

ESSAY

The Church's Future in a Gay-Supportive Age

by David G. Myers

"Here are five reasons Christians should continue to publicly and winsomely oppose bestowing the term and institution of marriage upon same-sex couples:

1. Every time the issue of gay marriage has been put to a vote by the people, the people have voted to uphold traditional marriage."

Kevin DeYoung, "Five Reasons Christians Should Continue to Oppose Gay Marriage," May 10, 2012, thegospelcoalition.org/blogs

In the Reformed Church in America, a simmering cultural war has exploded. "Homosexual behavior is a sin according to the Holy Scriptures," declared its 2012 General Synod. "Therefore any person, congregation, or assembly which advocates homosexual behavior or provides leadership for a service of same-sex marriage or a similar celebration has committed a disciplinable offense."

Others within the denomination and its allied Reformed denominations, including some of its esteemed theologians and biblical scholars, offer a contrasting reading of scripture and sexual ethics. In *What God Has Joined Together? The Christian Case for Gay Marriage* (HarperOne, 2005), Letha Dawson Scanzoni and I offered eight conclusions:

- All humans have a deep "need to belong"—to connect with others in close, intimate, enduring relationships. As the creation story affirms, it is "not good" to be alone.
- As one potent example of such relationships, marriage contributes to flourishing lives—to happier and healthier adults, and thriving children.
- Toxic forces, especially radical individualism and the media modeling of impulsive sexuality, are corroding marriage and the health of communities.
- Sexual orientation is a natural (largely biologically influenced) disposition, most clearly so for men.
- Sexual orientation is also an enduring disposition, which is seldom reversed by willpower, reparative therapy, or ex-gay ministries. Even Exodus, whose 260-plus local ministries assume that sexual expression outside of male/female marriage "is sinful," has now dissociated itself from gay conversion therapies and "has cleared

books endorsing ex-gay therapy from the Exodus online bookstore" (AP, June 26, 2012). Earlier this year, its executive director, Alan Chambers, acknowledged that "99.9% of the people I know have not changed their sexual orientation" (exodusinternational.org, February 3, 2012).

- Out of 31,103 Bible verses, only seven frequently quoted verses speak directly of same-sex behavior—and often in the context of idolatry, promiscuity, adultery, child exploitation, or violence. We infer that the Bible has nothing to say about an enduring sexual orientation (a modern concept) or about loving, long-term same-sex partnerships.
- The creation stories focus on human companionship, on the importance of relationship and the formation of new kinship units (most of which will be heterosexual, but some of which, we now realize, may be homosexual).
- A Christian case for gay marriage arises from the human need to belong, from the biblical mandate for justice, from the benefits of a culture-wide norm of monogamy, and from a refutation of popular arguments against gay marriage.

A ninth consideration—that public opinion is becoming more gay-supportive—we relegated to an appendix. Although the culture shift is reminiscent of earlier public opinion shifts regarding race and gender, popular public opinion should *not*, we agreed, guide our understanding of sexual ethics. Still, there is practical wisdom in understanding cultural trends. How have understandings and attitudes changed? What is driving these changes? Where will the present trajectory take us? And how will these changing understandings and attitudes impact the church and its institutions?

The more education people have, the more accepting and inclusive are their attitudes toward those with a same-sex orientation.

CONTINUE >>

>> THE CHURCH'S FUTURE IN A GAY-SUPPORTIVE AGE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7

Let's not evade the hard questions: If my own denomination, the Reformed Church in America, continues denying gay aspirations for ordination and marriage, and disciplines churches and pastors that enable such, how will history (our grandchildren) judge it? What if the trustees of the church-affiliated college to which I have devoted my working life continue to declare, as our institutional position, that "the witness of Scripture is firm" in rejecting intimate same-sex relationships, and to deny a faculty request to allow the campus governance system to consider adding sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination policy? How might this impact our future campus morale? Our external reputation? Our alumni and foundation support? Our faculty and student recruitment? (The college also "affirms the right of students and faculty to propound and defend ideas that may be at variance" with its position.)

THE SEA CHANGE

With remarkable speed, attitudes are changing. For example, Gallup pollsters have periodically asked, "In general, do you think homosexuals should or should not have equal rights in terms of job opportunities?" From 1978 to 2008, the percentage telling Gallup "yes" rose from 56 to 89 percent.

In multiple national surveys, US support for same-sex marriage has marched upward, especially since 2004, when it had the support of 1 in 3 to today's slight majority. Although support for gay marriage varies by state, every state exhibits increasing support. Indeed, political scientists Jeffrey Lax and Justin Phillips in 2009 reported a state-by-state opinion trajectory. Using these data, *fivethirtyeight.com* projected the year in which each state would, if it were put to a vote, vote against banning same-sex marriage. In November 2012, four states will be voting on same-sex marriage ballot initiatives. Maine and Washington were projected by 2012 to be slightly supportive of same-sex marriage, and Minnesota and Maryland to be toss-up states. Likely by November 5, Kevin DeYoung will have one less reason for opposing same-sex marriage.

Support for same-sex marriage and ordination will surely continue to increase, for several reasons. First, as studies of desegregation and racial attitudes taught us, *attitudes tend to follow social practice*. And social practice, in the US military and beyond, is changing. The percentage of Massachusetts residents supporting same-sex marriage in *Boston Globe*

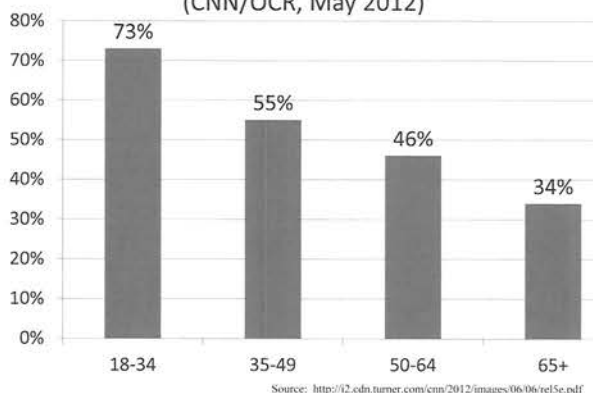
surveys increased substantially from the year before to the year following its introduction of same-sex marriage.

Second, there's a *growing public understanding of the realities of sexual orientation*. Back in 1977, only 13 percent of Americans responding to Gallup thought that homosexuality was something a person was born with; by 2011 that number was up to 40 percent, and was even higher in Canada and the United Kingdom. Over the last half century, the percentage who believe "someone can change their sexual orientation if they want to" has dropped from one-half to one-third. Moreover, the tendency to see homosexual behavior as morally wrong decreases with education. The more education people have, the more accepting and inclusive are their attitudes toward those with a same-sex orientation.

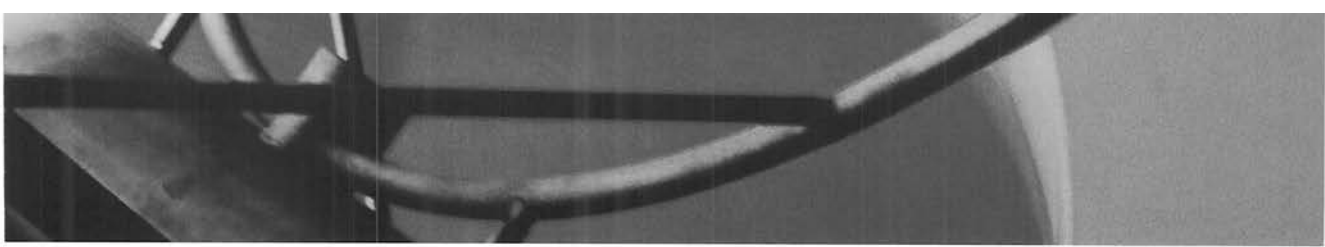
Third, *gay folks are coming out*. And what matters is not just what you know, but who you know. In separate Pew, Gallup, and Newsweek surveys, the percentage of people who agree that gays should be able to marry or that gay relationships should be legal has been dramatically higher among those who knowingly have a gay friend or family member than among those who don't. Moreover, the percentage of folks today who are aware of knowing a gay person is triple what it was a quarter century ago.

Fourth—and this is huge—is the *changing of the generations*. Many surveys reveal an enormous generation gap. Today's college students and their grandparents live on different attitude planets. Given the stability of attitudes formed during the teen and young adult years, generational succession implies a more gay-supportive future.

Support for Same-Sex Marriage
(CNN/OCR, May 2012)



Source: <http://2.edn.turner.com/cnn/2012/images/06/06/rel5e.pdf>



The generation gap was strikingly evident at the Presbyterian General Assembly's July 2012 vote against changing its constitutional definition of marriage from a union between "a man and a woman" to a union between "two people." Although the change was defeated 338 to 308, advisory votes by seminary students and "young adult advisory delegates" both supported the change by about 4 to 1. Had their votes counted (as some day they will), the resolution would have passed.

There also are striking *gender* differences, with more men than women finding same-sex relationships repugnant. In UCLA's annual survey, the percentage of entering American collegians who favored laws prohibiting homosexual relationships was about 50 percent during the 1970s and '80s, and headed downhill thereafter—to 23 percent in 2008, when UCLA asked the question for the last time. In that survey, 30 percent of men but only 18 percent of women favored anti-gay laws.

This gender divide has appeared in many surveys, as well as in denominational debates. The board of the gay-supporting, Reformed Church–related "Room for All" network is comprised of eight women and eight men. In contrast, the "accusers" in the Reformed Church's 2005 trial of Reverend Norman Kansfield, for his conducting a same-sex marriage service for his daughter, were all male. Consider also the steering committee of "RCA [Reformed Church in America] Integrity," which declares that "same-sex 'marriages,' even in committed and consensual relationships, are contrary to scripture": it consists of fifteen men.

Or consider the "Fellowship of Presbyterians," which formed in the aftermath of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s approval of local gay ordination. A search of the gender-identifiable names among their 425 "supporting" pastors revealed 38 women (9 percent)—unlike the 33 percent of ordained PC(USA) pastors who are women. As one observer at their 2011 national gathering wrote to me, "I . . . knew I was in a different universe when I discovered huge lines for the men's room! . . . This gathering isn't exactly overflowing with young people either."

This much seems sure: Public attitude changes and generational succession together are creating a rising tide, even a cultural tsunami, that will wash over the church and its associated institutions. Attitudes are changing, and generational succession

is destiny. Today's young adults are tomorrow's elders and trustees.

One other sobering point to ponder: the church's widely perceived anti-gay stance harms its outreach. From their analyses of the increasing number of irreligious "nones," researchers Robert Putnam and David Campbell have discerned that "intolerance of homosexuality" is proving to be "the single strongest factor" in alienating today's youth and young adults from the church. This suggests that an anti-gay

Intolerance of homosexuality is proving to be the single strongest factor in alienating today's youth and young adults from the church.

religious posture is having an unintended anti-evangelism effect that wounds the church. Writer Amy Sullivan recently observed that the church's anti-gay public image "has been devastating for the image of Christianity." When the Barna Group polled Americans ages 16 to 29 on what words best describe Christianity, the top response was "anti-homosexual."

What a different and more winsome spirit is expressed in the nineteenth-century hymn that inspired the title of Lewis Smedes's 1999 grace-full *Perspectives* essay on same-sex intimacy:

There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the
wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice, which is
more than liberty. . . .
For the love of God is broader than the measures
of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully
kind.

REFORMED AND EVER-REFORMING

Popular opinion, we all agree, should not decide ethics. But as neuroscience and psychological science document the natural basis for sexual orientation, as people become educated regarding these findings, as more and more gays and lesbians become known to loving family and friends, and as generational

CONTINUE >>

turnover rolls in like an ocean tide, it's pretty clear where things are headed.

At least it is clear to Institute for American Values leader and thoughtful critic of same-sex marriage David Blankenhorn. In a June 22, 2012, *New York Times* op-ed essay, he announced that "as a marriage advocate, the time has come for me to accept gay marriage and emphasize the good that it can do." His change of mind arose from his realization that "the time for denigrating or stigmatizing same-sex relationships is over," from his becoming "more interested in conciliation than in further fighting," and from his "respect for an emerging consensus. The population as a whole remains deeply divided, but most of our national elites, as well as most younger Americans, favor gay marriage."

Attitudes are changing, and generational succession is destiny. Today's young adults are tomorrow's elders and trustees.

Across history, people of faith have likewise repeatedly changed their minds regarding marriage,

- from favoring arranged marriages to expecting romantic choice;
- from assuming polygyny to mandating monogamy;
- from viewing marriage as inferior to celibacy (though "better to marry than to be aflame with passion") to seeing it as an equal calling;
- from assuming male headship to welcoming marital mutuality;
- from shunning interracial marriage to accepting it; and
- from disciplining divorced people in faith communities to embracing them.

In each case, our Christian ancestors have found proof texts to support their assumptions. Black people, the scriptures once seemed to say, were the accursed descendants of Noah's son Ham and were not suited for marriage with white people. Wives were to submit to their husbands "as to the Lord." Are we in the midst of one more such change? Will our grandchildren look back on today's culture war over sexual orientation as but another chapter in the

church's ever-reforming history—as a time when the church was the oppressor rather than standing with the oppressed?

After testifying at Norman Kansfield's church trial, I asked one of the (married) accusers during a break time: "Tell me, if Ann Kansfield is not to be partnered with the woman she loves, and is not disposed to partner with a man, what is she to do? Must she live alone?" His answer: "I know it sounds harsh. But yes, she must live alone." As Jesus said of the Pharisees, who preached what they didn't practice, "They tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry" (Matthew 23:4 TEV).

While feigning "loving support," the 2012 Reformed Church General Synod denied gay people legal satisfaction of the basic human need for intimate belonging, and advocated disciplining "any person" who enables gay people's aspirations for covenant partnership. When gay people hear such professions of love as a preamble to assertions that their longings for "sin" must, no matter the context, go unmet, one wonders how many feel the love.

Moreover, in focusing on keeping gay people unmarried, the church diverts its energy from the real cultural need—encouraging and sustaining marriage in a culture that fosters recreational sex. In C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, senior devil Screwtape advises junior devil Wormwood how to corrupt: "The game is to have them all running about with fire extinguishers whenever there is a flood." Screwtape must be smiling.

Abraham Lincoln's 1862 State of the Union words ring true 150 years later: "The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present . . . so we must think anew, and act anew." True to our Reformed heritage and in a spirit of humility, may we be ever-reforming. ■

Social psychologist David Myers is an ordained elder in the Reformed Church in America.