

## Review of Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (Yale University Press, 2024).<sup>1</sup>

When it was first announced back in April 2024, the new book from New Testament scholar Richard Hays and his son, Old Testament Professor at Fuller Seminary, Christopher Hays (*The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* (Yale University Press, 2024; *Widening* below) received much publicity and instant critique. At the time I [tried to set it in the context of Richard Hays' earlier work](#). Now the book has appeared there have swiftly been a number of strongly critical reviews and engagements with it from traditionalist authors among which the following are of note:

- [Preston Sprinkle](#) (author of *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue*) and [on his podcast](#) also [on YouTube](#)) in one of the earliest and most thorough and helpful reviews,
- [Darrin W. Snyder Belousek](#) (author of *Marriage, Scripture, and the Church* and *Supplement*)
- New Testament scholars Ben Witherington (Parts [One](#), [Two](#), [Three](#), [Four](#)) and [Thomas Schreiner](#) (with [additional podcast interview](#)),
- Evangelical Anglican theologian [Martin Davie](#), author of *Studies on the Bible and same-sex relationships since 2003* (with [summary](#) and [PDF](#))
- [Rebecca McLaughlin](#) author of *Does the Bible Affirm Same-Sex Relationships?: Examining 10 Claims about Scripture and Sexuality* (also in conversation with [Gavin Ortlund](#)),
- [Timothy Pierce](#) (OT Professor) and [Kimlyn Bender](#) (Professor of Theology and Ethics); see summary in Baptist Standard [here](#).

[Robert Gagnon](#), author of the widely cited *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, [reported on Facebook](#) on 16<sup>th</sup> October the completion of his originally 8,000 word review: "The editor has lightly edited my 10,000-word critical review essay on the recent book by Richard and Christopher Hays that promotes homosexual unions in the church. Just now I completed a 3200-word supplement that summarizes the remaining 32,500 words of my manuscript, primarily offering a summary and critique of each of the 17 chapters in their book". A foretaste of his perspective can be gained from [his initial response on X](#).

Responses from those welcoming the book's stance are currently harder to find but there are the following:

- [Karen Keen](#) (author of *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*)
- [Robert Cornwall](#) (Fuller PhD and minister in the Disciples of Christ denomination)
- [Anna Sieges](#), (associate professor of religion)
- [Keri Ladner](#) in *The Christian Century*

Having now been able to read the book I have to confess that my overwhelming initial reaction was one of disappointment, perhaps because of a hope that maybe such distinguished biblical scholars, who know the traditionalist arguments well, had, indeed, somehow discovered new Scriptural

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<sup>1</sup> A condensed version of this extended review is available at <https://www.psephizo.com/sexuality-2/does-gods-widening-mercy-contradict-biblical-sexual-ethics/>

insights that would open up fresh pathways in this tired debate and provide a biblical rationale for some alternative to the traditional position.

At the heart of my sense of disappointment was that the book has drawn so much attention because of its “inclusive” stance on the subject of the subtitle – “sexuality within the biblical story”. This contrasts with the stance famously set out by Richard Hays in his [chapter on “Homosexuality”](#) in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament (MVNT)* and several other earlier writings. The book clearly does wish to align itself with such an “inclusive” position and Richard in his brief Epilogue (*Widening*, 222-6) and opening introduction (5-10) offers a short account of his journey, expressing his repentance (10, 223) and explaining that “the present book is, for me, an effort to offer contrition and to set the record straight on where I now stand” (*Widening*, 225). However, the book has practically no discussion of “sexuality within the biblical story” such as offered in his earlier book and numerous other works arguing for the traditional perspective he advocated then (I have a list of resources with different views on same-sex unions and same-sex marriage [here](#)). It is instead almost wholly focussed on an argument for “the widening of God’s mercy” within the biblical story on the basis of which it is claimed that its position on sexuality is therefore “not a rejection of the Bible’s message but a fuller embrace of its story of God’s expansive mercy” (*Widening*, 221). There is much of value and importance in its handling of that focus on God’s mercy but the implications for the church’s teaching and stance towards LGBT people that they are now advocating are only briefly and rather confusingly set out and justified. There is little or no substantive response to the arguments which Richard Hays and others have previously articulated and which I and many others have found, and still find, convincing.

What follows is an attempt, despite my disappointment, to explore, as positively as I can

1. the claims of the book in relation to sexuality,
2. the arguments advanced for those claims,
3. why Richard Hays has changed his mind,
4. how the new argument relates to Richard Hays’ earlier work and method, and
5. lessons from it for those supporting traditionalist arguments and the book’s contribution to the ongoing conversation and debate in church and academy.

## 1. What are the authors arguing for in relation to the church’s response to LGBTQ people?

One of the difficulties with the book is that, through most of its discussion, it is not as clear as it could be what exactly the authors are wishing to argue in relation to “sexuality within the biblical story” and the multiple contested questions surrounding sexuality in today’s church. It is clear from its content that it is not seeking to articulate and defend a particular sexual ethic as biblical, to offer biblical wisdom to LGBT people about how to order their lives and relationships in holiness, or to engage with church teaching about the nature of marriage.

The nearest there is to a thesis statement on this matter is at the opening of the final chapter entitled, “Moral Re-Vision: What We Must Say About Human Sexuality”:

And so here is the proposal we offer in this book: The many biblical stories of God’s widening mercy invite us to re-envision how God means us to think and act today with regard to human sexuality. The biblical narratives throughout the Old Testament and the New trace a trajectory of mercy that leads us to welcome sexual minorities no longer as “strangers and aliens” but as

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“fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19).  
(*Widening*, 206, the final sentence is repeated and italicised on 207).

What is significant about this is that its heart is the call to “welcome sexual minorities” but with no reference at all here as to the pattern of life in Christ into which they are to be encouraged to grow. Almost all those who hold to a traditional viewpoint could agree with their proposal in the terms stated above. Indeed, the language of “welcome” has been used for decades to distinguish a traditional stance from that “affirming” stance which the authors are generally understood to now be advocating. This was famously captured in the title of the book by Stanley Grenz (*Welcoming but not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality*) which appeared in 1998, two years after *MVNT*. In its discussion of “Homosexual Persons and Church Membership” it answers the question, “Should the church welcome gay and lesbian believers into membership?” (*Welcoming*, 132) by favourably quoting Richard Hays’ 1992 article (“Awaiting the Redemption of our Bodies”) to show that “homosexual persons have an important contribution to make to the life of the community” (*Welcoming*, 133). Grenz concludes by stating,

The church, therefore, ought not only to minister to all but also to welcome all into membership on the same basis. And this basis consists of personal reception of salvation by faith through Jesus Christ together with personal commitment to discipleship” (*Welcoming*, 133).

Grenz then again quotes Hays’ 1992 article which referenced a gay Christian saying, “Anyone who joins such a community should know that it is a place of transformation, of discipline, of learning, and not merely a place to be comforted or indulged” (134). He goes on to argue that God’s grace (he could here have written “mercy”) is “never content to leave us merely as we are” and that God “is concerned about how we live in the midst of the fallenness of the present” (*Welcoming*, 135).

In the UK, the [Evangelical Alliance’s affirmations](#) similarly state, “We encourage evangelical congregations to welcome and accept sexually active lesbians and gay men”. The difference is that they add,

However, they should do so in the expectation that they, like all of us who are living outside God’s purposes, will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox church teaching. We urge gentleness, patience and ongoing pastoral care during this process and after a person renounces same-sex sexual relations.

In contrast, the Hays’ statement above has no clear statement about any expectations or transformation in relation to pattern of life.

It would, then, appear that the book’s major thesis, if expressed simply in the terms set out above, is one which most western evangelicals have held for at least a quarter of a century and is fully consistent with a traditional sexual ethic as set out in *MVNT*.

The underlying confusion here is evident from the book’s opening in which reference is made to “incessant bickering over sexual orientation” (*Widening*, 2) and the need for the church explicitly to include “those who do not conform to traditional expectations for sexual orientation” (4). The reference to sexual *orientation* reappears at the end of the book with the question being put as to “how God wants people to treat those with different sexual orientations” and the argument being stated as “we advocate full inclusion of believers with differing sexual orientations” (*Widening*, 214). But when limited to *orientation* all this is relatively uncontentious. The major disagreement is now

not over matters of sexual *orientation* but over the acceptable patterns of sexual *behaviour* and *relationships*. This is because of the reality that, as the book acknowledges in n5 on p7, “The Bible refers to same-sex *acts*, not to classes of persons who perform them or to persons who have an innate ‘orientation’” (*Widening*, 227).

There is remarkably little, however, in the book about sexual behaviour and relationships or how gay and lesbian people should live except for the following elaboration of their argument. This expands what they are seeking in a way that clarifies its difference from those holding to a traditional ethic:

We believe that sexual minorities who seek to follow Jesus should be welcomed gladly in the church and offered full access to the means of grace available to all God’s people: baptism, the Lord’s Supper, ordination and the blessing of covenanted unions, with the same expectations as for heterosexuals (*Widening*, 216).

Here we see that the Hays are calling not only for “full access” to the two dominical sacraments (which all conservatives would not have problems with for celibate gay, lesbian and bisexual Christians and many would also be willing to offer to those who are in a committed union) and to ordination (again most conservatives are now very clear that simply being a sexual minority is not a ground for denying access to ordination). The crucial step they make – without any real explanation or justification – is then to include church blessings for same-sex relationships with the same defining features as marriage (presumably mutual consent and love, sexual exclusivity, and a life-long intention) and to describe such blessings with the sacramental language of a “means of grace”.

The authors avoid the language of “marriage” in that important statement and a few paragraphs later they recognise that “conscientious difference of theological opinion” among those “who agree that those with differing sexual orientations are to be welcomed fully among God’s people” is “particularly acute with regard to the questions of how to interpret same-sex unions in relation to traditional Christian understandings of marriage” (*Widening*, 216-7). Although in the book they explicitly refrain from offering “new rules or liturgies” (217), sandwiched between these various brief comments they also acknowledge that disagreements here may have to prove church-dividing because of their practical implications:

As a practical matter, it is difficult to see how strong differences over same-sex marriage could be maintained within an individual congregation, or even in some cases within an individual denomination. But it is not impossible to imagine that different Christian congregations might hold different norms and practices on this question while still acknowledging one another as members of the one body of Christ – just as Catholic and Protestant churches already do with respect to their different standards on clerical celibacy and women’s ordination (216).

Their appeal then turns to the discussion of the weak and strong in Romans 14-15 (discussed in the previous chapter) and argues that nevertheless “it should remain possible for churches with different beliefs and practices to coexist peaceably and work together in an ecumenical spirit as history takes its course” (217-8).

Set out in this way, although still not totally clear, what they are apparently arguing for appears to me to raise at least the following two key questions in relation to the framing and extent of our current divisions:

1. Are the authors willing to recognise that
  - a. many who hold traditional views agree with their overall statement about the need “to welcome sexual minorities” which is also their goal,

- b. that in relation to this goal there are conscientious differences not only over marriage but also over “the blessing of covenanted unions”, and
  - c. that these latter differences are also difficult to maintain in an individual congregation or denomination even though “members of the one body of Christ” can be found on either side of this divide?
2. Are those who hold traditional views willing to recognise that
  - a. the authors (even though their teaching and practice in seeking “the blessing of covenanted unions” for same-sex couples is seen as unbiblical and in error) are fundamentally driven by the same commitment “to welcome sexual minorities” rooted in the biblical texts they expound and
  - b. the authors can (along perhaps also with those advocating same-sex marriage) still be acknowledged as “members of the one body of Christ”?

If agreement can be reached on these matters (or even the nature of any disagreement on these questions clarified and justified) and they can be placed more centrally in the church’s discussions and deliberations then the book may be able to make a significant contribution.

## 2. What are the authors’ main arguments?

There are, broadly, two main arguments advanced in the book and each of these – an appeal to God’s widening mercy and an appeal to God’s changing mind – will be explored before briefly noting once again the lack of engagement relating to “sexuality within the biblical story”. That gap relates to two areas which are not part of their argument but normally appear when advocating for an “inclusive” position: the classic texts and the big picture of Scripture on marriage and sexuality.

### 2.1 The Widening of God’s Mercy

As the title of the book and the passage stating their case quoted above makes clear, the central basis for their argument is that “The many biblical stories of God’s widening mercy invite us to re- envision how God means us to think and act today with regard to human sexuality” (*Widening*, 206). In particular, they appeal to a trajectory: “The biblical narratives throughout the Old Testament and the New trace a trajectory of mercy that leads us to welcome sexual minorities” (206, 207).

The *first* major difficulty here is that there is no explanation as to how God’s mercy might be able to provide us with a sexual ethic. Mercy can indeed “shape our moral judgments and our own lives” (22) but it cannot in and of itself provide us with answers about whether certain patterns of behaviour (here sexual) conform to God’s will or not. The authors point out that “in our time, new groups are asking for God’s mercy and asking to be accepted” (59) but they do not offer any explanation as to how God’s mercy might help us discern whether or not a pattern of life is or is not sinful. In relation to the gospels, Richard Hays writes

I propose that we keep asking ourselves this question: How might the Gospel stories of Jesus’s convention-altering words and actions affect our thinking about norms for sexual relationships in our time? (*Widening*, 121)

There is, however, no explanation here as to how we might go about making that move *from* Jesus’ disturbing pattern of showing mercy *to* identifying moral norms for sexual (or indeed other, for example, economic) relationships. The nearest we get to such a connecting of the dots is I think this passage a few chapters later:

Jesus does not reject Israel’s scriptures; instead, like the prophets before him, he insists on reinterpreting them in light of the conviction that love and mercy lie at the root of God’s

purposes. That insistence on God's wide-ranging mercy brought him into conflict with some others, including scholars and religious leaders, who were passionately committed to the authority of Israel's God-given law but interpreted it in a more restrictive way, a way that sought to protect Israel's obedience, purity, and distinctiveness. Here we should pause to reflect: Should this contrast of perspectives inform the church's present conflicts over sexuality? (*Widening*, 151).

But even this is limited unless it is being claimed that a "more restrictive" interpretation of the law is inherently incompatible with "the conviction that love and mercy lie at the root of God's purposes". Such a stance is hard to square with the Sermon on the Mount and, for example, Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 or his interpretation in 5:27-30 of the commandment against adultery. Neither of these are discussed although interestingly in *MVNT* Matthew is presented by Hays as offering "the hermeneutic of mercy" (*MVNT*, 99-101).

In relation to adultery, Jesus' response to the woman caught in adultery in John 8 (also not discussed) clearly demonstrates a merciful approach in conflict with that of others. This leads to his "Neither do I condemn you". It is not, however, clear that in saying "Go and sin no more" Jesus was suggesting that mercy redefines sexual sin in a manner different from those he was in conflict with or that he was teaching that their "more restrictive way" needed loosening up. The discussion of this passage in *MVNT* is interesting here. In response to the question, "Is it Christianly appropriate for Christians who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation to continue to participate in same-sex erotic activity?" Richard Hays responded

No. The only one who was entitled to cast a stone instead charged the recipient of his mercy to "go and sin no more". It is no more appropriate for homosexual Christians to persist in homosexual activity than it would be for heterosexual Christians to persist in fornication or adultery (*MVNT*, 401).

At no point is there any explanation as to why this line of argument – explicitly related to Jesus showing mercy – is no longer thought acceptable. Instead, as they conclude, the authors write

We hope that this book will start conversations that grow from an awareness of God's free and merciful character revealed in the biblical accounts we have traced. For the sake of the church and those within it, we hope to persuade (*Widening*, 216).

This is an important re-centring of much discussion and a challenge to how conservatives have often been experienced but it is impossible to see how it can amount to an argument that could in and of itself reasonably persuade anyone that the traditional sexual ethic is wrong.

A *second* question here is how the authors are relating God's mercy to God's wrath. Despite the importance of that theme in the fullest New Testament discussion seen as relevant to questions of same-sex sexuality, "wrath" does not appear in the book's index and it is unclear how it is being understood in relation to mercy. In *MVNT*, although not explicitly using the language of "mercy", Richard Hays clearly sets the Romans 1 language of "wrath" in relation to the focus of this book. After asking about the implications of God's act in Christ (as set out in Roman 8:3-4) "for understanding what Romans 1 says about homosexual practice" he wrote:

First of all, the wrath of God – manifested in God's "giving up" of rebellious humanity to follow their own devices and desires – is not the last word. The gospel of the cross declares that God loves us even while we are in rebellion and that the sacrificial death of his own Son is the measure of the depth of that love. That is the fundamental theological logic underlying

Paul's "sting" exposé of self-righteousness in Romans 2:1: we should not leap to condemnation of others, for we – no less than those who are engaged in "the dishonouring of their bodies" – are under God's judgment, and they – no less than we – are the objects of God's deeply sacrificial love. This has profound implications for how the Christian community ought to respond to persons of homosexual orientation. Even if some of their actions are contrary to God's design, the *cross* models the way in which the community of faith ought to respond to them: not in condemnation, but in sacrificial service (*MVNT*, 392-3).

There is, in this new book, no explanation as to why such a "traditionalist" approach is held to be incompatible with "an awareness of God's free and merciful character" (*Widening*, 216) or how the authors' focus here on mercy relates to the biblical message of wrath in a different way.

*Thirdly*, the language of "widening" in relation to God's mercy is not given a timeframe. At times it appears that what Christopher and Richard Hays are proposing is a new development in God's work of mercy in human history, the next phase of the Bible's "trajectory of mercy" extending beyond God's narrower mercy in the apostolic and preceding eras, and earlier eras in the life of the church, such that now this divine widening "leads us to welcome sexual minorities" (*Widening*, 206, 207). But it is surely a central conviction of Christians that God's mercy is not ever wider than his mercy revealed in Christ? It is also the case that, however complex it was for some of the early Christians to recognise this fact, the promise contained in the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit was indeed, in the mind and purpose of God, always "for all who are far off" (Acts 2:39).

This question about the temporal widening of God's mercy leads into the second central argument within the book to defend its case –

## 2.2 The Changing of God's Mind

The claim that God's mind changes is a key feature of the book and was highlighted in the original publicity and [in the blurb](#) ("They remind us of a dynamic and gracious God who is willing to change his mind"). In the opening pages this is highlighted in statements such as

Contrary to the common idea that biblical law was written once, in stone, and is unchangeable, the actual biblical story of God and humanity is one in which laws are under constant negotiation and revision...(Widening, 2)

Contrary to the common idea that God's decisions are eternal and immutable, there are numerous stories of God changing God's mind in the Bible....(3)

Several examples follow, particularly in Christopher Hays' chapters on the Old Testament, to back up these claims and by the end of the book they write that "if we take the biblical narrative seriously we can't avoid the conclusion that God *regularly* changes his mind, even when it means overriding previous judgments" (*Widening*, 207, italics added). They even see this as extending as far as "bending his principles of justice" (48).

Unsurprisingly, each of the texts that are cited can be interpreted in ways that do not give support to the claims being made (for examples see those discussed in [Martin Davie's review of the book](#)). Rather than reviewing the specific texts they cover, I want here to highlight two biblical texts not considered but perhaps particularly relevant and then note some of the more philosophical and theological questions they do not address. These highlight the difficulty that, as in relation to God's mercy, *even if their premise is granted that we can, in the light of Scripture, speak of God's mind changing* it is not clear that this can in itself provide support for a revised sexual ethic.

As noted, one of the surprising omissions from the book is a serious engagement with Jesus' teaching on marriage as found in Matthew 19:1-12 (and also Mark 10:2-12). This is surprising not only because it is so central to any Christian theology of marriage or sexual ethic but because it, on the surface, raises questions about God's mind changing. Taking Matthew's account, Jesus quotes Genesis 1:27, attributes Gen 2:24 to divine speech, and draws a conclusion from it (19:4-6); the Pharisees then ask about Deuteronomy 24 (19:7) and Jesus responds by saying "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (19:8). In Mark, Jesus asks about Moses' command (10:3) and when the Pharisees refer to Deut 24 (10:4) Jesus replies with Genesis 1 and 2 noting that "But at the beginning of creation God..." (10:6). Here, on one understanding of the phrase (and part of the problem is that the authors never really define how they are using it) we could speak of God being "willing to change his mind" (unless it is thought Jesus attributes Deut 24 solely to Moses and not to God). There is God's mind as expressed "at the beginning" and in Genesis, his mind as expressed in Deuteronomy, and his mind as expressed now by Jesus which reverts to the original. Rather than this being best understood as God changing God's mind, however, it is best to see his mind expressed in creation and Christ and his accommodation to human frailty ("because your hearts were hard") in the Law. This raises interesting questions as to whether and if so in what form such Mosaic-like "accommodation" may be considered today in relation to gay and lesbian people and their relationships (as in relation to divorce and remarriage) without fundamentally undermining God's purposes in creation (it is unclear whether the authors believe God's purposes in creation are also subject to change or only his commands in history).

Rather than becoming subject to a seemingly erratic divine voluntarism where Scripture provides us simply with laws "under constant negotiation and revision" and we continue that process today it is better to follow the historic Christian hermeneutic captured in Article 20 of the Church of England's 39 Articles ("it is not lawful for the Church to ordain any thing that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another"). Oliver O'Donovan comments on this:

We are forbidden any presentation of this historical dialectic which supposes it incapable of yielding a meaningful revelation – whether in the interests of sceptical debunking of the supposed revelation or in the interests of a return to pre-critical understandings of the Bible. We are, then, at one with the Tudor theologians in forbidding an interpretation which treats historical diversities, contrasts and conflicts as *repugnancies*. A term which should be banished for ever from the exegesis of Scripture is the word 'contradiction', which bespeaks an ahistorical, two-dimensional understanding of the Scriptural texts that conceives of them all as synchronous and competing propositions, rather than dialectically successive and mutually implicating testimonies of God's unfolding self-disclosure... ([On the Thirty-Nine Articles, p.57](#))

Turning to the Old Testament, while reading the book, it was fascinating to rediscover, through the lessons set for Morning Prayer, a story I had forgotten and one not mentioned in the book: that of the man of God from Judah in [1 Kings 13](#). The prophet receives a word from the Lord leading him to speak against King Jeroboam and the dominant culture of his day in Bethel. The king's wrathful response is turned to penitence and God's mercy is shown to him in response to the prophet's intercession (13:1-6). The king then invites the prophet to dine but is told that he cannot do so as it would be contrary to what he had been "commanded by the word of the Lord" (13:9). An old prophet on hearing of the incident goes out to meet the prophet from Judah and invites him to "come home with me and eat" but this is also declined because of what "I have been told by the



word of the Lord" (13:15-17). To this appeal to the Lord's word the prophet replies by saying (untruthfully) that he had received "the word of the Lord" saying "Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water" (13:18). The claim, in short, is that here we have a clear case of "God changing God's mind". The man of God from Judah interestingly accepts this and "returned with him and ate and drank in his house" (13:19), apparent confirmation that such a claim was not automatically ruled out as simply impossible. However, the story does not end well: the old prophet while dining does genuinely receive the word of the Lord and declares

This is what the Lord says: 'You have defied the word of the Lord and have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you. You came back and ate bread and drank water in the place where he told you not to eat or drink. Therefore your body will not be buried in the tomb of your ancestors (13:21-22)

After the man of God sets out again he is attacked and killed by a lion and the old prophet identifies him as "the man of God who defied the word of the Lord" (13:26) and buries him in his own tomb.

At the very least this narrative deserves some reflection in any argument arguing that there is a strong biblical argument that although God may have given particular commands in the past those have now been overturned by God. It raises a number of crucial questions, not least the following two:

*Firstly*, even if we grant the possibility of God's mind changing, that does not tell us that God's mind has in fact changed on any particular matter. Nor does it tell us how we might reliably determine that God's mind has changed (that "God is moving on again" (*Widening*, 218)) on any particular matter. Nor does it shed light on what God's new mind might be on that matter. The narrative also shows that even a clear and explicit word from an old and respected prophet (and so one might conclude even such a word from an old and respected biblical scholar) is not in and of itself a reliable guarantee that the new declaration of God's mind-change is accurate.

*Secondly*, we have constantly to recall that, even if not as dramatically as in this narrative, we are all subject to God's judgment. In words found in a chapter which does get significant attention in the book, "we will all stand before God's judgment seat...each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (Romans 14:10, 12, referenced at *Widening*, p. 199). This is one of the most significant challenges in relation to any claim that God changes his mind in relation to matters of right and wrong conduct which are subject to his judgment. We risk implying a Kafka-esque world where we may find ourselves condemned because we failed to receive the memo that informed us of God's revised will. Alternatively, we may find that we have lived a life which we believed to be one of faithful, perhaps sacrificial, obedience to God's will (Romans 12:1-2) but was in fact quite unnecessary because God's mind had changed. In addition it would appear that some will stand condemned for the same actions for which others are commended, the difference being a change in God's mind on those actions between when the different agents lived.

One of the thought-experiments I find myself undertaking at times in relation to these questions is to compare how I might respond if at the final judgment I discover I have been wrong in what I have believed and taught. While I hope I would have the humility and wisdom simply to accept the clear eschatological revelation of God's will and my own error it does appear to me that my defence would be much stronger if I continue to uphold traditional teaching ("Lord, could Scripture not have made your mind on this a little clearer than it did as it seemed to give so little evidence I was wrong?" or perhaps now "Lord, why did you change your mind at some point and why did you not make that

change of mind clearer?") than if I embrace a "re-vision", particularly if I do so on the basis of the arguments set out in this book.

The book does not address any of these deeper questions as to such crucial matters as

- What exactly is meant in claiming God's mind changes and what are the implications of this for our doctrine of God, his righteousness and trustworthiness?
- What are the limits of such change? Can it extend to rethinking his purposes in creation as these have been confirmed by Jesus' teaching? Or to rethinking and narrowing his mercy?
- What are the implications of such changes for the justice of God's final judgment?
- How do we come to know that God's mind has changed on any particular matter?
- When (and why) did God change his mind in relation to sexuality and what did it change from and what did it change to?

In fact, in relation to the last question it is not totally clear the authors do believe that God's mind has changed in relation to same-sex sexual relationships. This leads into the areas not highlighted in their rationale.

### 2.3 "Sexuality within the biblical story": The classic texts & The bigger picture

As discussed more fully in section 4, there is some evidence in the book that the authors believe that Scripture does prohibit same-sex sexual behaviour in all circumstances (but then proceed to argue, as explored above, that God has subsequently changed his mind). This is, however, far from clearly their position given their failure to offer any real discussion of the classic texts. Their attitude to these texts is captured from the start of the book when they dismissively write

The repetitive arguments about the same set of verses, and the meaning of specific words, have reached an impasse, they are superficial and boring. We have lost the forest for the trees (*Widening*, 2).

They reiterate this approach in their final chapter:

We believe that the debate should no longer focus on the endlessly repeated exegetical arguments about half a dozen isolated texts that forbid or disapprove of same-sex relations. (The regularly cited texts are Gen 19:1-9, Lev 18:22, 20:13, 1 Cor 6:9-11, 1 Tim 1:10, and Rom 1:18-32). In this book, we have not revisited them. It is relatively clear that these texts view homosexual sex negatively, even if they do not envisage covenanted same-sex partnerships as we know them today (*Widening*, 206).

That final clause leaves hanging a key question: is the argument that God has changed his mind as he previously revealed that all "homosexual sex" was wrong *or* is the argument rather that we have misunderstood God's mind because we did not recognise that the biblical prohibitions were addressing a quite different phenomenon from that which is our concern?

The footnote that follows this passage appears to give support to the latter view:

The biblical authors did not have in mind the sort of homosexual relationships that the church now considers blessing and it is not possible to imagine what they might have said about them (*Widening*, 245, n2).

This is [confirmed in a recent interview](#):

Christopher also said he believes the Bible's authors didn't have today's same-sex relationships in mind when they wrote scripture. "We don't think that that's the same thing as what Paul meant or what the authors of the Torah meant in the laws," he said.

However, no evidence is offered in support of this claim and there appears to be no recognition that if this is the case then all the detailed discussion about God's mind changing is apparently unnecessary for their argument. In this case the argument is more that "the laws have been misunderstood and misapplied" (*Widening*, 68) not that God has changed his mind because "the laws given were not good" (68). The rationale would then be "Scripture does not reveal to us God's mind on 'the sort of homosexual relationships that the church now considers blessing' but in the light of its wider teaching we consider a faithful response to be.....".

In order to offer such an argument as to what a faithful response might be to a new pattern of relationships (or indeed to show the historic mind of God that they believe has now changed) what is needed is what the subtitle claims to offer: some account of 'sexuality within the biblical story'. This is perhaps the most serious weakness in the book, particularly given the claim to offer such an account in the subtitle.

The authors could have set out their own understanding of sexuality within Scripture or pointed readers to one with which they broadly agree such as that set out over a decade ago by James Brownson in *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships*K (which remains to my mind the best such attempt, though one I am still unconvinced by, as summarised [here](#) with more detailed engagement [here](#)) or that of Karen Keen ([who commends their book](#)) in her *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships*. Instead, we are left with a massive lacuna and worse a dismissal of traditionalist arguments that implies they are guilty of the argumentative flaw which applies much more to this book:

Drawing conclusions based only on these passages [those listed in the quotation above] would be like basing a biblical theology of slavery on Exod 21:2 (which assumes one can buy a slave) and 1 Pet 2:18 (which tells slaves to be subject to their masters), or a theology of immigration on Ezek 44:9's exclusion of foreigners from the sanctuary. Instead, we hope to refocus the conversation on larger narrative patterns and precedents in the Bible (*Widening*, 206-7).

There is here no acknowledgment that, in the words of Richard Hays, "the issue of homosexuality differs significantly from matters such as slavery or the subordination of women concerning which the Bible contains internal tensions and counterposed witnesses" (*MVNT*, 389). Nor is it recognised that no serious defender of the traditionalist position simply draws conclusion on those passages. Rather, the traditionalist case points to the wider biblical witness to develop a biblical theology of being made male and female, marriage, and sexuality. Its defenders take the stance and ask and answer the question Richard Hays raised in *MVNT*:

No theological consideration of homosexuality can rest content, however, with a short list of passages that treat the matter explicitly. We must consider how Scripture frames the discussion more broadly: How is human sexuality portrayed in the canon as a whole, and how are the few explicit texts treating homosexuality to be read in relation to this larger canonical framework? (*MVNT*, 389).

In contrast, this book believes that it is possible to offer an argument that claims to address "sexuality within the biblical story" and to overturn the consensus of thousands of years while not only refusing to discuss the few classic texts but also refusing to answer that question about the

witness of the wider canon on marriage and human sexuality. Instead, it thinks that all this can be ignored as apparently irrelevant in the light of the two rationales which I have argued above are strictly incapable of providing a persuasive argument in relation to marriage and sexual ethics:

a deeper logic, a narrative pattern in which God's grace and mercy regularly overflow the prohibitions and restrictions that exclude and condemn fixed classes of human beings – even when those prohibitions were explicitly attributed to God in earlier biblical texts. We believe that our contemporary debates about sexuality should be shaped by that deeper logic. It may be difficult to get our minds around this idea, but if we take the biblical narrative seriously, we can't avoid the conclusion that God regularly changes his mind, even when it means overriding previous judgments (*Widening*, 207).

### 3. Why has Richard Hays shifted his position?

Undoubtedly one of the reasons the book has gained so much publicity is the significance of Richard Hays' previous writing on this area (see my earlier outline of this [here](#)) and his change of stance. The book gives some sense of his journey in its opening pages where each author tells something of their story (Richard at pp. 5-10) and then in a short epilogue by Richard Hays (222-6). There is, however, no sustained engagement with either the overall argument of *MVNT* or the specific discussion in it of homosexuality. In fact, as already noted, several of its claims are simply ignored in this book.

In addition to, and alongside, the two biblically focussed theological arguments discussed above concerning the wideness of God's mercy (which seems the predominant argument for Richard) and the changing of God's mind (which seems more significant for his son) there appear to be at least the following four central elements which have led Richard Hays to change his mind in relation to sexuality.

*Firstly*, there is concern about the way his chapter on the subject in *MVNT* has been taken out of the context of the book as a whole. He [recently commented](#),

apparently a lot of people read only the chapter on homosexuality and didn't read the whole book. So, you know, there's one chapter, 20 pages out of a 500 page book that I'm most famous for.

In summary, he sees what he wrote as having been "weaponised" in the church debates and wider culture wars. This (as his son also recounts, particularly in relation to policies at Fuller) has led to stances which he cannot accept. These include what he describes as "a tipping point" five years ago with his own brother saying he would not attend their mother's funeral if it was held in a church that had become a "reconciling church" with a rainbow banner (*Widening*, 5-7). Hays Sr is clear that

I have been deeply troubled by the way my chapter has been appropriated as ammunition by some individuals and groups taking the uncompromising "conservative" position exemplified by my brother's stern stance against attending our mom's funeral (*Widening*, 8).

Alongside this, he also claims (to me less credibly give the strength of his statements in *MVNT* and his other writings at the time) that the chapter was simply "a thought experiment" and a "proposal...intended to stimulate conversation, not to end it" but that "many readers and many churches took my proposal as a definitive pronouncement – a buttress for walls of separation, for rigidly restrictive policies and condemnations" (*Widening*, 224). He writes, "I bear some responsibility for that, and I am grieved by it" (224).

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*Secondly*, just as his earlier work was powerfully shaped by the experience of his gay Christian friend Gary as recounted in *MVNT* and other writings, so now this work has been powerfully shaped by new experiences of gay Christians:

I have been privileged more recently to belong to a grace-filled church community where gay and lesbian Christians participate fully as members and as leaders, without making it into a church-defining issue. And so my thinking about the issues of sexuality has developed significantly in recent years...My own experience of participating in a church where gay and lesbian members were a vital part of the congregation's life and ministry has caused me to stop and reconsider what I wrote before. In this book I want to start over – to repent of the narrowness of my earlier vision and to explore *a new way of listening to the story that scripture tells about the widening scope of God's mercy* (*Widening*, 8, 10, italics original).

This account has many similarities to that which The Episcopal Church offered to the wider Anglican Communion back in 2005 in [To Set Our Hope on Christ](#):

In the Episcopal Church we have been faced with growing testimony, and the experience of some of our own members, that the distinction between same-sex and heterosexual orientation is not a divide between dysfunction and normality, nor between sinful activity and holy activity. Rather, the distinction has come to seem to us much more like the kind of cultural and biological distinctions that St. Paul came to see as overcome in Christ. In the unfathomable mystery of our redemption, hidden for ages in God, the most apparently basic and even, sometimes, hostile differences among the human family are overcome through our common membership in Jesus: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-8; cf. 1Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 3:11). It is in this light that we have begun to re-conceive our understanding of same-sex affection. In other words, we have begun to notice, as we had not before, the ways in which persons of same-sex affection might be leading lives of holiness. Why might we notice these facts as we had not before? Because before we had assumed that physical acts of same-sex affection must necessarily be sinful, simply by virtue of being same-sex in orientation rather than heterosexual in orientation. For some time now, some members of our Church have been perceiving that same-sex relations as well as heterosexual relations can be manifestations of holiness, honesty, goodness, and enduring fidelity—just as same-sex relations as well as heterosexual relations can be manifestations of abuse, promiscuity, and many other kinds of sin (2.23)

As he rightly notes, his earlier work was in large part already a plea for a more welcoming church as is this new work. Now, however, his understanding of the nature of that welcome and the pattern of life to be expected of those who become followers of Jesus has shifted. In relation to *MVNT* he now writes, "I think that clear statement in favor of inclusion was, and is, inadequate" (*Widening*, 8). In fact he goes further to say "I am deeply sorry" (*Widening*, 225) and, in [a recent interview](#), "I want to repent of what I wrote before". As he put it [in a recent podcast](#):

the position I took was that if gay people aren't welcome in the church, I have to walk out the door with them and leave in the sanctuary only all the people who are entitled to throw the first stone. That was what I said. But I thought: gay people, welcome in the church, but we can't have same-sex relationships or unions because the Bible disapproves. I've come to think that that position that I took is very much like the position of the scribes and Pharisees in the gospels. Who, there's one very poignant story where there's, a person who's suffering from a physical

ailment, who's brought to Jesus on the Sabbath. Some of the crowd around are disapproving of Jesus healing this person. And Jesus says to them, is it permitted on the Sabbath to do good? You know, to heal or or or to harm, you know. And the scribes who are standing around are silenced. They can't answer because they are passionately committed to an interpretation of the God given law, which they believe leads to the position that you can't do this. You can't do this on the Sabbath. Come some other day, but not on the Sabbath. And so they they stand back sort of helplessly, because of their commitment to a text. That causes them to deny the extension of healing to a person standing in their midst. And I see myself as of 25 years ago when I wrote that chapter, as being that person who is caught up in defending a narrow interpretation of the text and ignoring the human suffering in front of me.

*Thirdly*, and this is it seems a crucial shift and connection with the argument concerning God's mercy, Richard Hays has recognised "the human suffering" that his previous stance (particularly, but not solely, how it has sometimes been used by others) has caused to LGBTQ people: "I am now mindful that my chapter titled "Homosexuality" in *Moral Vision* has, contrary to my intention, caused harm to many over the past quarter century" (*Widening*, 223-4). What has shifted for him is that then "I was more concerned about my own intellectual project than about the pain of gay and lesbian people inside and outside the church, including those driven out of the church by unloving condemnation" (225).

There is no doubt that those taking the theological stance set out in *MVNT* have sometimes behaved in ways that have caused distress and harm to gay and lesbian people. There is also no doubt that many gay and lesbian people who have embraced that stance and sought to live it out in their lives have found it very difficult and often lacked the needed support and encouragement of their fellow Christians. What is less clear is that these negative outcomes are the inevitable consequence of that theological stance and that it cannot therefore be articulated and embodied in a manner which is consistent with the obligation to love our neighbour. Here, as Preston Sprinkle's [extended review](#) highlights (point 5 critiques claims about "traditional views on sexuality leading to LGBTQ suicides"), drawing on his other writing in this area, the research evidence cited in the book is minimal and selective.

*Fourthly*, there are hints (but no more) that Richard Hays may no longer be happy with applying the whole methodological approach he took in *MVNT*, at least to the question of sexuality. As quoted above he has referred to his earlier work as "defending a narrow interpretation of the text" and in the book confesses

When writing *Moral Vision*, I fear, I placed myself in the company of those who devote intensive scholarly labors to straining out gnats, while neglecting what Jesus called "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matt 23:23) (*Widening*, 223).

The earlier judgment he reached in relation to singleness and celibacy was

to put it bluntly – the presumptuous judgment of an eager young scholar seeking to develop a theoretical model for 'doing New Testament ethics', that is, working out a model for processing biblical texts into a clear system of teaching (*Widening*, 224).

There is, however, no specific critique or clear revision offered of his method in that book and so it is worth asking whether and how his new conclusions fit with that method.

## 4. What has changed in Richard Hays' approach to New Testament ethics?

It is impossible in a short space to do justice to the breadth and depth of discussion of method in *MVNT* (and sadly the new book has very little engagement with it) so what follows is selective. It focuses on the fourfold task that structures the book and which Hays delineates in its opening pages (*MVNT*, 3-7) and on the question of the relationship of the four sources of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience where his most detailed discussion is in his chapter on the hermeneutical task (*MVNT*, 209-13). Particular attention is given not only to the discussion of each task in his chapter on homosexuality but to the summaries he offers in his "diagnostic checklist" on the four tasks (*MVNT*, 212-13) and his "proposed guidelines for New Testament ethics" (*MVNT*, 309-10, some of which Kimlyn Bender highlights in [his review](#) at n9 when discussing the book as "abandoning a (formerly held) method for ethical reflection in Scripture").

### 4.1 Reviewing the Four Tasks

Recognising that "the four tasks interpenetrate one another" (*MVNT*, 3), Hays distinguishes them as follows:

- *The Descriptive Task* "is fundamentally exegetical in character. The first thing we must do in order to understand the ethics of the New Testament is to explicate in detail the messages of the individual writings in the canon, without prematurely harmonising them" (*MVNT*, 3)
- *The Synthetic Task* asks "is it possible to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon?" (4)
- *The Hermeneutical Task* asks "How do we appropriate the New Testament's message as a word addressed to us?" (5) and answers that it "requires an *integrative act of the imagination*" as "*whenever we appeal to the authority of the New Testament, we are necessarily engaged in metaphor-making, placing our community's life imaginatively within the world articulated by the texts*" (6)
- *The Pragmatic Task* involves "embodying Scripture's imperatives in the life of the Christian community" (7) and "the test that finally proves the value of our theological labors is the 'fruits test': 'A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, not can a bad tree bear good fruit....Thus you will know them by their fruits' (Matt 7:18.20). The value of our exegesis and hermeneutics will be tested by their capacity to produce persons and communities whose character is commensurate with Jesus Christ and thereby pleasing to God" (7).

#### *Descriptive Task*

In one of the few explicit connections with this *MVNT* method a footnote in the final chapter of the book notes that "many of the passages are unambiguous in their disapproval of homosexual activity" and then reads

I (Richard) stand fully behind the *descriptive* exegetical judgments I made there about the meaning of all these texts (*Widening*, n2, 245).

In the Introduction he also writes

My chapter argued that most of the then-current proposals to explain away the Bible's condemnation of such activity were exegetically unsustainable and that 'though only a few biblical texts speak of homoerotic activity, all that do mention it express unqualified disapproval'

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(389). As a judgment about what these very few biblical texts say, that statement still seems to me to be correct (*Widening*, 7-8).

In [an interview about the book](#) he is if anything even more stark:

My exegesis of those half dozen passages, it hasn't changed. I think the Bible says what it says, and disapproves of gay sex, full stop.

Although this appears clear, the book, as noted above, is in fact a bit more ambiguous. The note quoted above begins "The biblical authors did not have in mind the sort of homosexual relationships that the church now considers blessing, and it is not possible to imagine what they might have said about them" (*Widening*, n2, 245). Christopher Hays argues that rather than saying the biblical prohibitions "are not good" it is better to say "that the laws have been misunderstood and misapplied" (*Widening*, 68) noting that "this argument is complicated and is better made elsewhere; it depends on a detailed historical analysis of social contexts, of the sort that we have decided not to repeat here" (*Widening*, n8, 232-3).

That explanation suggests a different outcome to the descriptive task, one in which the scope of the disapproval is understood not to be universal but narrower in the texts' original context. In contrast, Richard Hays was quite clear (summarising [the scholarly article he had written a decade previously](#), a reminder that *MVNT* was not his first or only engagement with the subject) that "Paul treats *all* homosexual activity as prima facie evidence of humanity's tragic confusion and alienation from God the Creator" (*MVNT*, 389) and in Romans 1 "the relations are not described as pederastic" and "Paul's disapproval has nothing to do with exploitation" (*MVNT*, 398, *contra* Scroggs).

#### *Synthetic Task*

There remains no doubt that the synthetic task also remains easy compared to some other ethical questions as all the texts "express unqualified disapproval. Thus, on this issue, there is no synthetic problem for New Testament ethics" (*MVNT*, 389).

In *MVNT*, however, the synthetic task was seen more widely (as noted above) with the question being raised:

How is human sexuality portrayed in the canon as a whole, and how are the few explicit texts treating homosexuality to be read in relation to this larger canonical framework?" (*MVNT*, 389).

Hays then insisted that as well as his three focal images of community, cross and new creation, "we should keep in mind at least the following factors in the biblical portrayal of human existence before God" (*MVNT*, 389):

- A. God's creative intention for human sexuality
- B. The fallen human condition
- C. The demythologizing of sex

None of these matters are considered in the new book where the descriptive and the synthetic tasks are focussed not on "sexuality within the biblical story" but on "the widening of God's mercy".

It would, in short, seem to be the case that, in order "to describe a unity of ethical perspective within the diversity of the canon" (*MVNT*, 4), the authors have decided to consider simply the theme of mercy and to offer their *descriptive* and *synthetic* account of that and to leave to one side any synthetic account of the type presented in *MVNT*. In relation to their handling of texts on God's



mercy they too need to be subject to the diagnostic checklist set out in *MVNT* (at 212-3) and some significant challenges remain concerning “how accurate/adequate” the exegesis is of the texts used, the range and selection of texts used and not used, and how the authors “handle texts that are in tension” with their position.

The approach taken in the new book also needs to address whether the strong emphasis on God’s mind changing regularly within the canon (and then subsequently) fundamentally undermines the whole rationale of the “synthetic task” as it was set out in *MVNT*. Does this not significantly weaken the argument that “the task of discerning some coherence in the canon is both necessary and possible” (*MVNT*, 4) and that “the canonical Scriptures constitute the *norma nomans* for the church’s life” (*MVNT*, 10)?

### *Pragmatic Task*

Rather than turning next to the hermeneutical task, it is better to consider the pragmatic task in order to understand why – despite what has been seen in relation to the *descriptive* and *synthetic* tasks – this book takes the direction it does. It would appear that it is in large part the perceived failure of the *MVNT* stance pragmatically that has led to a change of position. This has always been “the test that finally proves the value of our theological labors” (*MVNT*, 7). As the previous section demonstrated, it appears that Richard and Christopher have both judged the position set out in *MVNT* to have failed this test. An element of this does appear to be the “fruits test” understood in terms of the evidence of a *godly* life among those in same-sex unions. It is, however, as much, or more, the evidence of *ungodly* behaviour among those who oppose same-sex unions and cite *MVNT* in their support.

There is, sadly, no engagement with those many gay and lesbian or same-sex attracted Christians in networks like [Revoice](#) in North America or [Living Out](#) in the UK who, while accepting elements of the Hays’ critique of conservative practice, offer an alternative pragmatic vision which fits with the moral vision offered in *MVNT* rather than the “re-vision” in the new book. Instead of exploring this pathway, the new book’s argument is that in fulfilling the pragmatic task those who have appealed to the view set out in *MVNT* have often caused harm and suffering and failed to embody the good news of God’s mercy. This raises the question as to whether the *hermeneutical* task needs to be undertaken afresh in order then to open up a new *pragmatic* task that is more clearly consonant with the moral vision of Scripture and God’s widening mercy.

### *Hermeneutical Task*

It is undoubtedly in relation to this task that we find, within the method of *MVNT*, the key moves that have led to such different conclusions concerning what faithfulness to Scripture looks like. At the start of his Epilogue, Richard Hays quotes from the *MVNT* chapter on the hermeneutical task where it speaks of the need to

Seek, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, to reread our own lives within the narrative framework of the New Testament, discerning analogies – perhaps startling ones – between the canonical stories and our community’s situation (*Widening*, 222, quoting *MVNT*, 303).

In a fascinating footnote he then acknowledges that prior to publication of *MVNT* Rowan Williams “gently challenged me” (*Widening*, n2, 246-7) to “see how my own model of analogical moral judgment might have reshaped my thinking about homosexuality in the church” (*Widening*, 223) and how others, notably his subsequent doctoral student, J.R. Daniel Kirk, have done the same.

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This is, perhaps, pointing to one of the deepest differences that make this discussion so difficult. It highlights the competing paradigms that present themselves for the “metaphor-making” and “integrative act of the imagination” involved in all hermeneutics. The reason this book is so disappointing for many is that Richard Hays has undergone a paradigm shift in which he believes that the “analogies – perhaps startling ones – between the canonical stories and our community’s situation” in relation to sexuality are to be found supremely not in an account of “sexuality within the biblical story” but, apparently almost solely, in an account of “the widening of God’s mercy”.

The challenge that is side-stepped is to do justice to the arguments set out in Hays’ earlier account working in a different paradigm. The sentence in *MVNT* prior to that which Hays quotes and is cited above (from *Widening*, 222) refers to the different modes of ethical appeal in biblical texts that are important in the hermeneutical task (see *MVNT*, 208-9) and reads

If this sort of metaphorical hermeneutic is fundamental to New Testament ethics, then our normative appeals to Scripture will most often be in the *paradigmatic* mode or in the mode of *symbolic world* construction (*MVNT*, 303)

In his discussion in *MVNT* he is clear that “in the paradigmatic mode, the slender evidence offered by the New Testament is entirely disapproving of homosexuality” (*MVNT*, 395) and that “the mode in which the New Testament speaks explicitly about homosexuality is the mode of *symbolic world* construction” (*MVNT*, 396). The conclusion on the latter is clear:

Roman 1 presents, as we have seen, a portrayal of humankind in rebellion against God and consequently plunged into depravity and confusion. In the course of that portrayal, homosexual activities are – explicitly and without qualification – identified as symptomatic of that tragically confused rebellion. To take the New Testament as authoritative in the mode in which it speaks is to accept this portrayal as “revealed reality”, an authoritative disclosure of the truth about the human condition. Understood in this way, the text requires a normative evaluation of homosexual practice as a distortion of God’s order for creation...We should attend primarily to the way the texts function to shape the *symbolic world* within which human sexuality is understood...According to Paul, homosexual relations however they may be interpreted (or rationalized: see Rom 1:32) by fallen and confused creatures, represent a tragic distortion of the created order. If we accept the authority of the New Testament on this subject, we will be taught to perceive homosexuality accordingly. (Obviously, such a judgement leaves open many questions about how best to deal with the problem pastorally). (*MVNT*, 396).

The new book engages with none of these arguments which surely still stand if the *descriptive* exegetical judgments are unchanged. Instead, there has been a paradigm shift and one which (as the Epilogue acknowledges at *Widening*, 223) was open to him when he wrote *MVNT*. Richard Hays quotes his comment in relation to the argument from inclusion of the Gentiles (which I explored in some detail in a [Grove booklet back in 2001](#)) that “The analogy is richly suggestive, and it deserves careful consideration” (*Widening*, 223, quoting *MVNT*, 396) but he does not quote the two crucial sentences that followed:

The question is whether the analogy is a fitting one and whether it can overrule all the other factors enumerated here that create a strong presumption against the church’s acceptance of homosexuality. (See further comments about the role of *experience*, below). (*MVNT*, 396).

His central, effectively sole, argument for such overruling in the new book is (as discussed and critiqued above) that

The argument for God's gracious inclusion of people of different sexual orientations does not hang by the thread of a single analogy to Acts 10-15. Instead, it rests on the broad base of scripture's comprehensive story of God's counterintuitive but persistent mercy (*Widening*, 223).

But this argument does not address how to relate this "gracious inclusion" to "the New Testament's few but emphatic statements – especially Romans 1:24-27 – that portray same-sex intercourse as a tragic distortion of the created order" (*Widening*, 223). Rather, it appears to ignore that the latter relates to the transformation of life expected consequent after gracious inclusion rather than contradicting gracious inclusion. Instead, it treats a concern for the symbolic world summarised above from *MVNT* as "straining out gnats" which neglects "scripture's comprehensive story" (*Widening*, 223) and fails to acknowledge that, to rework his defence, the traditional argument "does not hang by the thread of" Romans 1 alone but "rests on the broad base of scripture's comprehensive story" of God's purposes for us as creatures made in his image, male and female, and given the gift of marriage which also points to God's eternal purposes of covenantal union fulfilled in the unmarried Christ and the new creation in which there is no giving in marriage.

### Conclusion

In summary, in relation to the *descriptive* task there are some suggestions that the classic texts may be more restrictive in the scope of their prohibitions than set out in *MVNT* and so are not addressing committed, faithful same-sex unions but this is unclear and certainly undefended. The argument however appears to be that even if the biblical texts are univocal, comprehensive and universal and so the *descriptive* and *synthetic* tasks are yielding the same conclusions as in *MVNT*, it is nevertheless wrong to assume that " 'faithfulness to the Bible' inevitably leads to a traditionalist view of human sexuality" (*Widening*, 15-16). This is because (a) that conservative/*MVNT* view has failed in the crucial *pragmatic* task and shown itself to be harmful and damaging and (b) there is an alternative biblical paradigm for the *hermeneutical* task which, using the *descriptive* and *synthetic* work set out in the book (not on sexuality but on God's mercy), opens up a new and better way of fulfilling the *pragmatic* task, a way that includes full inclusion of LGBTQ people and the blessing of their relationships on the same terms as heterosexual marriage.

## 4.2 Relating the Four Sources

In *MVNT* when comparing the two possible analogies and considering whether the "inclusion" one can overrule that based on texts relating to marriage and sexuality, we have seen that Hays noted that this opened up the question "about the role of experience" (*MVNT*, 396). The other crucial question in his checklist on the hermeneutical task in addition to that relating to "the mode of appeal to the text" is "What other sources of authority do the interpreters rely on?" and here, in addition to Scripture, he lists the sources of tradition, reason and experience (*MVNT*, 213).

Hays notes that Scripture is "always read by interpreters under the formative influence of some particular tradition, using the light of reason and experience and attempting to relate the Bible to a particular historical situation" (*MVNT*, 209). Having defined the other 3 sources he notes that "the right relation of Scripture to each of these other sources of authority has been a perennial problem for theology" and that "we have passed into an era in which the urgent question is the relative authority of Scripture and *experience*" with many "willing to assert explicitly that the authority of Scripture is in principle subordinate to the authority of the critical insight conferred by the experience of the oppressed or of women" (*MVNT*, 211). Having surveyed different authors and their use of the sources Hays wrote:

I would propose the following minimal guideline: *extrabiblical source stand in a hermeneutical relation to the New Testament; they are not independent, counter-balancing sources of authority*. In other words, the *Bible's* perspective is privileged, not ours...This guideline by no means excludes exceedingly serious consideration of the other sources of wisdom, but it assigns those sources an explicitly subordinate role in normative judgments. They function instrumentally to help us interpret and apply Scripture. They must not, however, be allowed to stand as competing sources for theological norms (MVNT, 296 cf Rule 7 at 310 – “Extrabiblical sources stand in a hermeneutical relation to the New Testament; they are not independent, counterbalancing sources of authority”).

In particular, in a number of places he stresses that

*experience...can claim theological authority only when it is an experience shared broadly by the community of faith...Claims about experience as a theological authority must always be tested in the light of Scripture, and through the corporate discernment of the community of faith (MVNT, 297)*

Here, in his methodological discussion in *MVNT*, he already raises the question of “cases....where the church as a whole might acknowledge some new experience as revelatory even against the apparent witness of Scripture” and sees Acts 10 and 11 as “the paradigm case” (*MVNT*, 297). This is, in effect, more cautiously stated, the argument set forth in detail in the new book in terms of God’s mind changing. He concluded previously that “such possibilities cannot be excluded a priori; God is, as Barth would insist, free to act in surprising ways” but

It must be stated as a theological guideline, however, that claims about divinely inspired experience that contradicts the witness of Scripture should be admitted to normative status in the church only after sustained and agonizing scrutiny by a consensus of the faithful. Far more often, our experience, ambiguous and sin-riddled, will need to be judged and corrected in light of Scripture, which teaches us again and again not to be conformed to this age but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we may rightly discern the will of God (Rom 12:2). (*MVNT*, 298)

It is in this context that we can turn to the paradigm shift found in the book and highlighted earlier. When he discussed the analogy with inclusion of the Gentiles as a possible hermeneutical path in *MVNT* he wrote:

The question is whether the analogy is a fitting one and whether *it can overrule all the other factors enumerated here that create a strong presumption against the church’s acceptance of homosexuality (MVNT, 396, italics added)*

He went on to acknowledge that

the advocates of homosexuality in the church have their most serious case when they appeal to the authority of *experience*. There are individuals who live in stable, loving homosexual relationships and claim to experience the grace – rather than the wrath – of God therein” (*MVNT*, 398).

He noted possible responses to this:

- Paul was wrong (an option this new book does not explicitly advocate although “God was wrong” may be one way of understanding the argument about God’s mind changing),

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- This claim about God in gay relationships is the “self-deception” Paul describes (an option this book does not consider),
- These are “new realities that Paul could not have anticipated” and so what he condemns does not “correspond exactly to the experience of homosexual relations that exists in the present time” (an option which as we have seen now seems to be on the table although previously rejected in *MVNT*).

Hays also pleaded the experience of his friend Gary which is one of “struggle with homosexual desires” that are found to be “a hindrance to living lives committed to the service of God” (*MVNT*, 399). Of this Richard Hays now writes

I fear that I was using him as a prop for my own theoretical construction. I hope that if he were alive today, he would approve of the argument of this book. (And I know that if he didn't, he would engage me in passionate but generous conversation) (*Widening*, 225).

What is central, however, in *MVNT* is his methodology and understanding of the relationship between Scripture and experience:

It is crucial to remember that experience must be treated as a hermeneutical lens for reading the New Testament rather than as an independent, counterbalancing authority. *This is the point at which the analogy to the early church's acceptance of Gentiles fails decisively.* The church did not simply observe the experience of Cornelius and his household and decide that Scripture must be wrong after all. On the contrary, the experience of the uncircumcised Gentiles responding in faith to the gospel message led the church back to a new reading of Scripture. This new reading discovered in the texts a clear message of God's intent, from the covenant with Abraham forward, to bless all nations and to bring Gentiles (*qua* Gentiles) to worship Israel's God....Only because the new experience of Gentile converts proved hermeneutically illuminating of Scripture was the church, over time, able to accept the decision to embrace Gentiles within the fellowship of God's people. This is precisely the step that has not – or at least not yet – been taken by the advocates of homosexuality in the church (*MVNT*, 399, italics added).

The question is, therefore, whether this methodology and his understanding of the relationship of the sources has now changed.

One conclusion, that some have drawn, is that Hays' method has fundamentally altered and the argument now is simply that experience is being taken as “an independent, counterbalancing authority” which then over-rides Scripture. [Bender's review](#) states that “the cautious earlier appeals to experience as a lens now give way to affirmations of experience's full and unquestioned authority” and “the analogical comparisons” the book now makes “overlay an argument that, in the end, is primarily consequentialist and based on experience”. Its fundamental weakness, he claims, is that “an argument for a trajectory beyond the canon for which there is no canonical precedent is not an extension of canonical authority but is its replacement by an external “canonical” authority—in this case, for the authority of contemporary experience”

I think these critiques highlight some key problems with the book, and as [Snyder points out towards the end of his review](#), they do state that “the evidence of experience outweighs the inertia of tradition and the force of a few biblical prooftexts on these questions” (*Widening*, 213) has been a factor in other areas such as women in leadership and needs to be applied now to LGBTQ Christians. However, I suspect that Richard Hays would resist that reading of its use of authoritative sources and the relationship of Scripture and experience and argue that the development in his thinking is more

nuanced and complex. As we have seen, one element, clearly and unavoidably based on experience, is that the traditional *MVNT* ethic fails the crucial *pragmatic* task because it inflicts suffering and fails to embody God's mercy. But I think Hays would also argue that, to adapt the passage above and put words in his mouth,

I have not simply observed the experience of same-sex partnered Christians and the churches that welcome them and decided that Scripture must be wrong after all. On the contrary, the experience of same-sex partnered Christians responding in faith to the gospel message has led me back to a new reading of Scripture. This new reading discovered in the texts a clear message of God's widening mercy...Only because the new experience of same-sex partnered converts has proved hermeneutically illuminating of Scripture as a whole (I have discovered there is not simply "the thread of a single analogy to Acts 10-15" but "the broad base of scripture's comprehensive story of God's counterintuitive but persistent mercy", 223) is the church able to accept the decision to embrace same-sex couples within the fellowship of God's people.

Expressed in this way the argument is much more consistent with the methodology in relation to sources found in *MVNT*. However, the argument still fails to address the challenges raised by the paradigm shift and why if, as Hays has said, "the Bible says what it says, and disapproves of gay sex, full stop", that conclusion is now able to be rejected on the basis of the experience of welcoming same-sex partnered Christians fully into the life of the church. The new argument applies the methodology, if you like, *within* the "inclusion" paradigm. But the question that Hays raised at the end of the passage quoted above and which I have then recast was

Is it possible for them [the advocates of homosexuality in the church] to reread the New Testament and show how this development can be understood as *a fulfilment of God's design for human sexuality as previously revealed in Scripture?* (*MVNT*, 399, italics added).

His conclusion in *MVNT* was clear:

In view of the content of the biblical texts summarized above, it is difficult to imagine how such an argument can be made...I think it prudent and necessary to let the univocal testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition order the life of the church on this painfully controversial matter. We must affirm that the New Testament tells us the truth about ourselves as sinners and as God's sexual creatures: marriage between man and woman is the normative form for human sexual fulfilment, and homosexuality is one among many tragic signs that we are a broken people, alienated from God's loving purpose (*MVNT*, 399-400).

The new book simply refuses to engage with this line of argument. There are hints that some of the basis for this conclusion in *MVNT* is now seen as weak. The authors clearly believe (but do not really explore) that, in terms of *reason*, there is now less "uncertainty surrounding the scientific and experiential evidence" (*MVNT*, 399). Nevertheless, it would be difficult to say (a) that we have moved on from "our culture's present swirling confusion about gender roles" (arguably, despite wide acceptance of same-sex marriage which they note, this is even more the case in relation to trans identities which are included by their use of "LGBTQ" but never discussed) or (b) that in our culture we now have less "propensity for self-deception" (*MVNT*, 399). In addition, far from "the corporate discernment of the community of faith" (*MVNT*, 297) having led after "sustained and agonizing scrutiny by a consensus of the faithful" (*MVNT*, 298) to the conclusion the authors have arrived at, the overwhelming majority of Christians remain convinced of a traditional understanding. In the decades since *MVNT* what we have seen is that those churches which have embraced the stance

commended in the book have witnessed division and decline and caused division in the wider church. These elements of *experience* also need to be included in accomplishing the *hermeneutical* task.

## 5. What are some of the book's contributions to the current discussion?

It is important to recognise that the book (both despite of, and because of, its significant weaknesses) does make important contributions to both the academic and ecclesial discussions concerning Scripture and sexuality. What follows groups these into three broad areas: the challenges to conservatives, the place and authority of biblical teaching on sexuality, and the life of the church.

### 5.1 The challenges to conservatives

There are real dangers that those who hold to traditional teaching will simply dismiss the book because of its flaws. I have even seen concerns expressed online that some may take the more serious and harmful step of no longer engaging and learning from the previous rich work of Richard Hays because of what he has now written here. Much better is to ask what – despite its flaws – conservatives need to hear and heed from the book.

*Firstly*, the book shows on the part of both authors, particularly Richard Hays, a willingness to keep asking questions and consider whether longstanding convictions need to be revised in the light of Scripture and the work of God's Spirit today. Alongside this is a humble openness to recognise, admit, and repent of, past failings. This is something which is often not present in these discussions where, across different positions, many people – far from only those who are “conservatives” or “traditionalists” – show little or no willingness seriously to consider in relation to these highly contested matters such questions as:

- What have I got wrong in my understanding?
- What have I said and done wrong?
- What do I need to learn from those I disagree with?
- How should I maybe change?

*Secondly*, related to that, the book highlights the biblical warrants for wrestling honestly with God and those who speak for God (from Abram in Gen 18 through Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 26 to the Psalms and Job) when finding what seems to be God's will and purpose difficult, even unacceptable and harmful. To embrace this practice does not require accepting the book's argument that this wrestling is able to shift God's will and purpose and lead him to change his mind. It would be sad if those who for good reason cannot accept that aspect of the book then fail to take seriously the biblically grounded call for entering into honest dialogue, even confrontation, with God when we struggle to understand how what we have understood to be his will is good and perfect or see the pain those who believe they are upholding God's purposes inflict on themselves or others.

*Thirdly*, it is clear that a key factor in pushing both authors away from the traditional teaching has been how it has been expressed and the practical actions that some individuals and institutions believe flow from holding to it and defending it against error. This challenges those who remain convinced of that teaching to consider whether all the conclusions they draw from it are in fact required because of it or whether they arise because of particular cultural contexts or conflicts. There is a real danger that those who take the stance set out in *MVNT* may be, like the Roundheads according to [1066 And All That](#), “right but repulsive” (just as those embracing the argument in this book risk being, like the Cavaliers, “wrong but wromantic”).

*Fourthly*, the book challenges those who uphold traditional teaching to ensure that in doing so they are not causing harm. One particular form of this in conservative circles has been the promotion of practices which are now generally categorised under the label of “conversion therapy”. Although there are problems with that nomenclature and the way in which it is sometimes used it is important that past and present failures are recognised (the [resources from Living Out](#) are particularly helpful here). This book represents a further encouragement to keep reviewing all patterns of teaching and pastoral support found among those committed to the *MVNT* understanding of God’s will. Part of this is also being willing to challenge those conservative voices (some in Western contexts, some in other cultural contexts) who condemn people because of their sexual orientation and whose language or tone or political campaigns cause damage to sexual minorities. This must, however, go beyond simply removing or resisting bad practices. There is also the need to develop good practices. Among the many failings of the Church of England (and other churches which, in principle, still support traditional teaching) is articulating a vision of godly living without then providing the necessary practical support to enable people to embody it in their lives or to help them experience the mercy of God when they fail to do so.

*Fifthly*, that reference to God’s mercy points to the central challenge clearly presented by this book: *how do we make mercy central in our words and actions and create Christian communities which embody mercy in how they teach and live in relation to sexual minorities?* The authors call for Christians to “come down on the side of generosity and grace” (*Widening*, 215) but then simply assume that means accepting their re-vision. Those of us who cannot accept that re-vision and find their arguments in the book unpersuasive need instead to consider what “generosity and grace” shaped by the Scriptures and led by the Spirit might look like in practice. This will likely require more work on what genuine, generous, grace-filled “pastoral accommodation” might involve (which I have explored previously e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)), particularly for those who come to Christian faith in committed same-sex relationships.

One major failing of the book is that it simply advocates an “inclusive” paradigm focussed on mercy and does not take seriously the concerns and biblical basis of the “traditionalist” paradigm focussed on God’s creation purposes and marriage and avoiding sexual immorality. Advocates of that “traditionalist” paradigm need to ensure that they are not guilty – either in theory or in practice – of similarly failing to take seriously the concerns and biblical basis of the “inclusive” paradigm as set out in this book. At a bare minimum that means taking seriously, in our preaching, our pastoring, our politics, these words of Richard Hays referring back to *MVNT*:

I also draw the reader’s attention to the final sentences of my discussion of Rom 1:18-32: “[N]o one should presume to be above God’s judgment; all of us stand in radical need of God’s mercy. Thus, Paul’s warning should transform the terms of our contemporary debate about homosexuality: no one has a secure platform to stand upon in order to pronounce condemnation on others. Anyone who presumes to have such a vantage point is living in a dangerous fantasy, oblivious of the gospel that levels all of us before a holy God”. I now wish that I had added another clause to that final sentence, so that it would read, “the gospel that levels all of us before a holy God who welcomes all of us with infinite compassion and mercy”. (*Widening*, n2, 245-6, quoting *MVNT*, 389).

## 5.2 The place and authority of biblical teaching on sexuality

The central weakness of the book for me is its handling of “sexuality within the biblical story”. In practice this amounts simply to adding a final seventeenth chapter headed “Moral Re-Vision: what we must say about human sexuality” but never addressing the biblical teaching relating to human



sexuality directly. This, and the justification for this approach, shed some light on the nature of the disagreements in both church and academy and why they are so intractable.

*Firstly*, the argument that not only God's mind changes but that it has (seemingly recently) changed in relation to sexuality ("it seems to us that God is moving on again, whether we like it or not", *Widening*, 218) makes clear that the conservative case from Scripture and from tradition in relation to their teaching on sexuality is basically here being granted. This element within the book's argument is not that we have misread Scripture on marriage and sexual ethics but that Scripture—including Jesus in his teaching in the gospels—has misled us about what God is saying to us today when it speaks on these matters. We cannot, we are told by Christopher Hays, "simply add up the sum of the texts and arrive at a right answer, once and for all" which "is not too far from what *Moral Vision* did in regard to homosexuality" as "we have a living God who does new things" (*Widening*, 92). The latter point is clearly correct and important and the mathematical crudity of the approach critiqued is not to be commended but, in the words of (among many examples) Ps 111 which happened to be set for Morning Prayer on the day I write this, it is also the case that "all his commandments are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever" (Ps 111:7-8). The progressive nature of revelation and its historic contextualisation mean that the outworking of this needs care but, when appeal is made to God's mind changing, this canonical thread needs to be given much more weight: how does any claim of God changing his mind relate to the faithfulness and consistency of God, particularly when that is connected—as it is in relation to marriage—to his word spoken in creation, the teaching of the Word made flesh, and apostolic warnings about a final word of exclusion from God's kingdom if their word is disregarded?

*Secondly*, it is important that the book is not simply an appeal to the "new thing" God is now doing but is an argument that this is connected to and consonant with the biblical witness taken as a whole. As set out above, in trying to understand the changing understanding of Richard Hays and his hermeneutic, the book highlights that there are in effect two different interpretive paradigms or lenses through which Christians are seeking to understand and be faithful to "the biblical story": that of inclusion and "widening mercy" and that of being made as sexual creatures, male and female, given the gift of marriage, and called to a pattern of holy sexual behaviour and relationships.

This book is perhaps the best articulation of the former paradigm but its total failure to address the latter is most telling. This is not only because one of its authors wrote one of the best articulations of the latter but because that same author is clear in the book that, as seen in relation to inclusion of the Gentiles, there is "the vexing question of what gentile believers in Jesus would be required to do *after baptism*" (*Widening*, 176). In other words, because, as John Barclay has most recently argued in his works, grace is unconditioned (a gift given without regard to worthiness, which is a central theme in the Hays' book expressed in terms of mercy) but not unconditional, we need to talk about not only inclusion but transformation (I have previously discussed some of these matters [here](#) and [here](#)). Unless and until those who work with the inclusion paradigm in their appeal to Scripture can convince those who work with the other paradigm that the "inclusive" approach also takes Scripture seriously in relation to its teaching on sexual differentiation, marriage and sexual immorality then we risk being stuck talking past each other and over each other. As already noted, this book is also an important reminder and challenge that this also works in reverse: those in the traditional paradigm need to show that their account is taking seriously the biblical texts which are central in this book in relation to God's mercy.

*Thirdly*, because of these features the book brings to the fore the question as to what counts as a recognisably "biblical" approach to these questions. There can be no disputing that the book is "biblical" in the sense that it is almost from cover to cover an engagement with Scripture by two

leading biblical scholars who profess a commitment to biblical authority. Nor can there be any doubt that one of its central aims is to persuade people that a biblical case can be made for the “inclusive” stance the authors advocate. In the book itself this is clear in the opening and closing where the argument in relation to sexuality is front and centre:

Some people seem to expect that biblical studies and theology, because they deal with ancient texts and history, will serve as conservative counterweights to all our experience of our LGBTQ colleagues, students and friends and their gifts and graces in the church. Some people assume that “faithfulness to the Bible” inevitably leads to a traditionalist view of human sexuality. This book upends those expectations and offers a positive way forward (*Widening*, 15-16).

This goes out as an invitation to readers who may have felt sympathy with LGBTQ friends and neighbours – perhaps along with some uneasiness about the church’s traditional exclusionary practices – but felt constrained by their understanding of “the authority of the Bible” from offering a full welcome. For such readers, we hope that this book offers encouragement to see that the inclusion of sexual minorities is not a rejection of the Bible’s message but a fuller embrace of its story of God’s expansive mercy (*Widening*, 221).

This highlights the question as to whether it is legitimate to claim a stance as “biblical” which

- a. accepts that the Bible speaks consistently against what that stance commends (here in terms of sexual relationships but the principle should apply more widely) and
- b. yet offers no argued alternative reading of those negative texts or
- c. a discussion of the Bible’s wider message and theology (here on human sexual differentiation and marriage) which frames those texts while also claiming
- d. that God has changed his mind from what he says in Scripture.

Is one being truly “biblical” if one offers a “re-vision” of the church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality simply by articulating “the biblical story” of “the widening of God’s mercy” and then dropping a new teaching into that context? Or does there need to be a more serious account of “sexuality within the biblical story” itself?

Rather than being recognised as “biblical”, is the position of Christopher and Richard Hays as set out in the book—which effectively says that Jesus and Paul were wrong and so they mislead us in relation to these matters—now not better and more honestly described in the words of “my friend Luke Timothy Johnson” (*Widening*, 223) who offered one of the earliest and best articulations of an appeal to Gentile inclusion (see his [Scripture and Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church](#), 1996 and [the article referenced in Richard Hays’ Epilogue](#) (n3, 247):

The task demands intellectual honesty. I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says...The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says. But what are we to do with what the text says? We must state our grounds for standing in tension with the clear commands of Scripture, and include in those grounds some basis in Scripture itself...*We do, in fact, reject the straightforward commands of Scripture, and appeal instead to another authority when we declare that same-sex unions can be holy and good. And what exactly is that authority? We appeal explicitly to the weight of our own experience and the experience thousands of others have witnessed to, which tells us that to claim our own sexual orientation is in fact to accept the way in which God has created us.* ([“Homosexuality and the Church”](#), *Commonweal*, 15<sup>th</sup> June, 2007, italics added)

### 5.3 The life of the Church

Finally, the disagreements over these matters are dividing almost every Christian denomination: Richard Hays' United Methodist Church, Christopher Hays' Presbyterian Church (USA), my own Church of England and wider Anglican Communion (where the Archbishop of Canterbury's newly articulated change of position discussed [here](#) and [here](#) appears to have much in common with the argument of this book). As noted in the first section of this review article, the authors significantly appear to acknowledge the inevitability of this given that the nature of the disagreements relate to the ordering of the church's life and the pattern of holy living into which disciples are to be nurtured. They acknowledge that "it is difficult to see how strong differences over same-sex marriage could be maintained within an individual congregation, or even in some cases within an individual denomination" (*Widening*, 216).

In terms of the Church of England's important discussion *Communion and Difference*, this may even be an issue where "each group believes the other to be advocating something simply incompatible with the good news of Jesus...that amounts to a rejection of Jesus' call on one's life" but it cannot be denied that it is one where "Disagreements...undermine our ability to live and work together as one church. They make it hard to worship together, to share sacraments, to have a single structure of ministry, oversight and governance" (*Living in Love and Faith*, 231).

In the final chapter of his section on the New Testament, Richard Hays seeks, nevertheless, to argue that we need to view the question in the light of Romans 14 and 15 (196-202). This is a passage which others have turned to ([LLF](#), 303-6 and [in earlier Shared Conversations](#)) and the book drawing our attention to it afresh and asking about its significance is important for the life of the church. However, in terms of providing an apostolic analogy, the argument advanced here faces major challenges which sadly the book does not really address.

*Firstly*, whatever the similarities in terms of some aspects of disagreement, is the *substance* about which there is disagreement not one which is significantly different? As Tom Wright sets out in some detail in his contribution to *Good Disagreement?: Grace and Truth in A Divided Church* there is no evidence at all that Paul would see questions relating to sexual conduct (and what Richard Hays still accepts Paul viewed negatively in terms of same-sex sexual behaviour) as equivalent to questions relating to food. As Wright comments:

Paul insists that the markers which distinguish Jew and gentile are no longer relevant in the new, messianic dispensation; but the Jewish-style worship of the one God, and the human male/female life which reflects that creational monotheism, is radically reinforced. (*Good Disagreement*, 72)

*Secondly*, Richard Hays is clear how he wishes to apply the categories of "strong" and "weak" (although he does not discuss where this places Paul):

The 'strong' ones today are the liberated advocates of unconditional affirmation of same-sex unions" and the 'weak' are "narrow-minded, rule-following conservatives who would impose limits on their freedom" (*Widening*, 200).

He uses these to warn the strong against despising the weak (though that description of them is perhaps guilty of that) but he does not really consider what on this account it would mean in relation to handling our divisions on sexuality for those whom he presents as the strong. What follows for those who accept the argument of the book if they are "not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister." (14:13), to remember that "If your brother or sister is distressed

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because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died" (14:15) or to heed the call "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food...but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall" (14:20, 21)?

As Tom Wright expressed it in [an interview over twenty years ago](#), summarising the argument he helped articulate in [The Windsor Report](#) (paras 87-96):

Paul has some fascinating passages about living with difference within the people of God. In 1 Corinthians 8-10 and in Romans 14, he talks about being prepared to accept one another as brothers and sisters, to eat together and to worship together, despite having differences on whether to eat food offered to idols, to eat meat at all, to drink wine, to keep special holy days, etc. Many people have tried to say, there you are, Paul has this principle of tolerance, and we should simply tolerate one another within the body. There are two problems about applying that right across the board. One is that Paul himself doesn't apply it right across the board. There are many issues on which Paul says, there are no two opinions about this, this is the way it is. If people go a different route, then they are excluding themselves from the fellowship of the church and the church should ratify that....The other is that when Paul is faced with a difference of opinion, he [puts the burden on] those who take what he calls "the strong line," which is that things that might have been thought out of line are now permissible, such as eating meat offered to idols. He says that if at any point your weaker brothers and sisters, those who haven't gotten to this point yet, are being caused to stumble by what you do, you must give up that right. Of course in the present church we see the exact opposite, where people are saying, no we must drive a coach and horses through this because this is the new morality, this is the way it is now. There we're up against part of contemporary American religious mythology...

By highlighting Romans 14 the book brings to the fore these questions and the problem for its argument is that *either* in terms of the hermeneutical task the analogy does not work *or* if it is held to be relevant then the pragmatic task that follows in terms of the life of the church is restraint on the part of those who are "strong", not least for the sake of the many Christians, like Richard Hays' friend Gary, for whom these questions are not simply intellectual and academic but personal and existential.