How I changed my mind about same-sex marriage

It began when I realized the church has always had a process for changing its mind.

by Francis Spufford in the July 28, 2021 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

One major thing I have changed my mind about over the last decade is same-sex marriage. This is true of a lot of people. In fact, it is true of the majority of those who are now in favor of it.

I should say, for clarity, that I am an English Anglican. This means that I am a member of a church that still doesn't recognize marriage between two men or two women and that has had an exception carved out in English law to permit it to go on taking this position. But I am also a citizen of a country in which a Conservative government moved unambiguously to make the change nearly a decade ago and where same-sex marriage has settled swiftly into place as a new normal. That is, same-sex marriage is still contentious in my church but not much in my society.

There has been such an extraordinarily swift change in perception that it is difficult now to recall what the old normal felt like—to the dereliction, I think, of charity where argument and campaigning over the issue still go on. The speed of the shift ought to mean that we treat those who are still opponents with the care and presumption of goodwill that our past selves would have liked to receive when we thought the same. Instead, it has become possible to shun and caricature opponents, to treat them as bizarre outsiders to a self-evident moral consensus.

When I was against same-sex marriage, say, 15 years ago, it was not (or at least I thought it was not) from any desire to discriminate against same-sex couples. I come from the generation of straight people who, arriving at adulthood in the 1980s, from college on always had friends who were gay, thought of our own heterosexuality as one possibility among several, and didn't find anything troubling in the knowledge that our gay friends were sexually active. I find it hard to imagine being disgusted or horrified by what same-sex lovers do in bed together.

The issue with marriage, I believed, was definitional. Marriage was the name for the pair-bonding that a man and a woman entered into. There should be other names, I thought, for the pair-bonds of men who loved men and women who loved women.

Was I a bigot then? Were we (almost) all bigots?

I don't think so. I wanted fairness, equality, parity of esteem, and parity of blessing between the ways in which the vocation of vowed love might be recognized for straight couples and gay ones, but without it being clear yet in what *form* that parity, that equality, should be manifested. It was not at all apparent then that heterosexual marriage was the model to be generalized.

Ah, but perhaps our non-bigotedness was a special consequence of the ambiguous state of things back then, and the world has since moved on. Is this like the difference between being a creationist before Darwin and being one afterward? Like the difference between not yet knowing any better and deliberately ignoring something known?

I used to think that same-sex couples deserved fair treatment but not the word *marriage*. Was I a bigot?

Again, I don't think so. It's not as if there has been the equivalent of a scientific breakthrough where same-sex marriage is concerned—although the thousands of

faithful couples who have wanted their unions to be blessed, usually without much encouragement from the churches, have provided a data point that thoughtful Christians should take note of.

The change, we should acknowledge, has its arbitrary qualities. There was a lot of opposition to it—and still is, in some quarters—among older gay rights activists and especially lesbians, for whom marriage had been something to be liberated from. Other histories for the last decade were perfectly possible. The desire for equality—and among Christians, the desire for equal blessing—could have worked out in other ways. No doubt those other ways would have come to seem morally self-evident too as they solidified into place culturally.

In Britain, it was not inevitable that a newly elected right-wing government would decide that legislating equal marriage was a swift (and, probably, cheap) way to demonstrate that people could vote Conservative without sacrificing social liberalism. That's the contingency of my local story of the change; other local stories of it are contingent, too.

Social change isn't a pure product of divine justice. It's a compound of grace and effort and accident, of the collision of forces that may not be recognized at the time or even afterward. It's messy, it's mysterious, and it does not come with a convenient arrow in the margin of the map identifying the proper direction of progress.

For all these reasons, I'm suspicious of the tendency among liberal Christians now to try to deal with remaining opposition just by glaring at it and bombarding it with our moral disapproval. Wedge strategies for achieving change can be very effective. First you ask for compassion for those an existing moral rule condemns; then you convert compassion into tolerance, tolerance into acceptance, acceptance into a new normal; and then, when 51 percent of people perceive the situation the new way, you pivot promptly and suggest that disagreement is now intolerable, illegitimate, of a piece with famous cruelties of the past.

This works; indeed, it has worked many times for various issues. But it does not seem like a way for Christians to treat each other if we are all adopted children of the living God, with histories and convictions to be treated with loving respect even where we fervently disagree. And it has the strategic disadvantage that conservatives, not being stupid, are perfectly capable of recognizing the early

stages of the process and declining to play along.

Wedge strategies, however effective, do not seem like a way to treat each other.

We cannot, and we ought not to, use the language of hurt, of historic injury, even of rights, to try to finesse away the fact that when we're talking about same-sex marriage in the church, we're arguing about how we ought to live. We're arguing about ideals of behavior, about what the shape of holy living ought to be in the light of conscience, scripture, doctrine, and Christian history. And that is always a legitimate thing to do. I think it behooves those of us who have changed our minds to continue to show our own working rather than to talk about bigotry. Therein lies the better hope of carrying us all, as brothers and sisters, toward a more generous future.

What changed my mind on same-sex marriage was thinking about how the church—the whole body of believers spread across space and time—changes its mind historically. How it has changed; how it does change; how, in every conceivable future short of the arrival of the kingdom, it will need to go on changing, as human situations change and the Holy Spirit continues to work within us.

There are excellent reasons, always, for the church not to change. We trust it to transmit the gospel, to pass to us, down the apostolic chain of hands and voices, the precious news of redemption that was entrusted to it amid the white noise of time 2,000 years ago. We rely on it, in our decades-long lives, to speak for something more permanent than us: the steady and eternal love of God, "with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning," as the King James Bible puts it (James 1:17). All Christians have to be small c conservatives in this sense. We have something of limitless value to conserve.

And the arrival of same-sex marriage does rely, for its justification, upon a major and historic change in Christian understanding. For almost all of Christian history, almost all Christians have agreed that nonheterosexual sex is inherently sinful. It was condemned in Mosaic law, and then the condemnation was reaffirmed for the early church by the apostles. There are a lot of complications and local variations in this history, of course. From place to place and from time to time, opinions have diverged on how important a sin gay sex is relative to other sexual sins and other sins in general. Monastic and clerical subcultures have existed in which it was accepted as an activity that, kinda sorta, didn't break vows of (heterosexual)

chastity.

Yet even when it was being treated as a venial or trivial sin, it still was seen as a sin. There was no area of un-sinful gay sex corresponding to the un-sinful zone of straight sex within marriage.

And this is the underlying issue still. If gay sex is always a sin, you cannot agree that a sexual, companionate marriage between people of the same sex is fit for blessing. Because you can hallow a vow, but you can't sanctify a sin. That would be an impossibility, a self-confuting contradiction.

So, those of us who advocate for same-sex marriage as an institution the church ought to bless—or, for those of a catholic rather than a reformed disposition, ought to treat as a sacrament, a speaking sign of divine love modeled within human lives—are arguing, necessarily, for a change in the historic Christian understanding of which actions are sins. We really are. And we ought to acknowledge that that's what we're doing.

I support same-sex marriage because of something that happened in AD 48.

I value the work that's been done to nuance and contextualize the Pauline condemnations in Romans. I see that there is a specific force to Paul condemning "men who lie with men" in the context of a slave-owning rape culture where high-status men felt entitled to help themselves to human flesh of every variety. I see that this Romanized and Hellenized Jew, expanding a Hebrew message of grace and dignity into a Greco-Roman world with a grossly transactional view of sexuality, wouldn't have had before his mind's eye any models at all for relationships between men, or between women, that were marked by mutuality.

But I'm not convinced by the next step, in which it's argued that the rule against gay sex was therefore never really intended to apply to sex between loving equals. I don't think we're really saying that Paul has been misunderstood for two millennia. I think we're saying that Paul was wrong.

We're saying that, in the blending of otherworldly and human, eternal and temporary, universal and local, that occurs when God directs his burning wind through the small mind of a mortal and tells them to speak for him, Paul's views about homosexuality belong to the human part of what he spoke in God's name: the part of him doing the best he could, with the biography he had and the viewpoint he

had and the limits he had, to set in order the human implications of the great change he had been told to announce. We're saying that Paul's views on gay sex belong with his views on women wearing hats.

This is not a comfortable position. At least, it ought not to be. As any conservative will point out, it could be warped into a license to discard anything that you, with your comfortably enlightened 21st-century views, find inconvenient in scripture.

Then again, any scriptural hermeneutic is open to distortion and exploitation. Any at all, including those that distort by insisting on an absolute literalism, as if our library of God's living and active word were a single through-composed instruction book. Interpretation has dangers, and interpretation is also inevitable.

And looking at it, I have come to realize that the process by which we come to adjust our sense of how much we should be bound by the rules of the past is not recent, not some invention of liberal modernity. It is utterly mainstream in Christian history. Changing our minds about gay sex, and therefore about the possibility of same-sex marriage, is simply a recent example. There were endless previous difficult issues, hidden now by a kind of amnesia flowing from our proper and shared small c conservatism—which, when we have achieved a necessary change, tends to restore, as the most important item for us to focus on, our sense of the long continuity of the past.

That long continuity is really there. We really do have, at the far end of our chain of hands and voices, a group of astonished men and women sharing a fish breakfast in Galilee. But the continuity is maintained—you could almost say is achieved, again and again for each generation—by adaptation and discovery.

The things our Christian forebears have had to sort out include both issues that now seem foundational to Christian understanding and those it seems bizarre, to a present understanding, that anyone could ever have gotten worked up about. A partial list would include clerical celibacy, the use of pain relief in childbirth, the acceptability of studying human anatomy, the acceptability of translating the Bible and of putting it in the hands of laypeople, praying for the dead, contraception, divorce, and whether a man can marry his deceased wife's sister. (This last one was a huge controversy in Victorian England, because it set the church's existing list of forbidden pairings directly against the story of Onan in the Old Testament, therefore pitting tradition against scripture.)

Then there is the whole complex of questions arising within the last couple of centuries over the scope for Christian action by the female half of the human race. Can women speak in church, with hats on or otherwise? Can they teach, preach, lead, minister? Can they embody Christ to a congregation, for those of us for whom the priest at the altar provides the hands that break the bread that makes the Savior known?

The biggest of all, in terms of the revolution it demanded, was slavery. Scripture contains rules for the time-limitation of bondage among the ancient Israelites and suggestions for the gentling of the master/slave relationship in the Mediterranean world that the early church was expanding into. But there is no actual condemnation of the institution of slavery in the Bible. Christians spent the first millennium and a half of the church's existence gradually arriving at the idea that Christians should perhaps not enslave other Christians, only to collapse promptly into an abyss of moral squalor in the face of the New World and its temptations.

The abolitionist movements of the 18th and 19th centuries could not point to an unambiguous and established rule against slavery as such. Instead they had to manufacture, from equally scriptural but not legal materials, a new moral consensus. They had to discover a fundamental incompatibility between the prophetic thrust of scripture toward justice and mercy and the idea of humans owning humans, between the Bible's fundamental picture of personhood and the idea of humans as commodities. And on the strength of that, they had to learn to set aside Paul sending Onesimus back to his master in Philemon.

None of us doubt now that the Holy Spirit was guiding this particular work of realization. This innovation, we are all sure, represents a necessary development of what was latent in our scripture and our doctrine all along. The scandal here is not the change but that it did not come sooner.

But other items on the list above are more ambiguous. Change often produced not a new consensus in Christian understanding but rather division, a splitting of the theoretically universal us of the church into subsets, with secular pressures and secular incentives pushing schism along. Or, since success in human institutions is not a guarantee of God's approval, change may sometimes have produced actual loss, a watering-down of the proper difficulties of faithfulness.

Where a change is being suggested, it is always possible to represent support for it as bold participation in the work of the Spirit and (simultaneously) to represent opposition to it as countercultural fidelity to the gospel. How do we tell the difference between those situations in which there is a trumpet call we must answer, those in which there is drift, and those in which there is merely difference of opinion? How do we read the messiness and ambiguity of Christian history, which is not a sign of God's absence or displeasure, given that it is always through human mess that divine love patiently acts?

I've come to think that while Christian history is messy, it has a pattern. The pattern is this: where a rule and a principle are in conflict, the principle in the end prevails. In the end, with much heat and shouting and foot-dragging and confusion, we always set aside the rule, or remake it, in order that we may live more fully by the principle.

For the sake of the principle of the equality of souls before God, we set aside scripture's rules for slavery. For the sake of the principle of compassion, we set aside Genesis's prediction (which for centuries looked like a rule) that Eve and her descendants should bring forth children in pain. For the sake of the principle that the gifts of the Spirit transcend human stereotypes and human gradients of power, we set aside the rules preventing women from answering when the Spirit calls them to minister. For the sake of the principle that only free assent to the Good News is acceptable to God, we set aside rules forcing assent and punishing dissent.

And now we have before us, in the case of same-sex marriage, a conflict between the rule distinguishing pure from impure sexual acts and the principle that all of God's adopted human children are called, on the little scale of our lives, to live in love—love that is, in miniature, like his faithful love to us, a love made exclusive by patient attention to one soul. Marriage is not a universal vocation, but it is for the majority of us the form in which as sexual beings we're called to sanctify desire.

Standing in the way of this, for the same-sex couples who are blessing the church with their unencouraged wish for our blessing, is a rule saying that some desires can't be sanctified. Irrespective of intention, irrespective of feeling, irrespective of love, those desires are just too dirty. But this does not strike me as a new problem. It strikes me as a new manifestation of an ancient problem—in fact, as a version of the very first conflict between rule and principle that the newly founded church had to deal with.

I don’t support same-sex marriage because I think it’s a rights issue (although it is) or because I want to avoid being mean to LGBTQ people. I support it because of what happened around the year AD 48.

In Acts 15, we find the church at Jerusalem wrestling with the question of whether gentile converts need to obey Mosaic law. On one side is the mass of rules that have defined righteousness hitherto, not only present in scripture but to a large extent constitutive of scripture: they’re what makes the Torah the Torah. On the other side is the palpable action of the Holy Spirit in making these awkward converts in the first place, and the new principle the apostles are still struggling to define, the one about not being able to earn your way to righteousness.

Of course, there are resources within the apostles’ Judaism that they can draw on. As well as the books of the law, there are the books of the prophets. The Lord, speaking through the mouth of Amos, for example, points out that legally punctilious behavior is no justification if you oppress the poor. And in the Torah itself, along with the detailed codification of the law there is the reduction of it to variations on only two themes: duty to God and duty to neighbor. This is the tradition within Judaism that allows you to argue with God on the basis of the principles revealed *within* rules, and ultimately to argue against the rules themselves, as many faithful and observant Jews in the last 50 years have done to find their own way to affirm LGBTQ equality.

But in AD 48, none of that gets the apostles all the way there. They have to make a leap of faith. Repeating Amos’s declaration that all other peoples may seek the Lord but essentially acting on the apostles’ own authority, the council at Jerusalem releases all gentile converts from having to obey the circumcision rules, the food rules, and the temple offering rules.

They retain the rules, which seem to them to be self-evident, against eating meat with blood in it or meat that has been sacrificed to idols, and also against “sexual immorality.” What two married ladies or two married gentlemen might do in bed together still falls within that last category. But the principle has been affirmed, and acted upon, that a large part of the previous apparatus for segregating pure and impure actions can be set aside in favor of a new vision of holy living that attends, instead, to intentions.

This means that for many small changes related to bodily self-regulation, you don't need to refer to a table of permitted and forbidden. You just need to ask what you intend and whether you are furthering by it the work of love, the work of redemption. The apostles are likely remembering Jesus telling them that it's not what goes into your body that makes you holy, it's what comes out: thoughts, words, and acts. They have known Emmanuel, God-with-us; the world has been transformed; everything is different.

Well, "everything." Like most people grappling with an enormous change, they are uncertain of its contours and its proper limits. The transformation stops when it comes up against the limits of what they can imagine God wants. Obviously, God cannot want the actual Commandments to be overthrown: he is not becoming relaxed about murder and adultery. Equally obvious, to those gathered in Jerusalem, God still cannot approve of rare steak, and he cannot have become okay with that nasty sodomy stuff. All that going-off-to-the-gym-and-getting-rubbed-down-with-olive-oil that the Greeks like to do? New Greek Christians had better stop that *right now*.

Yet the revolution of principle has been achieved, to bear slow and gradual fruit in Christian history; to test our rules, over the centuries, according to whether they allow people to pursue the difficult and astonishing work of love. To make us ask, when we come across acts that we may ourselves not be tempted by any more than the apostles in Jerusalem wanted to go off and eat shrimp, not "Is this dirty?" but "Can this be done with love?"

My sense is that by moving toward a Christian acceptance of same-sex marriage, we are continuing the unfinished Christian revolution of replacing purity codes with calls to holiness of intention. My sense is that by deciding that gay sex is neither inherently sinful nor inherently good—but is, like much of human behavior, a neutral domain where both virtues and vices can flourish—we're opening up a possibility that has always been latent within our doctrine of marriage. We're saying that the particular combination of genitalia doesn't matter very much compared to the blessing and the challenge of trying to love another person as God loves us.

That's my sense. That's why I changed my mind. But who am I? Nobody very important is the answer. Certainly not someone with the right to decide on behalf of other Christians or to speak for Christians as a whole.

But I am part of us. I am part of the enormous granular mass of Christians past and present and future, dead and living and to come, who, no doubt with heat and confusion and many missteps, are called collectively to discern the will of God. Whether you imagine that process as being hierarchical when seen close-up or egalitarian, it remains one in which truth is emergent over time and grows in us together like yeast. The apostolic council is always in session. We are the apostolic council. What are we being called to?

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “From rules to principles.”