

Eugene Peterson Retracts Same-Sex Marriage Statement

The Message author Eugene Peterson retracted his statement that he would perform a same-sex marriage if asked.

“To clarify, I affirm a biblical view of marriage: one man to one woman. I affirm a biblical view of everything,” Peterson said in a statement after his interview with Religion News Service’s Jonathan Merritt ignited a firestorm of controversy this week.

In Merritt’s interview, Peterson says, “I wouldn’t have said this 20 years ago, but now I know a lot of people who are gay and lesbian, and they seem to have as good a spiritual life as I do. I think that kind of debate about lesbians and gays might be over. People who disapprove of it, they’ll probably just go to another church. So we’re in a transition, and I think it’s a transition for the best, for the good. I don’t think it’s something that you can parade, but it’s not a right or wrong thing as far as I’m concerned.”

Today, Peterson clarified.

Here’s his statement:

Recently a reporter asked me whether my personal opinions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage have changed over the years. I presume I was asked this question because of my former career as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), which recently affirmed homosexuality and began allowing its clergy to perform same-sex weddings. Having retired from the pastorate more than 25 years ago, I acknowledged to the reporter that I “haven’t had a lot of experience with it.”

To clarify, I affirm a biblical view of marriage: one man to one woman. I affirm a biblical view of everything.

It's worth noting that in my 29-year career as a pastor, and in the years since then, I've never performed a same-sex wedding. I've never been asked and, frankly, I hope I never am asked. This reporter, however, asked a hypothetical question: if I were pastoring today and if a gay couple were Christians of good faith and if they asked me to perform their wedding ceremony—if, if, if. Pastors don't have the luxury of indulging in hypotheticals. And to be honest, "no" is not a word I typically use. It was an awkward question for me because I don't do many interviews at this stage in my life at 84, and I am no longer able to travel as I once did or accept speaking requests.

With most interviews I've done, I generally ask for questions in advance and respond in writing. That's where I am most comfortable. When put on the spot by this particular interviewer, I said yes in the moment. But on further reflection and prayer, I would like to retract that.

That's not something I would do out of respect to the congregation, the larger church body and the historic biblical Christian view and teaching on marriage. That said, I would still love such a couple as their pastor. They'd be welcome at my table, along with everybody else.

When I told this reporter that there are gay and lesbian people who "seem to have as good a spiritual life as I do," I meant it. But then again, the goodness of a spiritual life is functionally irrelevant in the grand scheme of things.

We are saved by faith through grace that operates independent of our resolve or our good behavior. It operates by the hand of a loving God who desires for us to live in grace and truth and who does not tire of turning us toward both grace and truth.

There have been gay people in a variety of congregations, campuses and communities where I have served. My

responsibility to them was the work of a pastor—to visit them, to care for their souls, to pray for them, to preach the Scriptures for them.

This work of pastoring is extremely and essentially local: Each pastor is responsible to a particular people, a specific congregation. We often lose sight of that in an atmosphere so clouded by controversy and cluttered with loud voices. The people of a congregation are not abstractions, they are people, and a pastor does a disservice to the people in his care when he indulges in treating them as abstractions.

I regret the confusion and bombast that this interview has fostered. It has never been my intention to participate in the kind of lightless heat that such abstract, hypothetical comments and conversations generate. This is why, as I mentioned during this interview, I so prefer letters and will concentrate in this final season on personal correspondence over public statements. {eoa}