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Evangelical Pastor Offers Third Way Approach to Full Acceptance of Gay People

In his new book, *A Letter to My Congregation: An Evangelical Pastor's Path to Embracing People Who are Gay, Lesbian and Transgender in the Company of Jesus* (Read the Spirit Books, March 3, 2014), Ken Wilson offers a “third way” approach to a fraught question. In rethinking the traditional evangelical approach to gay people, Wilson, a pastor for almost forty years, has strained his relationship with his denomination, Vineyard Churches U.S.A., which recently asserted its commitment to the traditional understanding of a biblical prohibition against homosexuality.

The “gay question” has become a litmus test for orthodoxy in many churches. There was a time when Wilson accepted the traditional position of Christendom: “Same-sex orientation itself is not sinful, but any sex with a member of the same sex is outside the boundaries of holiness.” People looking to join his church were told that those in active gay relationships should end them. He now expresses chagrin at this response: “For a pastor to answer a question like this without deep reflection, without a brutally honest appreciation for its impact on real people, is cowardly.”

The traditional approach has been the cause of unnecessary harm, Wilson acknowledges, and he advocates for full inclusion of gay couples. Both the “open and affirming” stance of some churches, and the “love the sinner, hate the sin” of others are unsatisfactory because both are exclusionary, requiring congregations, denominations, and society at large to offer moral approval or disapproval of gay relationships.

Wilson suggests that the gospel transcends this framing, by urging full acceptance of others that doesn't depend on giving or withholding moral approval.

Written as a letter to his congregation, the Vineyard Church of Ann Arbor, the book takes readers along on Wilson's journey of study, pastoral engagement, and spiritual discernment. He examines three aspects of the issue: the biblical texts concerning homosexuality; how an often ignored part of the New Testament can help Christians maintain unity of the Spirit in the face of differing views; and how an earlier church controversy over remarriage after divorce can inform this one.

Taking a closer look at the five biblical texts that have been understood to prohibit homosexuality—Leviticus 18, Romans 1, 1 Corinthians 6, and 1 Timothy 1—Wilson notes that all are uniformly negative regarding the behavior they address. The question is “What are the texts referring to?” Wilson suggests that these texts are not addressing people in modern, monogamous gay unions. Rather, they are condemning widespread practices of the time such as temple prostitution, pagan orgiastic practices, requiring homosexual services from slaves, pederasty, and gang rape.

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Wilson's third way hinges on the Bible's ultimate ethic, the rule of love. He offers Romans 14-15 as a guide to including GLBT people in the life of the church, while recognizing that the church has not yet resolved the question of the morality of gay relationships. In Romans 14-15, Paul urges groups in conflict to accept the other despite differences that threaten to tear them apart, establishing a category of "disputable matters" that can help Christians maintain unity in the face of serious moral and doctrinal differences.

"The gospel truth is that our common life in Jesus doesn't depend on granting each other moral approval, but it clearly rejects exclusion in all its forms," Wilson writes. "I think it is reasonable to regard this limited question—how the biblical prohibitions apply to monogamous gay relationships—as a disputable matter."

"This third way practices acceptance by choosing to respect the conscience of those who hold different views. Gay and lesbian couples are embraced into full participation of the life of the community, they are wanted as full members," Wilson says.

Wilson brings compassion and a refreshing humility to the account of how he came to change his mind about this most controversial question for the contemporary church. "I've been wrong before, and I might be wrong again," he says. "I am determined not to let the fear of that keep me from following Jesus as I understand him."

Ken Wilson is founding pastor of Vineyard Church of Ann Arbor, a multicultural congregation. He is known nationwide for his work in evangelical environmental initiatives and fostering contemplative prayer.

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*A Letter to My Congregation:
An Evangelical Pastor's Path to Embracing People Who are Gay, Lesbian and Transgender
in the Company of Jesus*

by Ken Wilson
Foreword by Dr. David P. Gushee
Preface by Dr. Tanya Luhrmann
Introduction by Phyllis Tickle

Read The Spirit Books

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