

Agreements for Good Faith Dialogue

Having seen the discord that has developed and continues to simmer within the Evangelical Covenant Church, both through the historical witness and from the recent survey responses, it is vital for the health and long-term viability of the denomination that proactive and substantive steps be taken to disengage from a climate recurrently marked by anxiousness, exasperation, and antipathy. The institutional health of the Church requires deeper engagement with its critics, especially those locating their critique from within. Health and wholeness for each of its members must be the priority and not simply comfort in service of an imagined status quo. To that end, it is essential for all parties involved in conversations surrounding sexuality and gender and their ethical and social implications for the Covenant community to agree to engage their interlocutors with openness, integrity, and in good faith.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of agreements to facilitate good faith dialogue in these, and related conversations. Some of these agreements may be challenging for some individuals to accept or hold onto if they are inexperienced in the broader discourse of sexuality, Christian ethics, theology, and Biblical criticism that has been ongoing for the past several decades. Take some time to reflect on the implications for your own conversations that would come from pledging yourself to these agreements.

We will start and end with the commitment we share as Christians to follow in the Way of Jesus.

1. Jesus is *always* on the side of the oppressed.

Liberation theologian Rev. Dr. James H. Cone once wrote, “The Christian community, therefore, is that community that freely becomes oppressed, because they know that Jesus himself has defined humanity’s liberation in the context of what happens to the little ones.”²²⁹

We see this orientation towards the oppressed, the marginalized, those cast out from the dominant society, from the very start of Jesus’ ministry, in the proclamation from the book of Isaiah in his first sermon preached in the synagogue of Nazareth:

²²⁹ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Seabury Press, 1975).

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”²³⁰

In his book *Might From the Margins*, Dennis Edwards, Dean of North Park Theological Seminary, wrote, “Those who have been oppressed are the best teachers of the way of Christ.”²³¹ As practitioners of the Way, we must always be mindful of how we, by word or by deed, are calling attention to the injustice we see in our communities, or else maintaining complicity in it.

2. God reveals Godself through the beauty and complexity of Creation.

From the Book of Psalms:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth
and their words to the end of the world.²³²

²³⁰ Luke 4:16b-21, NRSVue

²³¹ Dennis Edwards, *Might from the Margins*, (Herald Press, 2020), 58.

²³² Psalm 19:1-4, NRSVue

From Paul's Letter to the Romans

Ever since the creation of the world God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made.²³³

From the Gospel of Luke

He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."²³⁴

Throughout Scripture, we see an affirmation that God's creation, which he calls good, is a witness to his nature and character and that a fundamental way of understanding human nature is that we bear the *Imago Dei*; the image of God.

3. As Protestants, we affirm the universal priesthood of all believers.

In light of the incarnation of Christ and the intercession of the Holy Spirit,²³⁵ we do not require human intermediaries. Each of us is equipped for confession, prayer, and for reading scripture.

4. The Bible is not a systematic theology.

The Bible, by which we mean the sixty-six books of Protestant Canon, is a diverse library of texts written by dozens of authors over the course of hundreds of years. These authors wrote in different cultural and temporal contexts and were not always necessarily aware or concerned about developing highly coherent, harmonious doctrines. The Bible, as a whole, is not univocal about every topic, and in some cases contains contradictory statements.

When Christians read the Bible, we are always interpreting. We must negotiate the text, which means that to draw theological or ethical conclusions we sometimes have to prioritize some texts and subordinate others. We develop theologies by reading in community and inviting the prophetic work of the Spirit.

²³³ Romans 1:20, NRSVue

²³⁴ Luke 19:40, NRSVue

²³⁵ Romans 8:26-27

This view of the Bible *is traditional to the Covenant*. The Covenant resource paper *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible* was written, in part, to help us navigate the diversity of interpretations that we as Christians are inclined to come to.

We are well aware of both the diversity of readings and the value of that diversity...

As the Evangelical Covenant Church becomes more and more diverse (which we believe is a movement of the Holy Spirit), we must be attuned and sensitive to the various lenses through which we read the Bible... We must be sensitive enough to listen well to others' reading with lenses different from our own...

It should cause us to pause before we make authoritative statements about a particular interpretation of a passage—especially if it is an interpretation on which Christians authentically disagree...

None of us has the breadth of experience, intellectual skill, social sensitivity, or spiritual depth to interpret the Scriptures alone...

We have worked hard not to allow particular interpretations of texts to take precedence over the text itself to guide our life together...

We recognize these writings for what they are in their original historical and cultural contexts. We realize that there is a distance between us and the first readers of Scripture... All our intellectual capacities are brought to the task of interpretation, and we make use of available information and scholarly tools to bridge the gap between the ancient text and our own lives...²³⁶

5. People find themselves drawn to faith communities for different reasons.

For some, it is essential to find a community that affirms their deeply held beliefs. For others, it is more about social identity and relationships. Others still are drawn to being in a community oriented towards justice and care. The point is that within a certain faith community, congregation, conference, or denomination, we cannot just assume that every member holds the same set of beliefs, or even that those beliefs are a priority for their inclusion. Not everyone who comes into our churches seeking belonging or a spiritual encounter is convinced of the minutiae of the doctrine.

²³⁶ *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, 2-4.

6. The Covenant Church has a rich history of maintaining diverse if not contradictory doctrinal positions.

[We] read Scripture charitably with regard to differing interpretations on matters not central to our core beliefs... The Covenant's emphasis on "life together" in Christ as the unifying bond has profoundly shaped our understanding of both faith and Scripture. This commitment has historically kept Covenanters united in times when it would have been easier to divide over such issues as baptism, atonement, or the nature of the inspiration of Scripture...

We are committed to the core of the Christian faith, but differences on matters where Christians have historically disagreed are no grounds for division. Rather they are an opportunity for reaching out to each other, for growth and for mutual instruction.²³⁷

7. The affirming position of LGBTQ+ inclusion in the Church IS BIBLICAL.

To be clear, both affirming and non-affirming views are "biblical" in the sense that they can be supported by arguments that are derived from certain interpretations of certain biblical texts. My point in emphasizing the former is that a common uninformed argument that has been used to dismiss and demonize affirming Christians is to claim, contra evidence, that their conclusions are informed purely by secular intrusion or the abandonment of scriptural authority. This argument ignores the scholarship done by faithful, orthodox, and in many cases theologically conservative Christians that points to a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality than what has been traditionally understood. Many of the voices, both outside and inside of the Covenant Church, who are advocating for this expansive and inclusive view, do so with a deep and abiding respect and devotion to scripture. Declaring otherwise has no place in good-faith conversation.

Three such voices have been referenced previously in this report:

1) Jack Rogers: The late Dr. Rogers was a minister and professor of theology at Fuller Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary. In 2001 he was elected to be the moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); essentially the honorary head of the church. His book, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*²³⁸ is a

²³⁷ *The Evangelical Covenant Church and the Bible*, 4.

²³⁸ See note 11 on page 10.

detailed and exhaustively footnoted interrogation of the Bible, church history, and Protestant tradition in which he comes away with an unequivocal recommendation to the church of affirmation and inclusion of gay people. He was 75 as of the publication of the second edition (2009), and described having read from the Bible every day since he was in junior high. He writes

What is so astonishing about this experience is that after all this time, there is still so much more to discover about God's revelation in Scripture. I've been specifically studying the biblical texts as they relate to homosexuality since 1993, yet I still feel that I have just scratched the surface in terms of understanding all that is there.²³⁹

2) David Gushee: Dr. Gushee is a Baptist pastor, Christian ethicist, and professor at Mercer University. He was at various points the President of the American Academy of Religion and the President of the Society of Christian Ethics. His book, *Changing Our Mind*,²⁴⁰ offers a step-by-step, argument-by-argument breakdown of how the traditionalist arguments used to exclude gay and transgender Christians do not have the rhetorical weight that those arguing them claim to have. He challenges the assertion that changing our minds about certain aspects of sexual ethics and mores necessarily implies a lack of respect for scripture or a corruption of the core tenets of the gospel. He writes,

Those of us who are in the process of making a paradigm leap toward full acceptance of LGBTQ people are sometimes accused of “abandoning the Gospel.” This is a very serious charge. Are those who level it saying that the Good News that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19), and that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16) is compromised when Christians propose a rethinking of one aspect of Christian sexual ethics? That's quite a claim!²⁴¹

3) Richard Hays: The late Dr. Hays was an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and a professor of the New Testament at both Yale and Duke Divinity Schools. He is one of the most widely cited New Testament scholars of the last 50 years. His book,

²³⁹ Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 128.

²⁴⁰ See note 122 on page 44.

²⁴¹ Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 78.

The Moral Vision of the New Testament,²⁴² is a standard text in many religious studies departments and seminaries. In chapter 16, he laid out his moral understanding of homosexuality, as informed by New Testament texts, concluding that same-sex partnerships were, in fact, a sin. After thinking about it for 20+ years, he changed his mind. His book, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, co-written with his son Christopher, eschews analysis of the "lobber verses" in favor of a more expansive look at the entire canon and a recognition of repeating themes of the expanding inclusion of various peoples into the family of God. One of his principal theses is summarized in this selection:

The vision we have presented in this book, then, constitutes a parade example of moral judgment as metaphor-making: the task of "placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated in the text." When we make this kind of imaginative connection, we perceive that faithfulness to scripture requires not just following rules or repeating prohibitions; instead, it requires watching and listening to discern where the Spirit is at work.²⁴³

While one is free to disagree with their arguments and conclusions, one cannot in good conscience dismiss these learned and devoted Christians and their work as being "unbiblical" or a mere capitulation to the shifting sands of cultural depravity. As Covenanter Philip Keillor wrote, "We must not allow ourselves to think that those who differ with us on the matter of homosexuality are less Christian or even less committed to Scripture than we are."²⁴⁴

8. When we have theological disagreements, we must respond to the arguments presented and not to made-up ones.

It is so easy to fall into the trap of presuming to know the motivations and rationalizations that inform each other's understanding about a topic. Attacking straw men may give rhetorical satisfaction in the moment, but ultimately weakens one's position and calls into question one's integrity. For example, framing side-A gay Christians as simply "wanting to justify their own sin", overlooks their legitimate

²⁴² See note 12 on page 10.

²⁴³ Hays and Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy*, 214.

²⁴⁴ Keillor, "Redefining." See note 102 on page 37.

testimony to loving and committed partnership, as well as their fidelity to scripture and commitment to following Jesus.

9. Our relationship to the queer community must be informed by our intentional proximity to LGBTQ+ people.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual people are not merely abstractions or topics of conversation. Neither are they a problem to be solved or a line item on a checklist. They are fully realized, embodied, and exquisite human beings who exhibit creativity, joy, passion, connection, friendship, love, and who we, as Christians, understand to be beloved children of God. It is inappropriate to arrive at decisions or to construct policies which directly affect their lives and their capacity for relationships in the Church without intentionally including them.

David Gushee writes,

We must highlight the human costs—which involves attending to the real human beings affected. Engage people’s hearts, not just their minds, with the real human beings who suffer under [heterosexist] teaching. No conversation about ‘the LGBTQ issue’ should any longer take place without hearing the voice of LGBTQ people themselves.²⁴⁵

Gay Evangelical author and activist Justin Lee draws inspiration from a popular television character (one of my personal favorites):

In an episode of the popular TV series *Ted Lasso*, the title character wisely recommends, "Be curious, not judgmental" as a good approach to handling conflict. In other words, before we jump to conclusions about someone, we ought to take the time to be curious about them and ask questions to learn more about where their views come from and what makes them tick. When we do, we'll often find that our assumptions about them were wrong. We might still disagree with their views, but our curiosity can help us understand them better, and that's a vital part of practicing empathy.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ Gushee, *Changing Our Mind*, 101.

²⁴⁶ Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, (Worthy, 2012, 2024) 261.

10. Homosexuality is not a mental illness or psychological disorder.

The American Psychiatric Association voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM in 1974, a process which was fully realized by 1987.²⁴⁷ Major health organizations around the world recognize homosexuality as a normal and generally positive variation of human sexuality. In a joint statement with the American Psychological Association, the APA wrote:

The research on homosexuality is very clear. Homosexuality is neither mental illness nor moral depravity. It is simply the way a minority of our population expresses human love and sexuality. Study after study documents the mental health of gay men and lesbians. Studies of judgment, stability, reliability, and social and vocational adaptiveness all show that gay men and lesbians function every bit as well as heterosexuals.²⁴⁸

Being gay, *per se*, does not regularly cause emotional distress, nor is it regularly associated with clinically significant impairment of social functioning. It confers no more pathological behavior nor negative externalities than being straight.

11. There is no link between same-sex partnership and instability or social disorder.

The American Anthropological Association has written,

The results of more than a century of anthropological research on households, kinship relationships, and families, across cultures and through time, provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Rather, anthropological research supports the conclusion that a vast array of family types, including families built upon same-sex partnerships, can contribute to stable and humane societies. The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association strongly opposes a constitutional amendment limiting marriage to heterosexual couples.²⁴⁹

Speaking out against the violent rhetoric often used to attack gay and lesbian people, the late evangelical ethicist Lewis B. Smedes once asked,

²⁴⁷ "When Homosexuality Stopped Being a Mental Disorder," Psychology Today, June 24, 2024, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201509/when-homosexuality-stopped-being-a-mental-disorder>

²⁴⁸ American Psychological Association, "Statement on Homosexuality," July 1994.

²⁴⁹ American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Marriage and the Family," September 2004.

What danger to straight people is posed by homosexuals? Some say that they are a threat to the family, but none tell us how. Some fear that they might abuse our children, but no facts have ever been adduced to show that they are any more likely to do so than heterosexual people are. Do homosexuals threaten to invade our homes, steal our property, rape our daughters? What we know is that homosexual men are murdered by heterosexual people just for being gay; what we also know is that there is no record of a heterosexual being murdered for not being gay. Why, then, I wonder, in a world of violence, starving children, cruel tyrannies, and natural disasters, are Christian people so steamed up about the harmless and often beneficent presence of gays and lesbians among us?²⁵⁰

12. Homosexuality is intrinsic and unchanging.

We must be willing to acknowledge the fact that gay people exist and they experience physical attraction, romance, and sexuality differently than straight people. Efforts to change the sexual orientation of gay persons through conversion therapy or ex-gay counseling have been largely disastrous and tragic. Consider this section from Bridget Eileen Rivera's book, *Heavy Burdens*:

Exodus International was the flagship program for the ex-gay movement. Founded in the mid-1970s, it grew to a budget of more than one million dollars with over four hundred ministries across seventeen countries. But problems riddled the organization. Cofounder Michael Bussee abandoned Exodus in 1979 to be with his lover, another Exodus leader, and admitted decades later, "I never saw one of our members or other Exodus leaders... become heterosexual, so deep down I knew that it wasn't true." In 2000, Exodus chairman John Paulk divorced his wife and announced, "I do not believe that reparative therapy changes sexual orientation; in fact, it does great harm to many people." In 2013, president Alan Chambers issued a formal apology in which he admitted that he had "ongoing same-sex attractions" and said, "For quite some time, we've been imprisoned in a worldview that's neither honoring toward our fellow human beings, nor biblical." The organization folded that year in disgrace.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Lewis B. Smedes, "Exploring the Morality of Homosexuality," in *Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches*, ed. Walter Wink (Fortress Press, 1999), 77.

²⁵¹ Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church*, (Brazos Press, 2021) 52-53.

Furthermore, Stanford Medicine researchers have linked structured attempts to change an LGBTQIA+ person's sexual orientation or gender identity to greater symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidality.²⁵²

13. LGBTQ+ people are equally as deserving of affection, companionship, family, and love as straight, heteronormative people.

Coretta Scott King once said, "Homophobia is like racism and anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry in that it seeks to dehumanize a large group of people, to deny their humanity, their dignity and personhood."²⁵³ We must not allow our personal biases or inherited traditions to lead us to any kind of posture or action that would not fully affirm the humanity, dignity, and worth of LGBTQ+ people.

14. Gay, transgender, and queer Christians are testifying to spiritual abuse.

Heteronormativity and heterosexism can blind us to the realities of the experiences of many LGBTQ+ persons within the Church. The power of the dominant culture in defining what is or what should be deemed "normal" cannot be overstated. It is imperative that we lean in close and listen to the testimony of queer Christians. Here are a few of their voices:

Activist and religious trauma coach for queer Christians Mike Maeshiro gave an impassioned and unfiltered response to the spiritual abuse he and his clients and friends have undergone and witnessed:

I watch queer adults in my office bawl their eyes out when they feel safe enough to admit how damaging it was to have homophobic pseudo-theology imposed on them. Often, I cry with them. Today, I'm not grieving, I'm angry.

There are people with entire careers still doing the very harm my job is to help heal. It's nauseating

To the "ex-gay," Side B and other iterations of homophobia masquerading as a ministry: I wholeheartedly condemn your work.

²⁵² Krista Conger, "Conversion practices linked to depression, PTSD and suicide thoughts in LGBTQIA+ adults," Stanford Medicine News Center, September 30, 2024. <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2024/09/conversion-practices-lgbt.html>

²⁵³ Coretta Scott King, in a speech at the Palmer Hilton Hotel, quoted in the *Chicago Defender*, April 1, 1998.

I don't care about how you interpret the Bible, how you drink deep of heterosexist culture and embrace self-loathing and call it spiritual. Your message harms already vulnerable people, leaving them with lasting trauma and some to the point of ending their own lives. You also embolden and perpetuate bigoted hatred toward the LGBTQ+ community. The impact of your disgusting ministry is death.

To every queer person who is allowing themselves to be used by the Evangelical indoctrination machine with your internalized homophobia and traitorous platforms, I am repulsed by what you are doing. Hear me: you are wrong.

Today, I am infuriated by your hypocrisy and selfishness. Get actual help. See a therapist. Listen to someone outside of Evangelicalism. Stop calling confirmation bias "research." It is not.

I'm so tired of your derangement. Get out of humanity's way. Get out of God's way. The kingdom you claim to represent is inhibited by your delusion. If you want to destroy your own life for the sake of approval by the straights, that's your [prerogative]. Just be quiet about it.

"Woe to you, teachers of the law, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are." – Matthew 23:15²⁵⁴

The Evangelical Covenant Church has its own voices testifying to spiritual and emotional trauma. Have you listened to them? Here is Tyler Krumland, from his book *Love Him Well*²⁵⁵, writing about the moment he spoke up at the 2018 Annual Meeting. This was during the Q&A which preceded the vote to install John Wenrich as the new President of the ECC, and not long after Herb Hedstrom's request for a diverse task force to study and report the denomination's stance on homosexuality had been voted down. Krumland described the resounding "Noes" from the voice vote, as "daggers." He writes

Making eye contact with the president on stage, I took a deep breath and said, "Tyler Krumland from First Covenant Church Seattle and North Park Theological Seminary grad. Mr. moderator, this question is for the president elect. In the early 2000s, you were a

²⁵⁴ Mike Maeshiro, "I had to clean up my language up for this post," Instagram, December 3, 2025.

https://www.instagram.com/p/DRztkyEadl/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==

²⁵⁵ See note 205 on page 71.

pastor at First Covenant Church in Portland, Oregon, which had a strong relationship with Portland Fellowship a ministry promising transformation and freedom from same-sex desires. A Christian leader with ties to such a ministry is a red flag to many LGBTQ Christians who have endured terrible abuses in similar programs, and to their friends and families who love them. As a Christian who happens to be gay, this is very concerning to me personally. I, like many queer people of faith, have unfortunately been involved with these ministries promising to offer freedom from something we never chose. During my time in one of these online programs, through mentors claiming to act in Christ's name, I was taught to hate myself and how God made me. When the program didn't change me, I lost hope and wondered if taking my life was the only option even though that wasn't what I wanted. It made me feel like I must not love God enough, that I didn't pray hard enough, and that my twenty-five-plus years of trying to change weren't enough. My time in this program has caused lasting anxiety and depression, and today I still struggle with trying to believe God loves me. So please explain your previous relationship with this organization and how your views may or may not have changed."²⁵⁶

Andrew Freeman's open letter to Gary Walter,²⁵⁷ the last post to the *Coming Out Covenant* Blog, also speaks to spiritual abuse:

The first thing I want you to know is that I have been hurt by your words and your leadership. I have read and watched your remarks on this topic over the past year, and I want you to know how some of your words sound to the ears of one who is actually gay: they hurt.

When you describe my sexual orientation merely as an "attraction" that I must "navigate," that hurts. It undermines the legitimacy of the love LGBTQ people feel for their partners. It reduces our relationships to an attraction and denies them any credible depth and meaning. And it suggests that our orientation is a burden rather than a gift. In short, it makes me feel that you haven't taken the time to fully understand me or my life.

When you list my orientation at the end of a list of alleged sexual sins, right after adultery and pornography, that hurts. It is dehumanizing. It takes part of my identity and smacks a negative label on it. And when this is the context for your first mention of the existence of

²⁵⁶ Krumland, *Love Him Well*, 316-317.

²⁵⁷ See note 138 on page 48.

non-heterosexual individuals, it makes it difficult for me to receive anything that follows with a spirit of love and good intent.

When you cloak our denomination's position on same-sex marriage under a broad discussion of "the issue of human sexuality" and say that our position is "a high challenge to all of us", that actually hurts, too. It feels a little like saying "All Lives Matter" at a racial justice rally: Yes, it's technically true, but it misses the point of naming the unequal burden placed on a particular minority group.

When my life is reduced to an "issue", thus making me negatively one-dimensional, that hurts. Why must LGBTQ individuals always be spoken of in such contentious terms? Even within our stated position, can we not affirm that God has equipped LGBTQ individuals with significant gifts for ministry and that we have much to offer the church? We are not an issue, we are the Body of Christ.²⁵⁸

The agreement that I'm asking you to commit to is not whether or not the spiritual abuse has happened, or whether the term "abuse" is justified, or whether any abuse, harm, or trauma that may have occurred was "intentional" or not. I'm asking that we first agree that spiritual abuse is being proclaimed. Knowing this, what now shall we do?

15. Minorities have historically had to fight to communicate to the majority in power that their voices and lives matter.

In 2023, *Christianity Today* wrote an article about the upcoming vote in the ECC to remove Quest and Awaken from the roster of churches. In the article, Paul Lessard, executive minister of the ECC's church health initiative, was asked about pastors having petitioned the annual gathering to reconsider the position on marriage and about how those petitions have been consistently voted against. His response:

"It's perceived as squashing the conversation, but it is actually the people saying, 'No, we don't want to have that conversation. We don't think we need to open the conversation,'" Lessard told CT.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Freeman, "An Open Letter..."

²⁵⁹ Megan Fowler, "Two Congregations Force LGBT Debate on Evangelical Covenant Church," *Christianity Today*, updated July 5, 2023. Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20250706071449/https://www.christianitytoday.com/2023/07/awaken-quest-evangelical-covenant-lgbt-division/>

A breathtaking distinction without a difference.

Judy Peterson addressed this in a response to the article posted to Facebook:

In almost all cases the minority position doesn't hold enough power to force a conversation, rather those in power have to concede to having one. In the case of the Evangelical Covenant Church, those holding the conviction that the LGBT community should be fully included in the life of the church have been asking for a conversation within the larger denomination since the 1970's, over 50 years ago...

In the article Paul Lessard, executive minister of the ECC's church health initiative, states that the ECC is not silencing this conversation, but rather the conversation is not being had because a proposal to change the denomination's established position on marriage has never received enough votes to be reconsidered. This, he says, is clear evidence that people don't want to have the conversation. It's almost as if Paul Lessard, a white, male, heterosexual, evangelical, doesn't know what it feels like to be a minority trying to convince the majority that your voice matters.

Being unable to get enough votes to pass a measure that grants institutional equality to a minority population doesn't mean that people don't want to have the conversation. What it means is that the privileged don't want to have a conversation about a subject that doesn't directly [affect] them.²⁶⁰

In his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, theologian Howard Thurman wrote,

In a society in which certain people or groups—by virtue of economic, social, or political power—have dead-weight advantages over others who are essentially without that kind of power, those who are thus disadvantaged know that they cannot fight back effectively, that they cannot protect themselves, and that they cannot demand protection from their persecutors. Any slight conflict, any alleged insult, any vague whim, any unrelated frustration, may bring down upon the head of the defenseless the full weight of naked physical violence.²⁶¹

²⁶⁰ Judy Howard Peterson, "Christianity Today recently published this article entitled, 'Two Congregations Force LGBT Debate on Evangelical Covenant Church,'" Facebook, February 4, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/walkingpastor/posts/pfbid026qJNyupJ5EKy8pGhjjdrdmCJfBFJfyPREV9QcumDSwUPZ9bgNejLP8D6bhmeeYWwl>

²⁶¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (Beacon Press, 1996), 3. First published by Abington Press in 1949.

Violence need not be explicitly physical to be both real and harmful. Sometimes it comes in the form of silencing, shutting down, ignoring the desperation, mocking the pain. Sometimes it looks like refusing to listen, to reconsider, to allow one's heart to be moved. Sometimes it looks like celebrating the fracturing of a relationship. Sometimes it looks like paying lip-service to giving a voice to the marginalized, when one's mind has already been made up and the outcome has been predetermined. Sometimes it looks less like brutality and more like *privilege*.

Dennis Edwards reflects on the words of Howard Thurman and how Christians can choose to decenter our focus from the dominant culture and back on Christ:

In light of the toxicity of American Christianity, it's reasonable to wonder now, as Howard Thurman did back in the 1940s, why African Americans, or anyone on the margins of society, would become Christian. I believe that those who have been marginalized have power that is not only unnoticed, but often underutilized. We need to encourage each other to raise our voices and bring all of who we are into Christian service. *We do not need to wait for permission or approval from the dominant culture.* Our power comes, first of all, from Jesus Christ, whose gospel not only is about the life to come but also affects life in the here and now.²⁶²

16. The proper response to pain is healing, not avoidance.

Many of us can relate to a nagging ailment that can turn into a medical crisis if not promptly treated. We've heard the stories, or perhaps even experienced them ourselves. A persistent cough, an infected cut, a new and aggravating pain in the gut. We have our justifications: "It's not a big deal; it will get better on its own. Going to the doctor for diagnosis and treatment will be uncomfortable, perhaps even costly. I will be inconveniencing other people; they might criticize or resent me. Other people have bigger problems; they have greater need for the resources. I've been taught to tough it out. I have more important things to do with my time. If I self-medicate it will soothe the pain and I won't have to think about it."

²⁶² Edwards, *Might from the Margins*, 26. Emphasis mine.

Meanwhile, the cough becomes pneumonia and a trip to the hospital. The infection becomes necrotic and they have to amputate the leg. The pain was from a tumor; the cancer has metastasized.

I'm sorry if I've triggered your hypochondria. The analogy is not perfect, but it is enlightening. Healing requires acceptance. We have to lean into the pain and interrogate it, not merely numb it. It starts with a proper diagnosis. This means calling upon experts and being exposed to their knowledge and training. It may mean getting a *second opinion*. It means listening to the wisdom of those who previously went through the healing process.

17. Jesus told us the whole of the law. That should be our hermeneutic.

By *hermeneutic* I mean the lenses through which we interpret the Bible and derive direction and application for the Christian life. Jesus revealed his priorities in the Gospel of Matthew:

He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”²⁶³

Paul echoes this teaching in his letter to the Romans:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “‘You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.²⁶⁴

Let us acknowledge that honestly and seriously engaging with this topic and all of its history and consequences has the potential to cause pain and disorientation for all involved parties. Those who are committed to working together through that discomfort

²⁶³ Matthew 22:37-40, NRSVue

²⁶⁴ Romans 13:8-10, NRSVue

do well to remember the core tenet that shapes us as Christians and calls us to relationship with each other. Jack Rogers put it this way:

Jesus is the center of Scripture. It is to Christ that the church witnesses. Jesus taught that to love God and love our neighbor is the heart of the gospel. Jesus welcomed society's outcasts. He reached out to women, children, people of all races and ethnicities, the poor, the disabled, the sick, Gentiles, and, yes, sexual minorities. When we read the Bible through the lens of Jesus' redemptive life and ministry, we can see that both the Old and New Testaments command us to accept those who are different from ourselves.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Rogers, *Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality*, 135.