

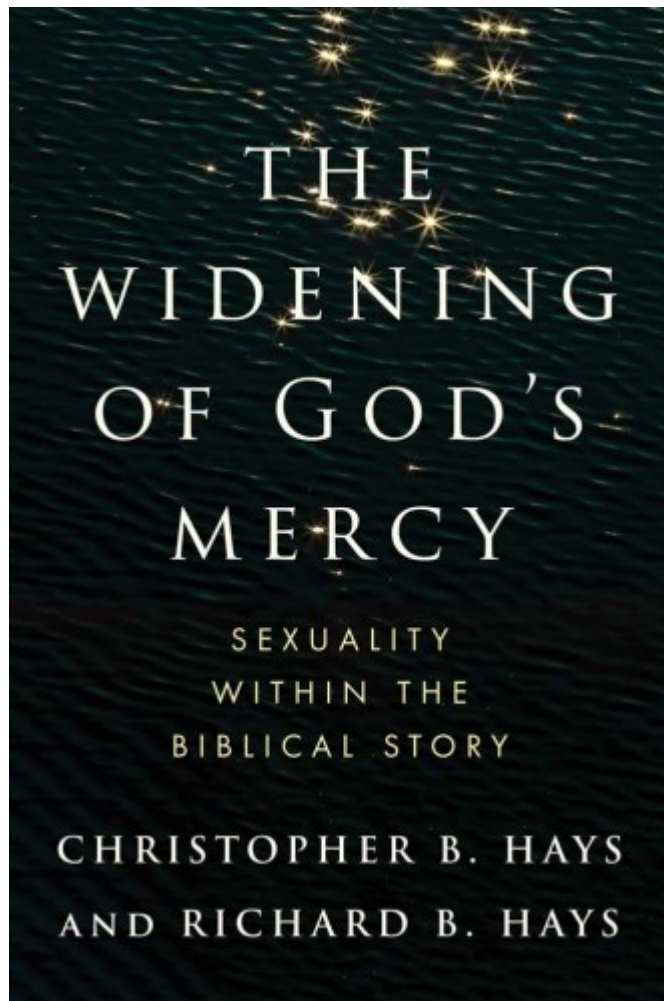
The unsettling surprise of God's mercy

Father-son duo Richard and Christopher Hays set aside their old positions in favor of a more expansive view of biblically faithful queer inclusion.

by [Keri Ladner](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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In Review



The Widening of God's Mercy

Sexuality within the Biblical Story

By Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays

Yale University Press

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Should Christians who uphold the Bible as the word of God have to choose between love of God and love of the queer people in their lives? While the answer may seem obvious to most readers of this magazine, to many Christian it isn't at all obvious. In posing the question, I am reminded of an openly gay teenage boy I knew whose parents sent him to an evangelical school. His classmates probably did not realize the psychological and spiritual harm they were causing him when they lobbed Bible verses at him like grenades. They were children themselves—well-mannered, well-intentioned ones—who were doing what the well-intentioned (albeit misguided) adults in their lives had taught them to do.

In *The Widening of God's Mercy*, father-son duo Richard and Christopher Hays provide what those parents needed: an argument that biblically faithful Christians cannot exclude queer people from the mercy of God. We cannot block God's mercy, nor should we give in to the tribalistic identities that compel us to try. God's mercy is expansive enough for all.

Richard, a retired Duke Divinity School professor of New Testament, is author of the 1996 book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, which has been cited extensively in arguments against queer inclusion in the church. He acknowledges the harm that book has caused to the church and to queer people, and he presents *The Widening of God's Mercy* as a "comprehensive rethinking of the way in which the Bible might speak to these matters." Christopher, his son, is a PCUSA minister and a professor of Old Testament at Fuller Seminary, an evangelical bastion that, despite more progressive stances on some issues, has resisted LGBTQ inclusion. He identifies several flaws in his father's past arguments, while also admitting that he has been "too often silent" as he's watched Fuller move away from inclusion.

The Hayses acknowledge that their formerly held positions contrast with God's mercy, writing with a humility that builds trust with readers. However, their central argument has surprisingly little to do with queer rights, which they discuss in only a handful of pages. They intentionally avoid the six famous passages that seem to specifically preclude queer people from the fellowship of God's people, describing

the repetitive debates on these texts as “superficial and boring”:

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. But drawing conclusions based only on these passages 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.

Focusing only on certain texts, the Hayeses argue, can obscure the big picture: the continuously expansive divine mercy that is revealed through the biblical story.

In this way, *The Widening of God’s Mercy* is about much more than how Christians can be biblically faithful while blessing the queer people they love. The argument about God’s mercy being extended to sexual and gender minorities comes almost as a side note, and there are similar side notes regarding foreigners and others who have traditionally been excluded from God’s people. The main character in this book is God, not any human system or practice of exclusion. “God repeatedly reveals an expansive mercy that embraces ever wider circles of people,” they write, “including those previously deemed in some way alien or unworthy. Furthermore, again and again, God’s widening mercy comes as an unsettling surprise to those who had thought of themselves as God’s most resolutely faithful followers.”

The Hayeses portray a dynamic God who is moved by human suffering, including the suffering caused by God’s own people following God’s own laws.

The authors’ argument about the ever-increasing expansiveness of God’s mercy is rooted in the idea of a God who is not immutable but is affected by temporal, human events. Pointing out numerous biblical instances in which God changes his mind, the Hayeses argue that “the Bible doesn’t portray God as static; instead, it tells stories that portray God as a mysterious, dynamic, personal power who can and does change his mind and reveal new and surprising facets of his will.” This version of God may remind readers of process theology, but the Hayeses rely instead on the thought of Karl Barth to portray the biblical God as deeply personal: “God repeatedly changes his mind in ways that expand the sphere of his love, preserve his relationship with humankind, and protect and show mercy toward them.”

The Widening of God's Mercy is concise, well written, and accessible to readers who lack formal theological training. By maintaining faithfulness to the biblical text without disregarding any part of it, the authors present an approach that many Christians will find palatable as they discern the meaning of scripture in today's world. It helps answer difficult questions about why God is presented by the biblical authors as both loving toward all and vindictive. It will also be inviting to the many queer Christians who want to reconcile their biblically informed faith with their sexual or gender identities. It allows readers to engage with a dynamic God who is moved by human suffering, including the suffering caused by God's own people following God's own laws.

However, readers whose faith insists on divine immutability will be challenged by the idea that God's embrace can broaden over time. The Hayses replace the immutability doctrine with an approach to scripture that allows biblically faithful Christians to welcome those whom the church has previously disregarded. Some readers may conclude from this that the only biblically faithful way to welcome sexual and gender minorities is to abandon divine immutability, which may lead them into a doctrinal tailspin. Evangelical readers in particular would do well to approach this book with open minds and a willingness to entertain uncomfortable ideas about God's mercy—as well as to engage with other perspectives on how God's people can openly embrace and bless the queer individuals in their lives.