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Preface to the Second Edition

In 1959, I was a new seminary graduate heading overseas to do doctoral study in the Netherlands. I asked my presbytery to ordain me so that if an opportunity to minister overseas developed, I would be able to accept the call without having first to travel back to Nebraska to be ordained. So the Presbytery of Nebraska City ordained me as a “traveling evangelist.”

As it happened, I did serve as organizing pastor of an English-speaking congregation in the Netherlands on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church. However, I feel that I have only really entered into my vocation as a “traveling evangelist” since the initial publication of this book in March of 2006. Friends and allies began to hear about the book and invited me to come and speak at their churches, in their communities, and at universities around the country. What started out as a short trip up the coast to speak at a gay and lesbian bookstore and a few churches eventually turned into a nationwide book tour that has taken the better part of two years.

This book tour has been one of the most wonderful experiences of my life. In those two years, I spoke at 142 events in 22 different states. As you might imagine, I was invited to speak to many progressive congregations on the west coast and in the northeast. But my tour also took me to some of the most conservative states in the country—Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri. Usually in these states my host pastor would pull me aside before the speech and explain, “We hope you won’t be disappointed, but I don’t imagine we’ll have very many people tonight. People just aren’t ready to talk about this topic.” Then we would arrive at the event and discover a large enthusiastic crowd made up of people from throughout the community. It showed the widespread yearning people have to talk about this matter and understand it on a deeper level.

I have been moved by the courage and compassion of the local organizers who invited me in to speak. In the fall of 2007, I was scheduled to speak at Drury University in Springfield, Missouri. I had heard that Springfield was a rather conservative town. At dinner with local

hosts before the event, I met Jolie Cave, a remarkable student organizer who was the vice president of Allies, the gay/straight alliance at the university. Jolie explained that the group had posted five hundred flyers advertising my speech the night before the event only to discover that most of them had been torn down and thrown into trash cans by the next morning. Allies responded by creating another flyer, this one proclaiming, "We will not be silenced; closets are for clothes, and trash cans are for ignorance," which they posted around campus along with the crumpled flyers they rescued from the trash cans.

The Drury University event took place on National Coming Out Day in an historic Baptist church where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly had preached. Peter Browning, the university chaplain, estimated that we might have thirty or so people in attendance. I arrived early to do some book signing and discovered the room was quickly filling as organizers dashed about to put up additional folding chairs. By the time the event started, about 125 people had crowded into the room, filling every pew and the choir loft, with still others standing in the back and sitting in the aisles. The atmosphere was electric. When Peter introduced the members of Allies and explained the courage and determination they had shown in organizing the event, they received a standing ovation. The energy just built from there. Students seemed to connect with my remarks, and afterward they asked thoughtful questions that showed a deep understanding of how their faith calls them to social justice. Seeing the courage and commitment of these students lets me know that the future of the church is in good hands.

Out on the road I have met extraordinary, faithful people dedicated to Christ. I have heard their stories, and they have touched my heart. I am now in a pastoral ministry of the kind that I haven't had since I was a pastor in the Netherlands. This ministry has three aspects. First, it is a ministry of comfort and encouragement to people who have been terribly hurt. Second, it is a ministry that supports marriage and family life. Third, and interwoven with the other purposes, it is a ministry of evangelism, in which people come to Christ and the church.

A MINISTRY OF COMFORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT

At almost every event my presentation is followed by a question-and-answer period and a book signing. Usually as I'm sitting at a table signing books, people bend down very close to me and tell me their stories.

Hearing people's stories, I have come to appreciate on a much deeper level the enormous pain that has been caused by the church's exclusionary policies.

In April of 2006, at a book signing at St. John's Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, California, an older woman came through the line to ask me to sign a book. She was exactly the sort of person you'd want for a neighbor—kind, gentle, soft spoken. She told me about her family. She had five daughters. Her middle daughter was a lesbian, who was so convinced that God didn't love her that she committed suicide. I just wanted to hold this woman and cry with her.

In North Carolina an older man told me that his gay son had shot himself twice but lived because he missed his heart. That son is now a successful businessman, living with a partner. He was just ordained an elder in a More Light Presbyterian church. This father said that he and his wife had always loved their son unconditionally, but the church had not. He told me what a thrill it was for them to lay hands on their son at his ordination.

On the book tour, I met bright church and professional leaders who had lost their jobs because someone found out they were gay. I met couples who have been together for ten, twenty, even forty years, who have raised children and cared for each other in sickness and in health, who are barred by the church and forty-seven states (at the time of this writing) from consecrating their union through marriage. I met faithful Christians who have excelled at some of the most conservative colleges and seminaries in the country yet were later shunned when it was revealed that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

In the summer of 2008, I spoke to about two-hundred LGBT evangelical Christians at the West Coast conference of Evangelicals Concerned, a group founded by Dr. Ralph Blair, a New York psychotherapist, gay man, and evangelical Christian. Blair founded this organization to meet the needs of conservative Christians who also know themselves to be gay. At the conference I became reacquainted with three former students from my teaching days at Fuller Theological Seminary. I had not known that the three men were gay. Each of them shared with me essentially the same story: when he had finally acknowledged that he was gay, people who had previously loved and admired him suddenly rejected him and refused to allow him to participate in church leadership.

These men had all participated in so-called "ex-gay" groups or therapy. They had been told by their church leaders that the Bible condemned homosexuality and that their salvation was at risk. So they had turned to

organizations that promised to help them change their sexual orientation. One man had tried for three years. Another had stayed in an “ex-gay” group for ten years. They had each spent enormous time in prayer, therapy, and self-loathing. But they all finally came to realize that they had not chosen nor could they change their sexual orientation, no matter how hard they tried. When these three former students finally accepted their sexual orientation, they were able to find meaningful relationships and personal stability, and they were able to start building a healthy family life.

This book tour has shown me firsthand the enormous pain caused by the church’s unjust policies. All of this suffering is completely unnecessary and preventable. As I show in this book (and as countless other scholars have shown in their work), the Bible, properly understood, does not condemn people who are LGBT, and it does not prohibit faithful same-sex relationships. The church’s historical prohibitions against marriage and ordination for people who are LGBT are an anachronism—much like the church’s previous policies that prohibited interracial marriage or ordaining people of African descent, women, or people who are divorced and remarried. Indeed our faith calls us to do justice, provide hospitality, and embrace equality for all God’s people.

A MINISTRY OF SUPPORTING MARRIAGE AND FAMILY LIFE

Supporting people who are LGBT is also about supporting families. One of the most striking things for me is the number of families I meet that are led by same-sex couples. The 2000 United States Census counted 594,391 families led by same-sex couples.¹ Research by other organizations suggests that the actual numbers may be higher. “A 2004 analysis by the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan research organization in Washington, DC, estimated that the census figures on same-sex households may be 25 percent too low.”²

When people know that God loves them and can accept who they are as a gift from God, it can be wonderfully healing for families. I was in Louisville, Kentucky, speaking at the national Presbyterian Women’s Gathering. An elderly African American woman stopped me in the hall after my speech. She asked me to sign her book there so she would not have to walk down the stairs to the bookstore. I pulled up two chairs so we could sit for a moment. “This is relevant to me,” she said as she handed me the book. “How so?” I asked. The woman sat in silence for a moment, then said, “I was so worried about my son. He seemed so confused and

wild. Now that he has accepted who he is and has settled down with his partner of two years, he is happy. His partner is like another son to me.”

In Fort Worth, Texas, I met a bright, well-behaved four-year-old boy and his two fathers. One father gave up his law practice to stay at home and raise the boy, while the other father works as an engineer. Over lunch, after church on Sunday, I learned from the stay-at-home dad that he and his partner had been active members of a church in Houston for ten years. The pastors knew they were gay and all seemed to be well. And it was—until they asked the church to baptize their son (born to a surrogate mother). The pastors refused. The parents asked, “Surely you will take this to the session?” An associate pastor informed them, “No, that will never happen in this church.”³

Eventually the engineer’s career moved the family to Fort Worth, where they found a new church home. The couple are very supported and valued now at St. Stephen Presbyterian Church, where their son was baptized. That night I called my wife, Sharon, and told her about this family and what they had been through. She said that earlier on that same day, at Pasadena Presbyterian Church, one of our copastors, Barbara Anderson, “baptized the two babies of a lesbian couple in the church. They were accompanied by members of their family and were supported in love by the congregation. It felt like we were all one family. It was beautiful.” One couple who came for the baptism inquired afterward about becoming members of the church.

Churches like St. Stephen in Fort Worth and Pasadena Presbyterian and many other congregations I have visited give me hope. Our churches and nation are being transformed. Everywhere I go, I meet pastors, elders, and church members who truly embody Christ’s love and who freely embrace all kinds of people, just as Jesus did.

I have seen firsthand that most people in the church deeply believe that everyone should be treated equally. They just have not always had the information and support they need to counteract the inaccurate things they have been told about the Bible.

A MINISTRY OF EVANGELISM

Thanks be to God, my book tour has also turned into a ministry of evangelism. After my remarks at a large conservative church, an Asian American woman and her boyfriend, both in their midtwenties, came up to me. The young woman said, “I haven’t been able to give my life

to Christ because of the hateful attitude toward gay people by the church." Gesturing toward her boyfriend, she said, "It has been a problem between us." I replied, "You *can* give your life to Christ. Jesus accepts gay and lesbian people whether a particular congregation does or not." She looked thoughtful for a moment and then visibly relaxed and smiled. I believe she gave her life to Christ in that moment while her boyfriend beamed.

At the Presbyterian General Assembly, shortly after the book came out, I talked with a friend and former student who is a professional fund-raiser. She keeps balance in her life by being a commissioned lay pastor of a very small church near her home in Redlands, California. She told me that a member of her church had taken my book and given it to a gay friend at work. The man read it and came back and said, "This book changed my life. My whole life, I thought God hated me. But this book is telling me that Jesus loves me." Then he paused and said, "I wonder, could I come to your church?" "Of course!" was the answer.

One of the most deeply moving aspects of speaking to diverse audiences across the country is to see the reactions on people's faces as I tell them that Jesus loves them. That should be obvious, right? Jesus loves you. It is the fundamental message of Christianity. Yet somehow in all the hate-filled rhetoric of the debate about homosexuality, the central message of Christ's redemptive ministry sometimes gets lost. As I remind people that Jesus loves them, I can see the glimmer in their eyes as they reconnect with their faith.

One story, for me, sums up the extraordinary experiences that I have had during this book tour. I was in Richmond, Virginia, teaching an adult church school class. During the discussion period, a well-dressed middle-aged woman with dark hair, sitting in the second row, shyly raised her hand. She asked if she could tell her story before she asked a question. She explained that she was a psychiatrist and a lesbian who had been with her partner for twenty-one years. She had grown up in a different faith but had stopped practicing it long ago. Her partner was raised in a rigid Southern Baptist home and had likewise turned away from her faith.

This couple decided to move from downtown Richmond out to the country for more peace and quiet. Their nearest neighbor was a young Southern Baptist minister with a small, rural church. As good neighbors do, this minister paid them a visit. He just wanted to get to know them as people. And, over time, these neighbors became friends.

Something transformative happens when we really get to know someone. We drop our categories and our preconceived notions. Peter and

Paul and Barnabas discovered it with Gentiles out in the mission field (see my discussion of Acts 15 in chapter 5). And this young Southern Baptist minister discovered it in rural Virginia. He came to realize that this lesbian couple was okay just as they were. They didn't have to change their sexual orientation. In turn, they became interested in his gospel message. The result was that this woman asked to be baptized, and she and her partner joined the little church. She had been a Christian for one year. That is evangelism. Accepting all people as children of God, as Jesus did, gives us the opportunity to share the good news of the gospel.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

A large part of the success of this book is due to the many committed Christians who supported its message and me. Prior to the start of the book tour, the copastors of our church, Mark Smutny and Barbara Anderson, arranged a small gathering to raise money to help get the book out to others. At that event, Barbara said, "This is about saving lives. Telling people about this book will help save lives."

I now know from personal experience that what Barbara said is true. Sharing the good news that Jesus loves people for who they are saves lives, reunites families, and brings people back into relationship with Jesus and the church. It is a privilege to be engaged in this ministry. My life has been forever transformed by the people I have met over the course of this journey.

I am grateful for the opportunity to present this second, revised and expanded edition of *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*. In the last two years the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has taken several important steps toward equality for all of its members. I have revised and added new material to chapter 7 to reflect these new developments. Chapter 8 is completely new and explores three biblical stories that show how Jesus' teachings illuminate God's extravagant welcome for all who have faith. I have also added an appendix that documents the remarkable progress toward LGBT equality over the last forty years in denominations throughout the United States.

Jack Rogers
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