

Is Gay Marriage in the Church Really That Big a Deal?

If the widely esteemed Eugene Peterson were still pastoring today, and a gay couple in his church who were “Christians of good faith” asked him to preside at their wedding, would he do it?

He answered that question this summer in a word: Yes.

Passionate responses followed in the weeks after that simple answer to RNS columnist Jonathan Merritt’s query was published: disappointment from some prominent conservative Christians, joy from LGBT Christians and their allies and a statement by LifeWay Christian Stores threatening to remove the Presbyterian pastor-poet’s books from its shelves.

Then Peterson retracted his answer.

Many outside, and some within, Christianity now are asking questions broader than whether Peterson should have answered one way or another: Why does sexuality seem to be *the* question for Christians? Why do these conflicts—over same-sex marriage, transgender people and the ordination of openly gay people—keep popping up?

The controversies have determined whether books will be banned from stores and donations withheld from charities. They have split families and brought denominations to the brink of schism.

It makes sense that sexuality has become the dividing line for many Christians, according to R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“Historically, the church has to respond to the moral crises of its own day. You shouldn’t expect the church to respond to

what isn't being discussed in the culture," Mohler said.

It's not only being discussed in culture, but also roiling Christianity – from churches to families to the workplace to college campuses. Consider:

- LifeWay stopped selling popular Christian author and speaker Jen Hatmaker's books last fall after she wrote on Facebook and later confirmed to RNS she believed LGBT relationships could be holy.

- Last fall, campus ministry InterVarsity Christian Fellowship grabbed headlines when Time Magazine reported it would begin "involuntary terminations" for staff members who openly disagreed with its position "that God's intention for sexual expression is to be between a husband and wife in marriage."

- In 2014, World Vision reversed course after announcing it would no longer define marriage as between a man and a woman in its employee conduct manual. Within a week of its initial announcement, donors had canceled their sponsorships of about 2,000 children around the globe made through the Christian relief organization.

Why sexuality?

Sexuality has been intensely debated within Christianity since its earliest days – at least since the time of church father Augustine, according to William B. Lawrence, a professor of American church history at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University.

It always has been something Christians have used to distinguish themselves from others, Lawrence said, something they have used as a way to talk about more esoteric doctrines like original sin. For one, sex is interesting, and it's comparatively easy for those with little theological training to grasp.

Throughout history, some Christians have used temperance and conscientious objection to war in a similar way, he said.

“Most of the decisions that have to be made about theology and ethics are deeply nuanced, and for a lot of people, that requires more hard work than they want to do,” Lawrence said.

“It’s just easier to find a single issue and use that as the red line that says you’re either on one side of this or the other.”

For many, sexuality has been that issue. Mainline Protestant denominations such as the United Methodist Church, which is planning a special session of its worldwide General Conference to discuss sexuality, began debating the inclusion of LGBT members during the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Lawrence pointed out. Other independent churches, parachurch organizations and publishing houses since “have decided that they’re going to make this the single dividing issue,” he said.

“It’s been that way for a few decades and probably is the successor single issue to the discussion about abortion,” he said.

That’s not to say opposition to abortion no longer is important to many Christians, according to Mohler.

But, he said, abortion and sexuality raise different questions. Sexuality has become a question of identity, not behavior. And sexuality asks yes-or-no questions of pastors that abortion doesn’t: Would you perform a same-sex wedding? Would you ordain LGBT clergy?

“What’s new is that this moral revolution has gained so much momentum and moral authority in the culture,” he said.

Why now?

Mohler describes a collision between “two massive and very powerful cultural realities.” One is the “long, consistent testimony of Christianity concerning God’s plan for human sexuality, marriage and gender” that reserves sex for one man and one woman within marriage, he said. The other is a “moral revolution being driven largely by what is considered to be sexual liberation.”

Both sides agree that human dignity and human flourishing are at stake, he said. Both agree they are talking about fundamental matters of right and wrong.

“With that being said, you’ve got to expect the collision is going to be pretty volatile,” he said.

And the middle ground – or, at least, the “illusion” of middle ground – is disappearing, Mohler said. As he put it: “You’re either going to perform a same-sex ceremony or you’re not.”

Matthew Vines, author of “God and the Gay Christian” and founding executive director of The Reformation Project, agrees that for conservative Christians there never has been a middle ground on LGBT inclusion.

“Can there be a middle way?” Vines asked. “It is far, far more common for people to actually be excommunicated from churches or blacklisted from conferences for saying they are affirming (of LGBT people) than for the opposite.”

The author said he understands some conservative Christians’ argument that to condone same-sex relationships is to condone “unrepentant sin,” pointing to passages in the biblical books of Leviticus and Romans.

But, he said, he’s lost sympathy for that argument when many of the same Christians have been quick to support President Trump, who has both boasted of groping women and said he has

never asked for forgiveness. In a Washington Post-ABC poll taken in October after the release of the tapes, 44 percent of white evangelical Protestants reported they believed Trump had “strong moral character.”

The number of white evangelicals is in decline, though, Vines said, and that “produces an anxiety among many conservative Christians about their role and their status in their society and what impact it will have on society more broadly.”

“This particular issue – the topic of same-sex marriage and, in more recent years, of transgender people – has become a powerful symbol of the ways in which our society no longer adheres to traditional Christian norms and teachings on an important topic, and it is an issue that uniquely undermines the moral authority of church leaders,” he said.

What’s next?

David P. Gushee – an ordained Baptist minister, professor of Christian ethics and RNS columnist – said evangelicalism in particular has always been anxious about maintaining boundaries.

It’s more of an “amorphous ‘movement’” than structured denomination, and without a recognized authority, it’s “almost like self-appointed bishops and cardinals emerge,” he said. Gushee includes on that list many older authors and pastors, and publications such as Christianity Today and retailers like LifeWay.

“Because they keep losing in the culture, it becomes more important to draw a line within the religious community, the evangelical community, and say, ‘We may be losing out there, but in here we’re going to keep enforcing this boundary,’” he said.

Gushee pointed to one project he was working on that he was

told was shot down by publishers because LifeWay would never carry it given his support of gay marriage and LGBT Christians. In the meantime, Hatmaker's latest book, "Of Mess and Moxie," published by Nelson Books, hit No. 3 on Amazon's best-selling books list the day after it was released.

LifeWay did not answer specific questions on whether it has gone – or plans to go – back through all the authors on its shelves to make sure none have made statements affirming same-sex marriage. A company spokesperson also declined to say whether it has removed authors' books from its shelves based on other actions or positions that it would not consider biblical and whether it has a statement of faith or policy that indicates which positions authors should hold in order for their books to appear in LifeWay stores.

Instead, a spokesperson responded several weeks ago with a statement via email saying LifeWay promises customers it will "provide trustworthy, biblical solutions for life," and uses a "multiplicity of factors" to determine what those might be. The spokesperson did not elaborate on those factors.

Gushee said he didn't think attitudes toward LGBT people were the only thing that would get Christians booted from bookstores and conferences, though that did seem to be the case in many such instances in the past decade.

But, statistically, those attitudes toward LGBT people – and, particularly, toward same-sex marriage – are changing, even among white evangelicals, according to the Pew Research Center. The number of white evangelicals who support same-sex marriage has grown from 27 percent to 35 percent over the past year. Among all evangelicals born after 1964 – considered Generation X or millennials – nearly half are supportive.

And while those who hold what Mohler refers to as a historic Christian view of sexuality maintain that their view is the biblical one, others say the Bible may not be so clear.

A glance at Romans 1 suggests its writer, Paul, may not have had the same kind of committed same-sex relationships in mind that readers see and experience today, according to Vines. Plus, there are only about five verses in the Bible that mention homosexuality, Lawrence said, compared with hundreds of passages about “care for the poor, justice for all persons, welcoming the stranger” and other topics that don’t command the same energy and financial support.

“The next few years are going to be interesting to observe in terms of what happens in the broad sweep of American Christianity on this topic,” Lawrence said.

“Is this going to be something that is going to prove to have been an immense dispute that wasn’t divisive?” {eo}

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