

Out of the Shadows into the Light

Christianity AND Homosexuality

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The Role of Straight Allies in the Pastoral Care of Lesbians and Gays

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As a straight white male pastoral theologian in the Protestant tradition (educated as a Lutheran and ordained in the United Church of Christ), my entry into theological interpretations of sexual orientation arises from two intersecting standpoints. The first is the gospel of the church as received and developed through scripture, tradition, experience, and reason. The second is the concrete immersion as a pastoral caregiver in the struggles of individuals, couples, and families to help them find care, healing, and transformation.

From these influences, the core of my pastoral work and theological interpretation is summarized in the aphorism, "You are accepted!"¹ It is the great Divine Indicative about all of life, and it orders what must and must not come afterward in our theological constructions and moral judgments. If we are accepted by God, through God's sheer generosity and grace, no condemnation may be attached to one another. If we are accepted by God, it is blasphemous to reject and denigrate what God cherishes. If we are accepted by God without condition, it is improper to add conditions of worth based on value structures and patterns of living created by individuals, religious groups, and cultures.

At first glance, acceptance does not appear to be a strong word. It implies passive tolerance or bland indifference. It could be viewed as a kind of reluctant inclusion or benign neglect: a "live and let live" philosophy. On the contrary, if we are accepted by God, we have the unshakable foundation for delighting in one another and, like God, investing every part of our being in promoting our welfare. Acceptance involves an intertwining of divine and human life, and a level of intimate bonding. It is the power of "being grasped" by grace and the compulsion to be invested in the welfare of the other.² It is a fully self-giving participation in the life of my neighbor, with the unalterable confidence that my neighbor is similarly called to be invested in me. It is an active welcome, an undying loyalty, and a capacity to nourish one another physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Acceptance in this sense is a fully invested—even, one might say, fully embodied and incarnated—love of God, self, and neighbor by means of one's whole heart, soul, and mind.

Hence, in the first place the gospel itself predisposed me to see the beauty of gays and lesbians before God and humanity. But, second, standing with gay and lesbian persons in the context of care has also opened my eyes more fully to the richness of God's diverse creation and to the joy of human loving in all its forms, including gay and lesbian. My relationship with William Carroll, a gay pastor and former student, is a poignant example in my ministry of the way the gospel of God's accepting love and the concrete care of persons came together in a life-changing manner for me.³

William Carroll was an advisee of mine in a Doctor of Ministry Program. Several years after his graduation we reconnected when he sought an appointment with me. He confided that he struggled all his life to be straight, while he increasingly knew himself to be gay. His awareness brought him into serious conflict with his commitments as a husband and father and with the teachings of his church. He felt an enormous tension because he preached about a God of love to

his congregation but realized that he had never known God's love for him. He reported that "if God were real, God had created me as a misfit, and it was a cruel joke... I felt like an utter phony in the ministry, in my marriage, and in my life."⁴ Rev. Carroll said that he "struck out" on "every point" of his spirituality:

(1) I did not see life as a good gift. My life was a burden—sometimes a curse (even though there have been some great joys along the way, which include my wife and children). (2) I tried to grow toward my full potential, but felt trapped, thwarted, and divided. (3) And I certainly could not reach out to others, even my wife in self-giving love. I couldn't even face myself, let alone reveal myself to my wife, friends, or colleagues.⁵

After confiding all of this to me in a long and anguished pastoral conversation, he said that he cried the whole three hours driving home. It was as if a logjam inside him had broken. "Larry was the first person I had ever talked to, as a friend, about my homosexual feelings. What was different about seeking Larry, unlike going to a psychiatrist, was that he had known me in the past and had seen me as a competent, well-functioning minister and graduate of Iliff."⁶

His anxiety and confusion persisted for a few days. He felt very vulnerable, that his world was unraveling. "And yet there was a kind of relief, too."⁷ A day or two after he got home, he looked at himself in the mirror.

Was that a homosexual person I was looking at? I saw a face and form I had hated and despised since teen years. I saw a person who had little or no self-esteem. Then I saw someone else. I saw a person who was deserving of love and not contempt. I had misunderstood myself. I owed myself an apology. I deserved better treatment... For the first time in my life I really cared about that person in the mirror. Was this a gift of God's grace? Was the big "sin" in my life that I had been so estranged from myself, not willing to be who I really was?"⁸

In reflecting on his coming out process, including his initial disclosures to me, William realized that many factors came into play to help him more fully learn about himself, renegotiate his family life, find a new venue for his ministry, and commit to a life partner. In all of this, he said that a big part of his care was the fact that I as a representative of the church could affirm his orientation as a positive reality in his life. "I needed permission to be gay from someone representing the church. It was very helpful when you told me that I have been trying long enough to deny or overcome something unalterably true about myself."⁹ In addition to his wife's acceptance, and learning to understand and accept himself more fully in psychotherapy, he said, "From a spiritual perspective I needed to hear that God created me the way I was."¹⁰

The Christian gospel mediated through fully affirming pastoral care in the life of William led to huge consequences. He moved from self-hatred to self-esteem. Estrangement from God was replaced by tentative reconciliation. His relationships became truthful rather than phony and deceptive. Self-absorption gave way to self-giving love. His sense of being a misfit in ministry was replaced by new vocational vitality and purpose. He was able to move from sexual shame to erotic pleasure, from sexual isolation to relational intimacy. His life was redeemed and transformed. He lived out of a joyful liberation rather than a closeted or tomblike bondage to death and deceit.¹¹

Budding Alliances

The transformative power of this pastoral situation was the beginning point of my thinking of myself as a straight ally to lesbian women and gay men, though the particular designation as "ally" did not come until later. The first insight that emerged was that I did not need any new theology to be an ally with gays and lesbians. It became unalterably clear to me that the gospel of God's radical acceptance constitutes us as allies theologically speaking. We live out that alliance in many ways, but for me it was expressed in my vocation as a pastoral caregiver. When the

principles and practices I had learned and taught as a Protestant pastoral caregiver came into play with my friend, colleague, and former student, the results were absolutely transformative. The power of God's love working through fully affirming care as a representative of the church brought William a life worth having. It brought me an enthusiastic renewal of my vocation and a deeper sense that, as a straight man, I could play a part in overcoming the bondage in which we are all held as a result heterosexist and homophobic systems of oppression.

Since this initial awareness, the idea of being a "straight ally" of lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and queer persons has taken on new dimensions and complexities. The core argument of this article is that heterosexual pastoral allies have an important but limited role to play in the care of lesbian and gay persons. The features of care most significant for straight allies are (1) decentering heterosexual privilege, (2) theological reconstruction, (3) social solidarity and active welcome, and (4) public advocacy.

Allies under Command: Decentering Heterosexual Privilege

As I reflected and lived into the concept of a straight ally, it became clear that the term is a momentous one in history. It is not a term that I chose for myself. It has emerged as a designation by GLBTQ persons, and much of its meaning is inscribed by that community. As a straight white male Protestant pastor, tenured in a leading theological institution, I have become accustomed to being the signifier of my identity, as well as the identity of others. Now, others signify my identity as a "straight ally." While we are all allies by virtue of the gospel—socially, culturally, and politically—I stand in a position of power and privilege not shared by most GLBTQ persons. The GLBTQ community requires me as a straight ally to give up—or at least modify and share collaboratively—privilege and power, and to bring my resources under the command of a group that I normally would ask to follow my lead and to fit my definitions.

Now I am faced not only with the gospel of affirmation, but with the gospel of reversal of status and power. Now I contend with the challenge to let the last be first and the first last. This is not easy. As an American, it does not sit well to think that our military and economic power would come under the command or control of another entity. Just so, as a straight white male it does not always sit well to follow, or get out of the way, rather than to lead and control.

To be a straight ally means to decenter power from heterosexist privilege. Certainly this means that we regard one another as equals under the gospel. But, more, it requires that we straight people take our leads from our gay and lesbian commanders who become our teachers, friends, guides, and, sometimes, our critics and challengers. To be a straight ally is not only to mediate affirming acceptance, but it is to participate in constructing a new social order and a new command structure by which all lives are enriched and set free.

Living as allies means that straights must always be aware of the unequal power arrangements that structure our lives. We must gain our authority and credibility by being accountable to our trusted gay and lesbian colleagues. We must never substitute our voices for theirs, but use our power to assist in creating spaces where their voices would otherwise not be heard. Rather than holding our pictures up for them to imitate, we must hold up mirrors by which they might see themselves as they truly are and discover in those mirrors a face that God loves, that we love, and that they too love. We must find ways for those faces to be seen in all segments of our ecclesial and social worlds.

In living as allies, straights will experience inconvenience, discomfort, and discrimination. It will frequently put us on the margin of both the heterosexual and the GLBTQ community. Our personal residues of homophobia and heterosexism will manifest in surprising and untimely ways. GLBTQ persons might find our actions to be inadequate, misguided, and even insensitive and offensive. Straight persons may think of us as "bleeding-heart liberals" (or worse) and shun or attack us. We

may feel ourselves as disempowered minorities in our own sexual groupings, and as outsiders or marginalized with respect to various GLBTQ contexts. While this may be uncomfortable for us, it will also connect us more deeply to the pervasive negation of our marginalized brothers and sisters.

The discomfort and ambiguity of the ally became personally clear to me on two occasions. First, when I was flying to an interview for research for my book, *Discovering Images of God*, I was reading John McNeill's *The Church and the Homosexual* on the plane. Suddenly, I felt myself becoming very anxious and uncomfortable. I realized that my seatmates might ask me what I was reading and why. It became apparent to me that such a conversation was undesirable on two counts. On the one hand, I did not want them to think that I was gay and either shun or attack me. On the other hand, I didn't want to get into a conversation about why I thought being gay was a fully acceptable way of being human and Christian in the church. To regain my comfort level, I put the book away and read *The New Yorker*. I felt guilty and ashamed for feeling the way I did and for cowering back into a protected place. My internalized homophobia took me by storm, completely disarming and paralyzing me, leaving me feeling diminished and conflicted. I also became quite existentially aware that many minorities, including GLBTQ, when targeted by the dominant culture, often lack positive means of protection. It became clear to me in quite a new way how draining and costly it can be to live exposed and vulnerable in a rejecting and punitive world.

Another challenge was the recognition that my book *Discovering Images of God* was denied by a publisher who had previously accepted another more conventional publication from me. The grounds for denying my book were that it was an advocacy book on behalf of full affirmation of lesbians and gays rather than a balanced accounting of various interpretative options concerning homosexuality within Christianity. The hypocrisy in this action was not only that the publisher had abrogated a prior agreement to publish more liberal views if they

were well-argued, but that it had recently published a book that vigorously argued in a quite one-sided manner that to be gay or lesbian is not in accordance with God's will for men and women. This overt discrimination was the first time I had experienced from the victim's side the power of oppressive structures and values. It was not easy for me to accept, and I still refuse to buy or assign books from that publisher unless they are essential for teaching and research purposes. I have consistently rejected further invitations to write for this publishing company. Some of my friends and colleagues have not appreciated my unavailability to their projects with this publisher, either as contributor or endorser. I did not like being discriminated against, and still find the memory infuriating.

Theological Reconstruction: Discovering the *Imago Dei*

To be an ally involves more than changing the organization of power and privilege in one's social location and coming under the guidance or command of others. It also involves changing one's meaning systems and theological convictions. There is the requirement of theological deconstruction and reconstruction, as well as a reordering of moral priorities. Specifically, my work as a straight ally with lesbian and gay persons has led to a major theological-ethical advance. Under the tutelage of gays and lesbians, I have discovered new dimensions in the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and I have come to see that the ethical norm of relational justice (as a dimension of the *imago Dei*) is central to the theory and practice of pastoral caregiving. Let me elaborate.

William Carroll's life was broken and distorted until he could honestly claim his gayness and feel God's full acceptance and participation in his welfare. He realized that he was not defective, or a misfit, but a glorious creation of God's goodness. Through the care that he received from others, the care he gave himself, and the love he discovered in sexual intimacy with cherished partners, his life came into a fullness previously unimagined. He was freed by love to love.

When I thought about the power of care to bring a broken human life such as William's into accordance with full humanness intended by God, my mind turned to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. A cornerstone of Christian belief is that humans are created in the image of God, and that when the divine image is effaced in humans by sin and evil we are restored to it by God's loving grace. The dominant Christian witness is that gays and lesbians are defective, if not sinful, and do not fully reflect the image of God because they are trapped in some form of sexual sin. To come into the image of God, they must become heterosexual, or at least not act on their sexual impulses and desires toward persons of the same sex.

However, through the power of care expressed in part by means of embodied sexual loving, I learned that gays and lesbians are anything but defective human beings. On the contrary, when set free by naming the truth about their sexuality and experiencing God's welcome and acceptance in the mystery of erotic pleasure and intimacy, their lives became beacons of light reflecting God's grace and goodness. They discovered a capacity to love themselves fully and share intimately with others. Their lives, as exemplified by William Carroll, became restored to their intended goodness and became sources of grace and redemption for others. They came to the place where they loved God with all their souls, hearts, and minds, and their neighbors as themselves. Coming to themselves as gays and lesbians was like coming home to God. And in coming home to God, they were set free to reflect the image of God in the world. They were anything but defective and flawed human beings. They were models of Christian discipleship, servants and lovers of the world, and set free to live fully in the world as mature and productive human beings.

When I went back to the Christian tradition to see what it taught about the image of God, I was stunned with what I found. Most Christian reflection on the image of God identified it with a human characteristic or essence. So, for example, to be in the image of God was to possess spirit, or reason, or the capacity to

choose. The more spirit one has the more one is like God, who is spirit. Or the more rational one is the more one is like God, who stands above it all and makes dispassionate choices about what is right and good. Another characteristic used to specify the image of God is heterosexuality. Some interpreters of the Genesis account of creation in which God made us in the image of God as "male and female" to procreate argue that this means that only heterosexuals who marry and procreate reflect God's being and goodness. Anything less is unnatural, defective, and a distortion of what it means to be fully human in the image of God. When understood as a particularly desired characteristic or personal endowment, those who have more of the characteristic marking the image of God are more like God, and those having less are defective and inferior. Hence, for centuries, women were regarded as less Godlike than men because to be in the image of God was to be rational rather than emotional, and it was commonly if mistakenly assumed that men are the one and women the other!

But, alongside this dominant approach to the *imago Dei* as possessing a characteristic of some special sort marking humans as especially like God, there is a subordinated tradition in Christianity that says to be in the image of God is to have relational qualities that are God-like. For Christians, these qualities are centered in love. The highest affirmation of God in Christian reflection is that God is love. Jesus Christ as the Son of God is, in the Christian witness, the human model of the image of God. His life, death, and resurrection are the symbolic markers of the *imago Dei*, understood as embodied and sensual servant-love. When human life reflects his capacity for self-acceptance, God-centeredness, service to others, creation of new and transforming communities, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and freeing those in bondage, then the image of God is realized concretely in human life.

What I discovered, then, is that as gays and lesbians were restored to their humanity through accepting the fullness of their sexuality as a gift of God and as a means of giving and

receiving love through embodied participation in the welfare of others, their lives reflected the love of God as understood by much of the Christian tradition. They participated in and disclosed to the rest of us what it means to be fully human in the image of God, when the image of God is understood as the capacity to participate in various forms of loving communion with others.

So, what in concrete terms came to light about the image of God from these reflections? Let me suggest briefly several features.¹² First, it means to recognize the sacred worth and dignity of every individual. To be created in the image of God is to be created with unconditional value and goodness. William Carroll found that he was not a misfit or defective after all, but a cherished and good creation of God. To be of sacred worth is also to be unique, inviolable, and characterized by mystery and otherness. Each one of us, like the God we reflect, has a special transcendence and hiddenness that must be approached with respect, awe, and wonder.

Second, to reflect the image of God is to be co-creators of novel configurations of life-enhancing relational possibilities. God creates the world for relational possibilities and names it truthfully. The biblical witness to God is to one who brings forth new families, tribes, nations, and peoples. God creates the church and makes disciples out of workers, and friends out of disciples. "To be in the *imago Dei* is to participate, like God, in the creation of new worlds of experience and in naming those worlds truthfully... When all humans are able to name their experiences fully, and [like William Carroll able] to create new forms of care and love based on their experience, and to disclose these forms truthfully in the face of the forces of devaluation and falsehood, they move toward realizing the *imago Dei*."¹³

Third, "To be in the *imago Dei* is to have enjoyment and delight in the pleasures of erotically embodied existence and the extension of care, gratitude, and responsibility to those with who we share these pleasures."¹⁴ Many gays and lesbians I interviewed reported "that they did not feel that they really

understood the intensity and tenderness of God's love until they could be truthful about and expressive of their own sexuality."¹⁵ One interviewee, Katie Bowen, said it best when she reported, "Until I fell in love with a woman, I never knew why wars had been fought over love, poetry written, and the Taj Mahal built! I had known pleasure before this, but never intimacy. Never coming home... My coming out was more a coming home to God: 'You made me this way, you love me this way. I am lovable, and I will find love in my life.'"¹⁶ "Embodied erotic partnerships, when characterized by love, mutuality, and commitment to the ongoing welfare of the other, image in concrete terms God's way with all the universe."¹⁷

Fourth, to reflect the image of God is to participate in relational justice:

To reflect in human terms the love that God bears for the world requires a form of just relatedness that ensures the ongoing welfare of the relational partner. Such an ethical norm lays claim on all human relationships. For lesbian and gay persons in particular to thrive and fully flourish in the *imago Dei*, relational justice must be embodied in mutual respect, protection of the health and integrity of all partners, and overcoming internalized heterosexism and homophobia. Heterosexuals must also exhibit mutual respect and protection of all partners and must turn from attitudes and practices that subordinate and denigrate lesbian and gay experience in the name of God. Institutionalized heterosexism and internalized homophobia reflect neither the love of God nor the love of neighbor consistent with God's love. Therefore, if our creative and loving communion with others is to fulfill ethical norms central to Christian moral values, it must embody relational justice.¹⁸

Finally, "To be in the *imago Dei* is to have respect for diversity and multiplicity with the context of a dynamic wholeness."¹⁹ "Love is not possible without diversity and difference; love is

the force that keeps difference from becoming a source of evil; love reconciles the estranged... God is big enough to let each entity be itself, rather than something else. So must we be, if we are to reflect God's love... [As creator,] God participates in the emergence of diversity and novelty, while providing conditions for coherence, cooperation, and beneficence within the totality of the universe."²⁰ To be in the *imago Dei*, therefore, is to ferociously protect and tenderly cherish the uniqueness of each entity in the world, while seeking the conditions of justice in which each might be fulfilled.

To summarize, as a straight ally my theological meaning system was deepened, enriched, corrected, and reenergized through reflection upon the loving partnership and erotic pleasure disclosed through caregiving in the gay and lesbian experience. Gay and lesbian loving has become normative for constructing new and promising interpretations of the Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei*. To be in the image of God is to be rooted in creative and embodied love, recognizing the sacred worth and unalterable uniqueness of each person. It means to co-create with God new forms of relational bonding and to name them truthfully. Fulfilling the *imago Dei* involves relational justice, the deconstruction of systems of oppression, and a delight in embodied pleasure and intimacy. When the image of God is realized in concrete human life, respect for difference, promotion of the good of the whole, and structures of mutual accountability come into play.

Social Solidarity, Active Welcome, and Public Advocacy

In my attempt to spell out the role of straight allies of gays and lesbians, I have emphasized equality in the acceptance of God mediated through the gospel and acts of care. I highlighted the need to decenter heterosexual power and privilege and to come under the leadership of gays and lesbians. And I have articulated how lesbian and gay sexuality may disclose for all of us deeper awareness of what it means to be fully human in

the image of God. Finally, I would like to briefly underscore the responsibility of straight allies to engage in social solidarity, active welcome, and public advocacy on behalf of a relationally just world for us all.

Social solidarity and public advocacy challenge the pervasive and pernicious separation of the private from the public. Our destinies as persons and citizens are recognized as irrevocably tied. Social solidarity involves the creation of a new order in which straights, lesbians, and gays share equally in the pains, privileges, and responsibilities of the religious, political, economic, and cultural communities in which we reside. Since straight allies have relatively more power and influence in these communities, it falls upon us to publicly identify with those who do not and create venues where power and influence can be shared. It falls largely upon us to bring about the conditions of awareness, equality, and active welcome to our communities and to put in place practices that promote an ecology of shared influence, responsibility, and benefits. It would be inappropriate for us as straight allies to hide behind our privilege and power and fail to exercise this social capital strategically to bring about relational justice and full inclusion.

Social solidarity means that we join in corporate endeavors to normalize and make visible the experience of lesbians and gays, and to insure that they have equal access to shaping the norms, values, and relational patterns of the life we share in community. Participating in gay pride parades, reading gay and lesbian literature, following news accounts and public debates concerning gay and lesbian life, constructing special liturgies to recognize lesbian and gay experience, organizing special educational and study programs and inviting outside speakers to the congregation, promoting equal access to marriage and partner benefits, and changing rules about ordination, employment, housing, and access to education are specific activities by which social solidarity and public advocacy might be expressed.

To take an active gay and lesbian friendly stance in our largely heterosexual religious communities is sometimes difficult. Straight pastors who seek to be allies with lesbians and gays will have to intentionally prepare themselves to think carefully about how to prepare the congregational culture to become receptive to lesbian and gay participation. Such action will require intelligent assessment, personal courage, incisive leadership, and an ability to work constructively with conflict and opposition. Yet, congregations are remarkably open to pastoral leadership and influence and will respond in surprisingly positive ways to pastors who sensitively guide them to become more knowledgeable and responsive to gays and lesbians in their midst. Some guidelines for accomplishing this shift in congregational culture include recognizing and normalizing theological differences without privileging the dominant tradition; becoming more comfortable with disagreement; finding ways to genuinely stay connected to the strongest opposition; disallowing factionalism and polarization; and finding ways to worship, pray, and study with the expectation that everyone's understandings might be deepened as well as changed. In addition, it is very important that pastors have support groups for their work and draw upon the experiences of other congregations that are seeking to be positively allied with GLBTQ persons. Other useful strategies include using denominational resources, outside experts, and, when safe and appropriate, letting respected members of the congregation share their personal stories as a way of expanding the discourse in the community.

To conclude, I would like to recount a moving example of the power of social solidarity and public advocacy as a mediator of care through which straights, lesbians, and gays were conjoined in a transformative manner. A gay male faculty member at a western university described this experience to me. Michael and his partner, Paul, attended the March on Washington in the spring of 1993 to celebrate the anniversary of Stonewall Revolution in Greenwich Village in 1969. Michael and others

reported over and over how much these public events instilled in them "a sense of value and worth, and strengthened them to withstand the unrelenting hostility of the church and society."²¹ Michael reported:

One of the most moving things for me was to go to the National Cathedral to a prayer service. We weren't going to go. There were so many other things to do besides going to church. We went because my cousin asked us to. The place was packed. It was the most moving experience in my life. The rector was a black man. I think of it as care. He welcomed us. He said, "Everyone is welcome here." We clapped, we cried... We sang with such devotion. I thought the roof would come down. People would be shocked. Here it is before one of the most significant political events in the recent past in our community's life, and we go to pray and sing! The rector prayed for the march. It was justice and care all rolled together, in a real biblical sense of "right relation" between people and God. I'll never forget it. We were blown away. It set a beautiful, beautiful way to start the march. There was a welcome—an honest welcome. There was a community, solidarity, feeling close to God in a simple way. There was a sense of hope. It was one of the most powerful things in my whole life. Hymns I sang a million times took on such power that I would get so choked up that I would not be able to sing... There was a coming home... This was not an alienating experience; it was coming home—in simple ways, such as honest welcome. There was celebrating diversity and the many styles of being gay... It was just incredible! It was such a powerful, powerful experience! When we later reflected on this at our New Year's Eve dinner, everyone who had been there said that going to the march and to the National Cathedral in the spring had been the best part of the year for them.²²

Conclusion

Michael's words pretty much sum up the point of this article. To be a straight ally of lesbians and gays is to provide a genuine and active welcome, to sing praises to God as a part of a common humanity loved by God, and to create places where we are all equally at home in our full humanity, including its capacity for sexual intimacy and pleasure. To live thus is to live as more fully human in the image of God.

The Church in Action Asking Hard Questions

JAMES R. ORAKER AND JANIS HAHN

"Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."—PHILIPPIANS 2:12b

Transformation is radically unsettling. We prefer a static, predictable state. We need to look for our shadow—what we dismiss and what we disdain. As we integrate and forgive our shadow, life looks different. We see what we have never dared look at before. Biblical faith feels like giving up our eyes and seeing things as God sees them. God doesn't look at our faults, but at the places in us that are trying to say "yes."¹

Asking Hard Questions

Whether or not the church has faced difficult issues is not up for discussion or debate. Difficult issues have challenged, shaped, and significantly defined the church since its inception, with no end in sight. It is, according to some, the outcome of the church's management of such issues that gives one cause for hope and/or concern. Furthermore, depending on one's perspective, a case could be made for a "for-better-or-for-worse" paradigm, with some efforts yielding the fruit of progress while others result in split congregations, painful and wounding interactions, polarization, and even violence.