

Employees quit American Bible Society over new sex and marriage rules

The statement of faith is the latest sign that the organization has shifted away from its ecumenical roots toward a more narrow evangelical identity.

by [Yonat Shimron](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue



The building that houses the American Bible Society in Philadelphia stands across from the National Museum of American Jewish History, with the statue *Religious Liberty* in front. Photo by Celeste Kennel-Shank for the *Christian Century*.

The American Bible Society will soon require all employees to adhere to a statement of faith that includes a conservative code of sexual ethics.

Several employees have resigned in protest of the new policy and more plan to do so.

[The statement of faith](#) requires employees to “refrain from sexual contact outside the marriage covenant,” which it defines as “a man . . . with his wife,” citing Matthew 19:5 and Ephesians 5:31. Employees are also asked to affirm: “I choose to honor the covenant of marriage as a lifelong commitment, and I choose to pursue all reasonable avenues of reconciliation should my spouse and I have unresolved conflict.”

ABS, one of the oldest nonprofit organizations dedicated to distributing Bibles around the world, has stood by the measure.

“We did this because we believe a staff made up of people with a deep and personal connection to the Bible will bring unity and clarity as we continue our third century of ministry,” Roy Peterson, ABS president and CEO, wrote in a statement. “We understand there are differing views on these matters. . . . This decision does not signal intent to advocate or champion any cause other than increased engagement with the Bible.”

The document also requires employees to be “involved in a local Christian church” and to “resist temptations of deception, malicious speech, stealing, cheating others, and dishonoring my body through substance abuse.”

It opens with an “I believe” section with language similar to the Nicene Creed. It adds this statement: “I believe the Bible is inspired by God . . . [and] provides authoritative guidance for my faith and conduct.”

ABS, founded 202 years ago to publish, distribute, and translate the Bible, presented its “Affirmation of Biblical Community” to employees in December. Beginning in January 2019, all employees will be required to sign the document. Those who don’t will be asked to tender their resignation.

Already, at least nine of the organization's 200 or so employees have quit. More said they are looking for jobs elsewhere and will likely take another job on or before January. Some noted that a man hired as a help desk manager last year introduced his husband to employees shortly after being hired at the society's Philadelphia headquarters.

The affirmation is the latest sign that the organization has shifted away from its ecumenical roots toward a narrower evangelical identity. That shift began in the 1990s when the society changed its constitution to make it a ministry that undertakes "Scripture engagement." Previously it published Bibles "without note or comment."

"This is a clear manifestation, or a logical conclusion, of the evangelical takeover in the 1990s," said John Fea, a historian at Messiah College and author of the book *The Bible Cause: A History of the American Bible Society*. "In many ways they are creating boundaries here for the organization that are new, that have limited their scope beyond what has happened in the past."

Jeremy Gimbel, a 34-year-old gay man who had worked for the organization for ten years as a web services manager, said he loved the work he was doing but felt he had no choice but to quit a few months ago.

"I am hurt because this affirmation specifically excludes me from the community it is supposed to foster," he wrote in a letter he sent to the board of directors before he left. "The affirmation will, like much [of] the political climate we live in today, build walls along the lines of difference."

The new statement of faith also led several employees to quit because they didn't want to work for an organization that so tightly circumscribes its workforce and its message.

"Everything that was on that affirmation was stuff I could pretty much sign in good faith and say 'yes,' I can comply with these things," said Doug Black, a web developer who quit in February.

But Black, who is also an ordained minister in the Assemblies of God, said he couldn't abide the change in direction.

Some employees pointed to the apparent contradiction between the new policy and the marketing materials the society was pushing, such as [a video called “The Apology,”](#) in which a group of people apologize for the ways the Bible has been used to hurt others.

“Some of us have used this book of love for hateful things,” the people on the video proclaim, among them “to oppress women, to defend slavery, and to treat others with disgust and revulsion. . . . This book is all about doing just the opposite.”
—Religion News Service

FOLLOWING UP (Updated February 20, 2019): The American Bible Society implemented a policy terminating LGBT employees and unmarried heterosexuals who are not celibate if they do not sign a statement of faith agreeing to refrain from sexual activity except in marriage between a man and a woman. In the 13 months between when the policy was announced and when it took effect on February 1, 36 employees resigned—a little less than 20 percent of the organization’s workforce, according to Religion News Service.

A version of this article, which was edited, appears in the print edition under the title “American Bible Society employees resign over new statement of faith.”