

426 Gushee: 'Changing our Minds'

This week, I've begun to read Gushee's book again. He's a top-flight US biblical theologian, author of a well-respected and widely used textbook on Christian ethics, which *supported* the traditional view on gay sex. But, years later, he began to reconsider, and he now feels that the biblical evidence is not strong enough to insist that the traditionalist view is unassailable, so he wrote *Changing our Minds* (2015), arguing that the issue should be one of personal conscience, not church prescription.

In the first couple of chapters (after 18 pages of support from other theologians), he explains the increasing difficulties that gay Christians face. (Encouragingly, I've noticed that more churches are making public statements about being 'inclusive' or 'affirming' of gay people.)

In chapter 3, he suggests three responses: 'traditionalist', 'revisionist' and 'avoidist'. The third might sound a little harsh, as church leaders are under so much pressure these days, and they certainly don't want their churches to split, so it's understandable not to want to discuss it.

After delineating the basic issues (c4), he suggests important positive ways of treating one another (c5), and then gives statistics to show that there are indeed many gay Christians (c6). He then explains six different options for how we might view the current situation (c7) and asks us to get to know gay Christians as real people, and not just to discuss this as an 'issue' (c8).

In chapters 9–20, he gets theological, and I couldn't adequately summarise that here, so I simply want to give you an example of how *not* to approach this.

This week I overheard an older Christian chap, 'Alan', assuring a younger chap, 'Barry', that 'the Bible says that homosexuality is an *abomination!*' Barry doesn't attend church, so I was unhappy about the impression that Alan might be creating, especially if Barry was gay. I later spoke to Barry who, thankfully, was very gracious. But let's check Alan's use of language:

Abomination: *a thing that is hated, considered extremely offensive, or causes disgust and intense loathing. It often refers to something shameful, wicked, or a person/object that is repulsive.* OED (my bold)

Gushee (c12), says that the Hebrew, *toevah* – sometimes translated as 'abomination' – occurs 117 times, including those two oft-quoted verses in Leviticus.^{18:22 + 20:13} You can check Gushee for the Hebrew meaning, but it's the use of that English word that really concerns me.

The meanings of words change over time,^[418] so I checked the etymology of 'abomination': from 'ab omen' – a bad omen – it is now massively emotive. So why has it become so highly charged? Could it be that it mainly reflects people's strong negative feelings (which, sadly, I once shared) about male gay sex? Does *toevah* really warrant such a fierce translation to then to use as 'The Bible says...'?

Like Alan, I feel very strongly about this issue, and I find it difficult *not* to be emotive when I meet such dogmatic attitudes, especially when aimed at not-yet-believers.