course, you could say that black Christians are just wrong about gay marriage. But minimally, this divergence of views shows that we cannot lump the interests and beliefs of all minorities together. We see this crack in the supposedly cohesive shell of diversity most clearly when failure to affirm gay relationships leads to discrimination against black people in white-majority countries.

In 2019, a black actress named Seyi Omooba was fired from starring in a London production of *The Color Purple* because of a 2014 Facebook post in which she expressed her Christian beliefs about gay relationships.²⁰ "I just quoted what the Bible says about homosexuality," Omooba explained, "the need for repentance, but ultimately God's love for all humanity."²¹ The firing of a black woman because she holds traditionally Christian views is not a triumph for diversity. Quite the reverse.

The fact that many black people in the United States do not affirm gay relationships is hinted at in the mission statement of Black Lives Matter. The second point in that mission statement says:

We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.

Of course, Christians should affirm and defend the right to a life free from harassment, bullying, and violence for any person as an image-bearer of God. Black people who identify as queer or trans matter so much to Jesus that he came to die for them, and any hatred and abuse poured out on LGBT+ people by Christians goes quite against Christ's call to love our neighbor as ourselves. But the acknowledgment that LGBT+ people have been "marginalized within Black liberation movements" shows that the gay-rights movement is not smoothly

20. Sofia Lotto Persio, "The Color Purple actress under fire over anti-gay post," *Pink News*, March 17, 2019, <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2019/03/17/the-colour-purple-actress-anti-gay-post>.

21. Jonathan Ames, "Seyi Omooba: Actress fired for anti-gay Facebook message wins backing in legal fight," *The Times*, November 16, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/seyi-omooba-actress-fired-for-anti-gay-facebook-message-wins-backing-in-legal-fight-srzzfz6y>.

continuous with the civil-rights movement. Most African Americans engaged in the civil-rights movement would not have affirmed gay relationships or transgender identities and (ironically) the people most likely to hold progressive views on LGBT+ rights today are white and economically privileged.

Race, sexual choices, and gender identities are different threads that must be untangled to be understood. As we look more closely at the comparison people make between being born gay and being born black, we'll find intrinsic problems that ultimately don't do justice to people in either group.

We see this most clearly when gay marriage is compared to interracial marriage.

IS GAY MARRIAGE LIKE INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE?

In 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned laws banning interracial marriage. The case at hand was that of Mildred and Richard Loving, who had both been sentenced to prison for a year. Richard was white. Mildred was part African American and part Native American. Their marriage violated Virginia state law. It's shocking to think how recent this is and to think that, despite all that the Bible says about love across racial and cultural difference, many Christians insisted that interracial marriage violated God's plan.

When the Supreme Court was considering the case for gay marriage in 2015, *Loving v. Virginia* was cited as a precedent. The court voted 5 to 4 in favor. Justice Clarence Thomas—the only African American justice on the court—was one of the four who argued against same-sex marriage. But whatever the rights and wrongs of the U.S. legal system, is it right to see gay marriage as a natural heir to mixed-race marriage? I don't think so.

For centuries, motivated by racism, white scientists claimed that there were meaningful biological differences between black people and white people. But they were wrong. In fact, now that we can analyze each human's DNA, we can see that there is often more genetic variation between two people of African descent than between a black person and a white person. What's more, any apparent differences between an individual black person and a white person—skin color or

hair type, for example—are irrelevant when it comes to having sex and having kids. While the laws against interracial marriage in the United States were partly based on the claim by scientists in the mid-19th century that racial mixing led to infertility, this claim was completely false.²² Nothing about interracial marriage changes what marriage was designed to be: a picture of Jesus's love for the church and a partnership for bearing and raising children.

The case of same-sex marriage is different. There are significant biological differences between men and women. In many life situations, such differences don't matter. For example, to do most jobs, it doesn't matter if you're male or female. But the differences between men and women are highly relevant in marriage. In fact, this is the setting in which they're *most* relevant, because the differences enable us to have babies together. Equating same-sex marriage to mixed-race marriage only works if you accept the wrong beliefs about people from different racial backgrounds that white scientists used to peddle. This doesn't by itself mean gay marriage is wrong. But it does mean we can't say it's the natural successor to mixed-race marriage.

IS BEING GAY LIKE BEING BLACK?

The gay-rights movement built on the foundation of the civil-rights movement on the basis that being gay was in important respects like being black. Each of us is born with an unchosen racial heritage. Likewise, the pioneers of gay rights argued, some people are born gay. They should, therefore, have the same right as anyone else to work in any job, serve in the military, and marry. But there are two substantial problems with the analogy.

First, when people compare being gay to being black, they typically don't distinguish between a person's *attractions* and *actions*. Whatever our patterns of attraction, we don't *choose* our attractions. I didn't choose, for example, to be attracted to women. But we do choose our actions, and we all agree that sexual actions carry moral weight. For

22. William H. Tucker, "The Ideology of Racism: Misusing Science to Justify Racial Discrimination," UN Chronicle, <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/ideology-racism-misusing-science-justify-racial-discrimination>.

example, not long ago I met a man in his 50s who has wrestled all his married life with attraction to other women. He has worked hard to turn away from these attractions. But he could have made other choices. When attracted to another woman, he could've responded by starting an affair. He could've divorced his wife to marry another woman. Or he could have attempted a sexual assault. All of these are moral decisions, and all of us would agree that the last choice at least would be immoral. In each case, the attraction is the same, but the action is different. My friend experiences attraction, and then he makes moral choices about how he responds. Likewise, while my same-sex attraction is as unchosen as the color of my skin, if I left my husband for another woman and then said I had no choice but to do so, I'd be denying a basic fact of my humanity: that I'm a human who makes moral decisions, not an animal who simply responds to her drives. When you think about it, it's dehumanizing not to distinguish between someone's attractions and actions.

Second, while racial heritage is both unchosen and unchanging, the latest research shows that our sexual attractions can change over time, and that bisexuality is far more common than exclusive same-sex sexuality. University of Utah professor Lisa Diamond, who identifies as a lesbian, is a pioneer of this research. Diamond has found that women like me, who experience same-sex attraction but not exclusively, are by far the largest group of same-sex attracted people. About 14 percent of women experience attraction to other women, while only 1 percent are never attracted to men. For men, it's roughly 7 percent who are attracted to other men, while only 2 percent are never attracted to women. This means there is significant complexity within labeled categories. For example, 42 percent of self-identified lesbians and 31 percent of self-identified gay men report having had an opposite-sex sexual fantasy in the last year, one study found.²³

23. Professor Diamond summarizes her data in a lecture at Cornell University, "Just How Different Are Female and Male Sexual Orientation?," YouTube, October 17, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr7THDOuUBw>. For a short summary on the different proportions of the population that report same-sex attraction, same-sex sexual behavior, and LGBT identity, see Gary J. Gates, "How Many People are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?," UCLA School of Law, Williams Institute, April 2011, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/how-many-people-lgbt>.

Popular culture is starting to acknowledge this complexity. The Canadian comedy *Schitt's Creek* won a raft of Emmys in 2020. One of its central characters, David, signals gay identity from the start and ends up marrying another man. But in the first season, the show plays with the audience's expectations by having David sleep with a woman and say he's bisexual. Meanwhile, the man whom David finally marries was previously engaged to a woman and has never before dated a man. Ten years ago, this man would have been portrayed as someone who always knew he was gay but never acknowledged it. But as professor Diamond's research has shown, rather than being set from birth, "change in patterns of same-sex and other-sex attraction is a relatively common experience among sexual minorities."²⁴

Diamond clarifies that change is not forged by intentional effort—for example, someone undergoing therapy to try to change their attractions. But change over time and in different circumstances (sometimes called "sexual fluidity") is seen in every category, whether people identify as gay, straight, or bisexual. Diamond recognizes how challenging this finding is to the gay-rights movement:

We've advocated for the civil rights of LGBT people on the basis of them being LGBT. We have used categories as a part of our strategy for social policy and for acceptance, and that is really, really tricky, now that we know it's not true.²⁵

None of this means we choose our attractions, or that everyone who experiences same-sex attraction is also capable of heterosexual desire. But it does mean that sexual orientation is not like race. Our patterns of attraction can change over time. Our racial heritage does not. Out of respect for all concerned, we must untie the knot that has bound these two ideas together.

24. See Lisa M. Diamond, "Sexual Fluidity in Male and Females," *Current Sexual Health Reports* 8 (November 4, 2016): 249–256, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10330-016-0092-z>.

25. Quoted from Diamond, "Just How Different Are Female and Male Sexual Orientation?" See also Clifford J. Rosky and Lisa M. Diamond, "Scrutinizing Immutability: Research on Sexual Orientation and U.S. Legal Advocacy for Sexual Minorities," *The Journal of Sex Research* 53, nos. 4–5 (May–June 2016): 363–91, https://psych.utah.edu/_resources/documents/people/diamond/Scrutinizing%20Immutability.pdf.

But those of us who are Christians must also repent of the ways in which Christian sin has tied that knot.

RACE, SEXUALITY, AND PREJUDICE

One of the most noxious lies told over centuries about black people was that they were morally inferior to whites. This deep-seated prejudice made 6-year-old Ruby Bridges seem like a threat and made the prosecution lawyer think he knew Anthony Ray Hinton was guilty just by looking at him. King dreamed of a day when his children would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character, because racial heritage does not carry moral weight. While sexual choices do, we must also recognize that Christians have too often seen people who identify as gay or lesbian through similarly prejudiced eyes.

Many who were raised in the church were taught to be suspicious of gay and lesbian people. In fact, the idea that gay and lesbian people were in some general sense *bad people* was baked into the teaching. When people raised that way discover their prejudices aren't true, they often throw out what the Bible actually says. For example, I've frequently heard straight Christians say something like this: "I used to think that the Bible was against gay marriage, but then I made a gay friend at work. He's really nice and seems to be in a really loving relationship, so now I'm not so sure." When someone says this, it shows that they were raised with views that baptized what the Bible actually says in a steaming pot of prejudice. There's no reason for a Christian to think that someone in a gay relationship is not also kind, generous, and trustworthy. A gay person might well be all these things, just as a straight person who commits adultery might be a nice person in other respects. We might have a gay friend who is faithful to his husband and a straight friend who is not faithful to his wife. If this surprises us, we might need to repent of our prejudice. But we shouldn't repent of our theology.

To be sure, the Bible presents homosexual relationships as a symptom of a generally sinful heart. But this is also true of other forms of sexual sin. People sometimes observe that Christians go easy on straight sin while being strict on gay sin. They're right to cry foul when

they see this inconsistency. As we saw in the last chapter, the apostle Paul cried foul too. But the answer is not to say “Yes” to gay marriage because we have so often allowed for sinful heterosexual sex outside marriage. The answer is to say “No” to heterosexual sin as well—which the Bible also condemns.

WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY MARRIED?

An increasingly important question for Christians is what the Bible’s teaching means for gay and lesbian people who come to Christ while in a same-sex marriage. The question is particularly pressing for those raising children in same-sex partnerships. The God of the Bible hates divorce. So, isn’t it better for those in same-sex marriages to stay married after coming to Christ, just as Paul tells believers who are married to unbelievers not to leave their husband or wife (1 Cor. 7:12–13)?

From a biblical perspective, the answer is No. While same-sex marriage is recognized legally, it is not valid before God, because it requires unrepentant sin. But especially in cases involving children, the church must think creatively about how to welcome new believers into the community of faith. This is one of many areas in which the biblical truth that the church is the primary family unit comes into play. I recently met a woman who is living this reality.

Genia married first at 17 and had her first three children with a chronically unfaithful man. She tried to turn her marriage around, but it didn’t work. Instead, she had an affair with another woman, who gave her the relational connection she craved. When her marriage finally broke up, Genia became depressed and suicidal. She was part of a church and had met a young woman named Misha through a friend in her Bible study group. Misha kept vigil over her. “We were at a lake house,” Genia recalls. “I could have just walked out into the water.”

Misha had no history of same-sex attraction, but one thing led to another and she and Genia fell in love. They moved in together, entered into common-law marriage, and (through a sperm bank) had a child. Everything was well until Misha’s grandpa died. She started wondering about mortality and told Genia she wanted to go to church. “I was fine and happy until I went back to church,” Genia said. “That was when God started tugging at my heart again.” God’s

call became so clear that Genia told Misha they couldn’t go on as they were. At first, Misha took it very badly. But after a period of resisting and even having an affair herself, Misha gave her life to Christ. “Her transformation was amazing,” Genia recalls.

All this time, Genia’s daughter and son-in-law, who pastors a church in Nashville, had been loving and praying for the two of them. When Genia and Misha came to Christ, they knew they couldn’t continue in a sexual relationship. They were open to the possibility that this would mean breaking up their family, and they were ready to take that step—trusting the Lord that their obedience would be best for their daughter as well. But as they prayed, they both felt called instead to restart their lives in the church family Genia’s son-in-law served. That church had been deeply instrumental in Misha’s faith journey and felt like their spiritual home. So in the end, all three of them moved in with Genia’s daughter and son-in-law, who were also raising little girls. Rather than being broken up, their family grew, and their relationship changed. “We were lovers,” Genia explains, “and now we’re sisters.” With words that brought tears to my eyes, Genia told me that she and Misha are closer now as sisters in Christ than they ever were as lovers.

Not every story will have such a happy ending. Some same-sex couples will need full separation to live faithfully for Christ. Painful as this may be, Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. It isn’t safe. But a creative, expansive approach to family will always be part of the answer for gay and lesbian people entering the community of faith: whether they are leaving legal marriages or less formalized relationships, or whether they are simply giving up the possibility of sexual and romantic relationships in the future. Rosaria Butterfield, who was a literature professor at a secular university in a long-term lesbian relationship when she became a Christian, says she learned hospitality from her time in the LGBT+ community.²⁶ Today, most people associate “non-traditional family”—the sense of corporate closeness that doesn’t depend on DNA—with LGBT+ people. But

26. Her excellent book, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), makes the case for this being a Christian norm.

the first pioneers of such community were Christians. As one second-century commentator put it, Christians have “a common table, but not a common bed.”²⁷

‘WHY HAVE CHRISTIANS ACTED HATEFULLY TOWARD LGBT+ PEOPLE?’

In January 2020, I gave a talk—“Aren’t We Better Off Without Christianity?”—for a Christian fellowship at MIT. When it came to Q&A, I asked for questions from skeptical people. One of the first was this: “Why have Christians acted hatefully toward LGBT people?” I said I could answer that important question with one word: sin. Not the sin of the LGBT people who experienced the hate, but the sin of any Christians who deliver it.

Jesus calls us to love even our enemies—let alone those who have made different sexual choices than we have. The ways in which Christians have at times acted hatefully toward gay and lesbian people is simply disobedience to Christ, and its effects can be devastating. The lesbian couple I met with in Missouri were sincerely concerned what I’d say wouldn’t be “safe,” since some studies have suggested that LGBT+ young adults raised in religious contexts are more likely to attempt suicide than those who weren’t. For example, a 2015 study showed that “LGBT young adults who mature in religious contexts have higher odds of suicidal thoughts, and more specifically chronic suicidal thoughts, as well as suicide attempt compared to other LGBT young adults.”²⁸ In general, as we’ll see in the next chapter, regular churchgoing has a significant protective effect against suicide. But this does not seem to be the case for those who identify as LGBT+, whose suicide rates in general continue to be much higher than their heterosexual peers, despite greater societal acceptance.²⁹ Loving a person

27. The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, chapter 5.

28. See Jeremy J Gibbs and Jeremy Goldbach, “Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 19, no. 4 (March 12, 2015): 472–88, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25763926>.

29. See, for example, Julia Raifman, et al., “Sexual Orientation and Suicide Attempt Disparities Among US Adolescents: 2009–2017,” *Pediatrics* 45 no. 3 (March 2020): 1–11, <https://pediatrics.org>.

doesn’t mean affirming all that person’s actions. But it does mean listening and seeking to understand. In *Us versus Them*, Andrew Marin quotes a 29-year-old gay man living in Athens, Georgia, who said something typical of other LGBT+ people he interviewed: “I left the church because I couldn’t find one person who cared enough to listen to my story. I mean *really* listen.”³⁰

If we look at Jesus’s life and ministry, we often find him criticized for loving people known for sexual sin. Indeed, he shocked his religious critics when he claimed, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you” (Matt. 21:31). Jesus’s point was not to affirm prostitution or the extortionate tax collecting of his day. His point was to say, “Look, these people are getting ahead of you, because they realize they’re sinners who need me. You guys are sinners too. You just don’t realize it!” Some people use this text to argue that Jesus wasn’t bothered by sexual sin, so we shouldn’t be either. But the opposite is true. In fact, if Jesus had affirmed the sins of the tax collectors and prostitutes, it would have removed what set them apart from the self-righteous Pharisees: they knew they were sinners who needed a Savior.

When Ruby Bridges walked into William Frantz Elementary School, she had to walk past jeering crowds waving hateful signs. Many gay and lesbian people historically have experienced similar treatment in the name of Christianity. Today, such explicit, public hate mainly comes from fringe groups, like the so-called Westboro Baptist Church, which is mostly one man’s extended family. But there is still much prejudice in churches, to the extent that it is typically easier to confess to a pornography addiction than to experiencing same-sex attraction, and same-sex attraction is often linked in people’s minds with pedophilia. If the beautiful biblical vision of marriage is to shine, this layer of prejudice must be sloughed off.

But while black and LGBT+ experiences have at times been bound together by the unchristian behavior of many professing to follow Christ, we must once again reject a simple narrative of them-and-us.

appublications.org/content/145/3/ez0191658.full.

30. Andrew Marin, *Us Versus Us: The Untold Story of Religion and the LGBT Community* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2016), 35.

Rosaria Butterfield was wooed to Christ by the unconditional love of an older Christian pastor and his wife, whom she met after writing a newspaper article critiquing Christian hate. My friend Rachel was immediately embraced by a Christian fellowship at Yale, and faithful friends walked with her in love and helped her stand again when she fell into sexual sin. And as the 6-year-old Bridges walked past those hateful crowds, she prayed for those who despised her, asking God to forgive them and reflecting true love for enemies. Through centuries of abuse, millions of African American Christians have done the same.

CAN YOU UNTANGLE THIS FOR ME?

When my daughter came to me with her mess of wool, it was partly an act of confession. Her actions had led to different colors getting tangled up, to knots being pulled more tightly, and to short sections of wool being cut. She had to realize she'd gone wrong and ask for help. If we look back over the last 400 years, we may have a similar realization. It's easy as a Christian today to see the faith of civil-rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Fannie Lou Hamer and to feel a warm glow of pride. But that glow turns cold for white Christians like me when we realize that if white Christians had upheld biblical ethics from the first, there would have been no need for the civil-rights movement.

Going further back, I like to think with pride about leading abolitionists like Harriet Tubman or William Wilberforce, whose faith fueled their pursuit of justice. But if white Christians had stood against race-based, chattel slavery in the first place, there would have been no need for the abolitionist movement. Christian sin has allowed the gay-rights movement to trade on the moral capital of the civil-rights movement. "Black lives matter" got tied in people's minds to "love is love" not just because of sin in the world, but because of sin in the church. The sin that protested Ruby Bridges's small steps into an all-white elementary school. The sin that made Richard and Mildred Loving's marriage illegal. The sin that played midwife to the black church, as white believers rejected their brothers and sisters in Christ and refused to worship with them as equals before God. But before

we conclude that all this history of Christian sin means we should throw out Christianity, we must remember that human equality is ultimately God-given.

My daughter could have given up her tangled wool entirely and thrown it in the trash. And if we abandon Christianity, we will not find ourselves in a brave new moral world, better able to support equality for all. No, we will find ourselves unable to justify human rights for *anyone*. Without Christianity, human beings have no natural rights, just as chimpanzees, hyenas, and spiders have no rights. And there is no moral arc to the universe. There is nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.