

Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*: A Review Essay

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Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story*

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This book's existence is big news. Since the 1970s, prominent evangelicals have been changing their minds and coming out in support of same-gender relationships—peaking around 2013–2015 (i.e., from Steve Chalke to Tony Campolo).² Last year, and in his last year of this life, New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays joined this

1. I extend my sympathy to Richard Hays's family, including Christopher Hays, and all those who loved him. His passing is a major loss to biblical scholarship and Christian ethics, and his work will continue to resonate as he rests in peace before rising in glory. This review was essentially written before Richard's death. I now dedicate it both to Richard and to the LGBTQIA+ community to whom he dedicated his last academic work.
2. Earlier affirming evangelical pioneers included the Metropolitan Community Church and Troy Perry, Evangelicals Concerned and Ralph Blair; the Evangelical Women's Caucus and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott and Letha Dawson Scanzoni; Michael Vasey; and (some

line, as undoubtedly the person who had done the most prominent work for the other side. For decades, Hays was a leading authority for evangelical arguments against same-gender relationships—Tom Wright has called Hays’s work ‘still the best short treatment available’.³ Hays announced his changed position by announcing this book, co-written with his son, Old Testament scholar Christopher B. Hays. The announcement was met variously with celebration, curiosity, calls for reparation, accusations of heresy, and analysis of how this would change the state of play in academia and churches.⁴

The book’s content is somewhat different from expectations. It was announced as being about affirming LGBTQIA + realities, based on an argument that God has changed God’s mind, supported by an account of the overall narrative of Scripture as a story of God’s expanding mercy. That summary is not exactly inaccurate, but the order of emphasis should certainly be reversed.

In fact, regardless of views on either LGBTQIA + affirmation or divine (im)mutability, I hope most Christians could agree with most of what the book says. Aside from an introduction, final chapter, and epilogue directly addressing same-gender relationships, the book is a detailed biblical theology showing the central theme of God’s unfolding and widening mercy through both Testaments. Mercy is defined, biblically, as God’s character and action of ‘passionate, steadfast ... all-encompassing, restorative love’.⁵ Citing Jesus citing Hosea—‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’⁶—they suggest Jesus views ‘mercy as the overriding message of Scripture ... the key that unlocks’ its meaning.⁷

Across a wide variety of biblical texts (with OT chapters 1–7 by Christopher and NT chapters 8–16 by Richard), the Hayses survey various ways they see God’s mercy challenging and changing things. Recurring messages they draw from Scripture include:

- God’s character and core actions, including creation and Jesus’ ministry, are centrally about mercy and justice (chapters 1, 9–10).

of) the Gay Christian Network and Justin Lee. Caleb M. Day, ‘Evangelicals Who Affirm Same-Gender Relationships’ (2024), <https://bit.ly/affirmingevangelicals>.

3. Brandon Robertson, ‘EXCLUSIVE: N.T. Wright Speaks About His New Book!’, *Nomad* (1 June 2014), <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/revangelical/2014/06/01/exclusive-n-t-wright-speaks-about-his-new-book.html>.
4. Jonathan Merritt, ‘Conservative Christians Just Lost Their Scholarly Trump Card on Same-Sex Relationships’, *Religion News Service* (8 April 2024), <https://religionnews.com/2024/04/08/conservative-christians-just-lost-their-scholarly-trump-card-on-same-sex-relationships/>; Andrew Goddard, ‘Is God “Willing to Change His Mind” (Richard Hays) on Sexual Ethics?’, *Psephizo* (9 April 2024), <https://www.psephizo.com/sexuality-2/is-god-willing-to-change-his-mind-richard-hays-on-sexual-ethics/>; Madison McClendon, ‘Queer Folks Are Used to Having to Come to Terms with Workers Who Come Late to the Vineyard’, *Baptist News Global* (17 May 2024), <https://baptistnews.com/article/queer-folks-are-used-to-having-to-come-to-terms-with-workers-who-come-late-to-the-vineyard/>.
5. Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, *The Widening of God’s Mercy: Sexuality Within the Biblical Story* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), pp. 18, 133–34.
6. Matt. 9.13, cf. Hos. 6.6; Matt. 12.7. Biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised*.
7. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, p. 134.

- God has always been far more internationalist than popularly believed, with a long salvation history towards other peoples (chaps. 5, 7, 11, 12–16). This includes Richard’s five-chapter treatment of the early church’s full inclusion of Gentiles (chaps. 12–16)—the specific contribution here is situating this as the culmination of a story across both Testaments.
- God intervenes to reform unjust traditions and rules (chaps. 3, 15)—even God’s own previous rules (chaps. 4, 5, 7)—in the direction of mercy/justice.
- God changes course, repents, and does ‘new things’, often (but, notably, not always) in the direction of mercy/justice (chaps. 2, 6, 12–15).⁸

Throughout, particular attention is paid to God including and uplifting those who have been excluded and given low status—even when that exclusion and low status have also seemingly been by God’s instruction. Foreigners and Gentiles receive the most attention among these excluded or devalued groups, but they also address women (chap. 3) and eunuchs (chaps. 7, 12). As with Jesus towards the Pharisees, they suggest God sometimes calls us to ‘rethink ... restrictive scruples’ impeding God’s merciful character and intent.⁹ This often scandalises ‘God’s [self-styled] most resolutely faithful followers’.¹⁰

The Hayeses suggest this merciful revision is not just God’s intention, but also God’s practice: they sometimes describe this as God ‘changing his mind’ (passim). Nonetheless, most of their biblical theology of God’s unfolding mercy could remain intact without asserting divine mutability.

The Hayeses present this biblical theology as their argument for LGBTQIA+¹¹ affirmation. Yet they give little attention to specific ethical questions of LGBTQIA + affirmation—in contrast to their detailed theological-ethical argumentation on including foreigners. This is, of course, deliberate. The Hayeses lambast most biblical ethics on same-gender relationships as ‘superficial’, ‘boring’ and, more importantly, ‘red herrings [that] distract us from the character of God’ which should be central in ethics.¹² They opt to address LGBTQIA + questions sidelong, focusing on an overall message about God’s character and action¹³—a message essentially equivalent to that of the hymn that inspires the book’s title.¹⁴

8. For a fuller précis of chapters, see Caleb M. Day, ‘Hays and Hays Review: Trimmings’, *Rejoice and Complain* (31 January 2025), <https://rejoiceandcomplain.wordpress.com/2025/01/31/hays-review-trimmings>.

9. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, p. 134.

10. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, p. 206.

11. The Hayeses are somewhat noncommittal about whether their argument includes trans people, but they sometimes use the ‘LGBTQ’ category or mention ‘sexual minorities’ (*Widening*, pp. 17, 19, 98, 214, 216).

12. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 2, 12.

13. Karen Keen contrasts the book’s ‘divine character approach’ to a ‘direct subject approach’. Karen R. Keen, ‘Preston Sprinkle vs. Richard Hays’, *Bible, Sexuality, & Gender* (19 October 2024), <https://biblesexgender.substack.com/p/preston-sprinkle-vs-richard-hays>.

14. Frederick William Faber, ‘There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy’, *Hymnary.org* (1862), https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_wideness_in_gods_mercy.

Many will likely find this enough: namely, those who already considered the same-gender relationships prohibition harmful, but who grudgingly believe Scripture clearly presents it as God's unchanging and binding will for all humankind. Richard suggests he, previously, fit this description. For such people, this book may provide the last conceptual puzzle piece they need to embrace the affirming stance they believe is most consistent with the God they know, notwithstanding what a few texts say.¹⁵

But many readers of this journal will want more specific moral argumentation for LGBTQIA + affirmation. If changes of mind (ours and/or God's) are part of Christian ethics, why *this* change *now*?

Specifically, the Hayeses' move from 'welcoming' to 'affirming' is underdeveloped.¹⁶ The Hayeses articulate LGBTQIA + affirmation as fully including LGBTQIA + persons in the church's life. However, including gay people has been part of the non-affirming 'consensus position' for decades.¹⁷ Thus, an argument for welcoming is not a sufficient argument for affirming. The Hayeses apparently believe genuine welcome requires affirming—they suggest full participation in church includes 'covenanted unions'.¹⁸ But they do not provide full arguments for this position. They only touch on potentially weighty arguments about the Spirit's presence among (non-celibate) LGBTQIA + Christians,¹⁹ suffering caused by the Church's extant non-affirming stance,²⁰ and logical implications of biblical teachings,²¹ alongside some other perfunctory comments.

Readers expecting specific engagement (retraction, revision, or expansion) with Richard's former arguments will also be disappointed. Indeed, the book simplifies his earlier contributions, only mentioning his 1996 chapter in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.²² The full story of Richard's influential public output on homoeroticism lasts from 1986 to 2014.²³ But even the *Moral Vision* chapter is not dealt with thoroughly. The book also has little engagement with Richard's overall biblical-ethical methodology in *Moral Vision*. Richard hoped to write a further essay connecting the two books' methods, but I am not aware he managed this in the time he had left.²⁴

15. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, p. 221.

16. To use the standard distinction at least since the 1990s US Baptist debate between Welcoming and Affirming Baptists and, e.g., Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

17. Mark Vasey-Saunders, *Defusing the Sexuality Debate: Anglican Evangelicals in Conflict* (London: SCM Press, 2023).

18. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 5, 207, 216–17.

19. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 5, 10, 213–14.

20. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 5, 67–69.

21. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 18, 221.

22. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 7–8 and passim.

23. Helpfully surveyed in Goddard, 'Change His Mind?'

24. Richard B. Hays and Karen R. Keen, 'Karen Keen Interviews Richard Hays on the Bible and Sexuality', *YouTube* (2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUxw4S08Bg0>.

As others have noted,²⁵ *Moral Vision*'s method does offer materials for arguing for LGBTQIA + liberation. In his last public appearance, Richard mentions needing to further develop his *Moral Vision* contention that the 'paradigm' (narrative) 'mode of ethical discourse' in Scripture is primary over the rule or principle 'modes'.²⁶ The Hayses' argument is grounded in narratives showing God's character and choices to act with mercy, justice, love, and willingness to do 'new things'—and the challenge to 'analogically' apply such narratives, guided by the Holy Spirit's work in our communities.²⁷ However, as noted, analogically linking this to LGBTQIA + affirmation is precisely where their argument is weakest. Without more specific argumentation, they have, in practice, moved into 'principle' mode, with mercy as the central principle. I am not sure how well their argument here withstands Richard's critique that broad principles, like love or liberation, can 'cover a multitude of sins' without specific mooring to biblical narrative.²⁸

Others²⁹ trace a more specific narrative, a trajectory away from patriarchal gender norms, based on Richard's three 'focal images', especially new creation.³⁰ *Moral Vision*-era Richard *did* pursue a narrative-mode argument positing a trajectory against patriarchy in Christ and in new creation where 'there is no longer male and female',³¹—but applied to male–female equality only.³² Neither then nor now have the Hayses widened this gender trajectory to include others harmed by oppressive heteropatriarchal norms regarding 'male and female'. The 1990s Richard addressed the same-gender relationships prohibition separately, as effectively a rule (via other 'modes of discourse'), grounded in first creation, undisrupted by new creation's 'no more' to gender-based restrictions.³³

25. Beginning with Rowan Williams upon reading a draft of *Moral Vision* (Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 246–47 n. 2).

26. Hays and Keen, 'Interviews'; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 208–209, 293–95, 303, 310, 367.

27. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 212, 219–20, 222–23, and *passim*.

28. Hays and Keen, 'Interviews'; Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 144–46, 200–204.

29. E.g., mentioned in a footnote (p. 147 n. 2): J. R. Daniel Kirk, 'The Moral Vision of LGBTQ Inclusion: Community, Cross, New Creation', in David M. Moffitt and Isaac Augustine Morales (eds.), *A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven: Essays on Christology and Ethics in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).

30. Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 193–200.

31. Gal. 3:28.

32. Richard B. Hays, *New Testament Ethics: The Story Retold*, J. J. Thiessen Lectures 19 (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1998), pp. 71–72, 77, 79–80, <http://archive.org/details/newtestamentethi0000hays>.

33. Hays, *New Testament Ethics*, p. 72; Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 385–86, 393–96, 402–403, 404–405 n. 21, 405 n. 27. In his final public appearance, Hays acknowledges having looked too narrowly for how paradigms could speak to same-gender relationships, and, finding nothing, concluded we must 'fall back on the rules'. Hays and Keen, 'Interviews'.

Applying the anti-patriarchy trajectory to LGBTQIA + liberation requires tracing how patriarchal gender norms have undergirded almost all opposition to sexual/gender minority realities throughout history—including the terms and concepts employed in the biblical texts.³⁴ The Hayeses do not scrutinise or analyse these gender norms and their widespread resonance—even as they follow the widening mercy towards eunuchs from Deuteronomy through Isaiah to Acts. Curiously, they ignore Jesus' comments on eunuchs,³⁵ which mention additional categories of eunuchs—including people we may consider intersex or transgender today.³⁶ A Christocentric, new creation trajectory of 'widening mercy' on gender, away from patriarchal norms that oppress all but hegemonically masculine straight cisgender men, was there for the grasping.

However, such an argument requires frank acknowledgement of where biblical texts reflect gender norms of their human contexts. Richard was never comfortable with assuming we can identify what comes from flawed human understanding in Scripture. He was concerned such critique can disrespect both the text's divine authority and its human, enculturated form.³⁷ These concerns demand serious attention. However, it is striking how the Hayeses seem more comfortable with God correcting God's mistakes than with biblical readers correcting biblical authors' mistakes. Personally, I am more comfortable attributing hetero-patriarchal oppression to human biblical authors than, effectively, to God, by talking of God changing their mind.³⁸

Others with more systematic-theological knowledge will no doubt address the issues around divine (im)mutability. I will only note my discomfort with the apparent implication that God changed their mind towards mercy at some point, but had supported non-mercy previously. The Hayeses present their ethic as being about God's character, but that sounds like quite a capricious character.³⁹

Whether just people or also God require change, the Hayeses' comprehensive biblical argument for inclusion—specifically including foreigners and sexual minorities—is powerful. It is certainly timely, as hostility and moral panic towards migrants and trans people grows ever more culturally and politically ascendant.

Nonetheless, I wondered if a focus on oppression, alongside exclusion, would have been more fruitful. There is, of course, significant moral discourse on oppression and liberation in biblical narrative. Oppression can co-exist with inclusion, and in some

34. Restricting myself to one citation here, see Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998).

35. Matt. 19:12.

36. See discussion and citations at Caleb M. Day, 'Imperial Hybridity in the Early Christian "Symbolic Eunuch" Reading of Matt. 19:12', *Academia.edu* (14 April 2016), pp. 2–4, https://www.academia.edu/31782648/Imperial_hybridity_in_the_early_Christian_symbolic_eunuch_reading_of_Matt_19_12.

37. Hays, *Moral Vision*, pp. 299–303; Hays, *New Testament Ethics*, pp. 12–15, 18–19, 71–72, 77, 79–80.

38. I use they/them pronouns for God; the Hayeses use masculine pronouns, following current standard practice, Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 20–21.

39. A capricious God is explicitly *not* the authors' intent (Hays and Keen, 'Interviews'), but the book does not clearly answer such concerns.

contexts, exclusion can be liberatory or at least a survival strategy.⁴⁰ It is not clear that ‘including outsiders’ is always the best framing for matters like endorsing an emperor.⁴¹ Attention to experiences and analyses of oppression would have perhaps enabled more focused attention to what harms people and how God’s mercy liberates. Perhaps more engagement with liberation movements (decolonial, feminist, LGBTQIA+) could have helped them more precisely identify dynamics of oppression and trace liberating biblical trajectories on both national boundaries and gender norms.

Indeed, the Hayeses engage little with LGBTQIA+ voices, and they will leave many people dissatisfied with how they have discharged their responsibilities towards the LGBTQIA+ community: an important matter of concern from when the book was first announced.⁴²

This includes Richard’s articulation of the harm his previous work caused, which is more equivocal than Christopher’s. Richard also devotes attention to contextualising and explaining his past position and intentions. Richard presents his past arguments as a tentative ‘proposal’ or ‘thought experiment’ intended to provoke discussion, and suggests it has been misinterpreted as a conclusive judgment,⁴³ giving ideological cover for harmful Christian teaching and practice.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Richard acknowledges his past writing caused ‘harm to many’,⁴⁵ and takes responsibility for intellectual and moral failure underlying his work and his slowness to change.⁴⁶ He likens himself to Pharisees sieving out gnats while remaining ‘silent’ on ‘weightier matters’.⁴⁷ He admits to ‘blindness’ in his interpretation; prioritising his ‘own intellectual project’ over the suffering of gay Christians and ‘patient listening’ to them; and ‘fear that [Richard] was using [his celibate gay friend Gary] as a prop for [Richard’s] own theoretical construction’.⁴⁸

These are serious admissions, taking humility and bravery. Richard apologises and says he is repenting, needing mercy, and offering the book as ‘contrition’ and perhaps ‘some help’.⁴⁹ He wanted to get this repentance on the record, not least as an example of how to ‘say I was wrong’ and ‘seek forgiveness’.⁵⁰ Reparations are mentioned in relation to Zaccheus and complicity in slavery.⁵¹ Richard was no doubt also considering carefully what repair means in relation to his own repentance.⁵²

40. They hint at this at Hays and Hays, *Widening*, p. 171.

41. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 80–81.

42. Some tweets from biblical scholars retaining X accounts at time of writing: <https://x.com/MattThiessenNT/status/1776646160943390845>; <https://x.com/idouTheHoke/status/1776960595444580482>.

43. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 9–10; see also the epilogue.

44. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 10–11.

45. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 223–24.

46. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 223–25.

47. Matt. 23:23; Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 126, 134, 223.

48. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 223–25.

49. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 223, 225–26.

50. Hays and Keen, ‘Interviews’.

51. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 136, 237–38 n. 7.

52. McClendon, ‘Late to the Vineyard’.

Those who were harmed by Richard's past work and its reception history may well have wanted different contributions from him: more unequivocal disavowing of his past statements and ownership of his role in the ensuing interpretation; less focus on his own new argument that he believes offers the way forward. They may have appreciated more 'passing the microphone' to others who have been arguing for LGBTQIA + inclusion and liberation before and after the Hayeses.

The Hayeses could have cited and built on work by LGBTQIA + evangelicals, such as Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (with Letha Dawson Scanzoni) on God's work inviting us to transcend God's laws; Justin Lee on the 'spirit of the law' and 'missing the forest for the trees'; Matthew Vines on the implications of celibacy as a call for some and the harms of enforced singleness for others; Vicky Beeching on not calling 'unclean' those whom God has declared 'clean'; and Karen Keen on biblical deliberative processes sometimes leading to revising rules.⁵³

They also could have offered due respect to the views of gay Christians who disagree with the Hayeses' affirming perspective, including offering full arguments against such views. Neither 'Side B' (accepting LGB identities but not same-gender relationships)⁵⁴ nor Sides 'Y' or 'X' (more strongly opposing LGB identities and orientations alongside relationships)⁵⁵ are even mentioned as options sincerely held by non-heterosexual Christians.

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53. Keen is thanked for commenting on a draft (*Widening*, p. ix), but her work—which Richard read in detail during his rethinking process—is not cited. Letha Dawson Scanzoni and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor?: Another Christian View* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1978), chap. 2, https://archive.org/details/ishomosexualmyne00scan_0; Justin Lee, *Torn: Rescuing the Gospel from the Gays-vs.-Christians Debate*, reprint edn (New York: Jericho Books, 2013), chap. 13; Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian: The Biblical Case in Support of Same-Sex Relationships* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014), chap. 3; Vicky Beeching, *Undivided: Coming Out, Becoming Whole, and Living Free from Shame* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), chaps. 20–21; Karen R. Keen, *Scripture, Ethics, and the Possibility of Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), chaps 4–6; Karen R. Keen, 'Richard Hays' Last Word', *Bible, Sex, & Gender* (5 January 2025), <https://biblesexgender.substack.com/p/richard-hays-last-word-video>.
 54. E.g. Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010); Eve Tushnet, *Gay and Catholic: Accepting My Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2014); David Bennett, *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018); Bridget Eileen Rivera, *Heavy Burdens: Seven Ways LGBTQ Christians Experience Harm in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021).
 55. E.g. Christopher Yuan, *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel: Sex, Desire, and Relationships Shaped by God's Grand Story* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2018); Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *Five Lies of Our Anti-Christian Age* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023); Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?: And Other Questions about Homosexuality, the Bible and Same-Sex Attraction* (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2013); Jackie Hill

Thus, the late Richard Hays and Christopher Hays have channelled their considerable biblical-scholarly prowess into an evocative biblical theology that may help some people take the final step into LGBTQIA + affirmation. However, their inattention to LGBTQIA + liberation movements and analysis and their dabbling with divine mutability will leave many LGBTQIA + people, Christian ethicists, and theologians dissatisfied.⁵⁶

David Bennett

I always look forward to reading a book which could convince me and theologically justify a permanent, stable gay union or gay marriage according to the scriptural revelation of God. When this book appeared, I thought it might fit the bill. The book, however, left the reader deeply disappointed on a biblical, theological, and pastoral level.

The opening lines convey the central thesis of the book, which has little to do with sexuality directly.⁵⁷ Citing 1 Sam. 15.29, which says that God is ‘not a mortal, that he should change his mind’, we are, then, told that this verse is a lie. God does change even if the text reports that he does not. I was hoping that the Hayses would attempt revisionist arguments like those of E. P. Sanders or William Loader who argue that Scripture condemns same-sex activity *tout court*.⁵⁸ Instead, they simply disagree with Scripture because of experience and reason.

In contrast, for the Hayses, God has a mercy which expands infinitely—it is difficult to locate the limit when it comes to justice or holiness. God’s holiness is close to ignored. It is good news that God changes his mind and widens his mercy. The objection, ‘What is preventing God from changing his mind again and closing off this mercy, rescinding all of his promises?’ is not rebutted. The god depicted here is far from the scriptural God who is ever-faithful and does not cruelly deceive those who trust his word and law, but clearly communicates that he is loved by keeping his commands (Jn 14.15-24).

Instead, something far stranger happens with the Hayses’ argument for ‘widening mercy’. They construct their own open theistic systematic theology (which is curiously far from the wheel-house of biblical scholars) from the text to tell us that God simply changes apart from Jesus’ affirmation of the Old Testament Law as good (Mt. 5.17-20, 20.3).⁵⁹ Moses, Paul, and others learned to change with God even if Jesus affirms the

Perry, *Gay Girl, Good God: The Story of Who I Was, and Who God Has Always Been* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2018).

56. Thanks to Robert Song, David Bennett, and an anonymous person for reading a draft, and for their comments and conversations which helped improve this review.
57. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 1, 2–22; in this section we are given the vital information to read in light of Christopher Hays’s journey at Fuller and Richard Hays’s reflection on the past. Christopher covers the Old Testament and Richard, the New.
58. See William R. G. Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013); William R. G. Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); E. P. Sanders, *Paul: The Apostle’s Life, Letters, and Thought* (Augsburg: Fortress, 2015), pp. 335–74, 727–47.
59. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 28–31; see the critique of Jonathan Edwards, ‘Edward’s god is a philosopher’s god; His god creates out of logical necessity’. In this quotation, we detect a

importance of the Law for his disciples. Littered with proof-texts taken out of context (Ezek. 20.25; Jn 16.12-15) and strange platitudes which fire at Jonathan Edwards and certain systematic theologies which are not open theist, and facile phrases like 'God don't create junk', the book leaves the reader shocked, wondering where the Hayeses are leading us.⁶⁰

From the outset it became difficult to see how the Hayeses were avoiding an Antinomianism or Marcionism which undermines the Mosaic Law's good and spiritual authority to teach us what sin is, especially when known through Jesus, the prophets' witness, and Gentile inclusion (Rom. 3.20-31; Gal. 3.21). Instead, they construct two of the law-bound and the 'free in grace' factions in the early church in an outmoded Lutheran way (pitting James against the Pauline view of grace).⁶¹ Similarly to Douglas Campbell, we are told that we can know the Gospel in a way better than Paul who still affirmed the Jewish Law's goodness in forming the Gentile believer's sexual life.⁶² Instead, the antinomian contrast that the Law is bad and grace is good wins in their thinking in a way that felt staggering for such well-reputed scholars of Scripture.

The Pauline notion that Gentiles have to obey Jewish sexual ethics and flee sexual immorality defined by them (1 Cor. 8.18; 2 Tim. 2.2; 1 Thess. 4.3-6) is largely missing. Unlike food laws and circumcision, the notion that the creational ordinance and Noahide laws which refer to how the human body and land are cursed by sin, sexual immorality and idolatry, as Paul outlines in Romans 1 and in 1 Cor. 6.8 are all but ignored, severing the vital link between the moral theology of Old and New Testaments (some of the echoes Hays senior has helped us to see) which Acts 15 maintains carefully in light of the freedom given to Gentiles not to live under Mosaic laws designed to define Jewish distinction and identity. While they attempt to draw on a certain flexibility in the Old and New Testaments, we are given a close to supersessionist picture where the Gentile church lives on its own lights, rather than as a body humbly grafted into the Israel of believing Jews, which seeks to honour God's covenant with Israel, and the moral guidance of the Law on sexual morality intended for all people who dwell with Israel in the Church.

bitter tone which does not give us developed reasons for why classical theism is to be discarded except for that arbitrary and historicist insistence that the god of classical theism is like a 'solar deity'. Little theological attention is given to the fact that the patristic deposit and tradition have maintained some loose view of classical theism, with helpful departures from this for their argument.

60. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 36, 29–33, 229–30, 152–75; see how the widening of covenant belonging for Gentiles, eunuchs, and others in terms of baptism is confused with a change in the meaning of the term '*porneia*' on p. 174. Gentile distinction is blurred with the call for Gentile holiness.
61. See particularly the chapter on 'Blocking God' which accuses those who refuse a progressive view of grace so as not to undermine the Law as 'blocking God' rather than living in the tension of radical inclusion and radical holiness Jesus and Paul uphold: Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 168–75.
62. See Douglas A. Campbell, 'Missional Diversity', in idem, *Pauline Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020).

The notion that God subjects his creatures to the effects of the decay and frustration with no redemptive plan is all but a denial of the Gospel (Rom. 8.20). No reference is given to the evangelical reality that human sexual orientation is subject to decay and frustration and little work is done in showing how same-sex desire is in some way a likely product of that subjection. Very little is given on the originally good but incomplete creation, and that the differentiation of sex within creation was made to reflect a future reality of union between God and humanity; bride of Christ and Christ. Instead, we are to choose between complete affirmation or entire abnegation of same-sex expression as disordered. Other models, developed by gay Christians of Side A and Side B persuasions, are available which avoid these pitfalls; the Hayeses seem very unaware of these developments. For them, the exegesis on questions of sexuality has not changed, but God has. The link between scriptural revelation and God, the Torah, and the God of Torah has been severed. Instead, another 'overarching story' can be told, which Christopher and Richard Hays have the knowledge of and which they see apart from the moral guidance and authority of God's own self-revelation as Scripture tells it, and two millennia of church reflection and wrestling have denied.

What this book conveyed is that the doctrine of God (the story we tell about God) and the ethics of God (the way we are called to live in light of the revelation of this God) are directly linked. If we compromise one, then, the other is impacted directly. What the Hayeses' book dangerously opens its readers up to is a particular kind of voluntarism (defining reality according to desire which has not been transformed or tested) that any systematic theologian and ethicist worth their salt must be very careful to resist; that is the danger of making God in the image of one's own will and desire, especially in the face of the theodicean challenge of same-sex desire, and the mystery of God and sexuality. All hermeneutics must be shaped by prayerful connection to Christ and his spirit who helps us pray, 'not my will but yours be done' and who, through his incarnation, affirmed the creation, including our bodies, marriage, and sexual difference as good features of the world. The book omits that we are called to an inner self-denial or as Augustine describes, descent in humility, which is incarnational in shape. Only when we humble ourselves, can we find the through-line of God's ethical self-revelation and read the Scriptures in a way so that it does not become dead law or dogma or a revised idol of our own voluntarist self-deception which not just misleads LGBTQI+ people, but harms the faithful witness of the Church. The book does not guard against or show much concern for such deathly pitfalls.

God's subjection of creation involves diverse effects, including the reality of gay orientation among other unchosen differences like gender dysphoria or intersex conditions (Rom. 8.20). The 'born that way' or 'created that way' discourse is old hat, and theologically unsatisfying. Queerness begs the deeper question of how gay orientation is differently aligned or misaligned with God's created order.⁶³ This difference generates

63. David Bennett, 'Queering the Queer: An Exploration of How Gay Celibate Asceticism Can Renew and Inform the Role of Desire in Contemporary Anglican Theology', DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:be6ad708-3f2b-47d9-b9c9-dfb942a053ff> (accessed 10 February 2025), pp. 79–128.

our queerness and, without it, we are just like straight people (except maybe sociologically where our difference is oppressively maligned). Instead, we are different because our orientation is misaligned with this originary vision of humanity and God's creational ordinance for sexuality. Instead of showing compassion in this struggle and rejoicing in the gift, we are told 'you are made this way'. That comes across as a platitude which I would not expect from such esteemed scholars claiming to wager responsibly on such sacred ground.

Supplementary to this, the Side B or gay celibate Christian is cast as the weak brother or sister who is 'rule-bound', whereas the gay-marriage affirming person or Side A Christian is stronger in grace and liberty.⁶⁴ However, Paul is clear that the mature brother or sister learns to give up their life against their own untested desires when it comes not just to *porneia* or sexual immorality but the whole life of discipleship (Gal. 5.13-14). Paul reiterates that a Jewish paradigm (with some Gentile alignment) still matters for the moral stewardship of our sexual selves in 1 Cor. 6.9 and in Romans 1.

To cast those who live in this sacrificial obedience as 'weak' is a very strange attack and shows little awareness of gay Christians who embrace the queer difference of their desire that is a complex weave of the goodness of sexual orientation, the effects of the fall on that good, and its redemptive significance.

The Side B Christian avoids the pitfalls of libertinism or repression. Such a state requires living in the demanding liminal tension of a body which has a same-sex orientation and yet is leaning toward an intimate reality which has been inaugurated in the Church beyond sex and marriage. No distinction between a harmful, repressive celibacy and a healthy, integrated celibacy is shown.⁶⁵ Those gay Christians who choose a non-repressive celibacy are weak made strong, trusting the God who redeems the creation God subjected to decay and frustration, offering a name and glory like the eunuch better than what we lack in children, marriage, or progeny when we obey and give that to him (Isa. 56.2-5; Rom. 8.20).⁶⁶ A better way would be to understand the weaker or fleshly sibling in Christ is tempted either to make grace a licence to sin or the Law a licence to condemn.

Conversely, the Hayeses offer us a vague argument for acceptance of gay marriage within the Church which is evoked through Gentile justification.⁶⁷ Little place is given to the fact that it is the Gentile distinction which matters; it is Gentile and Jew that are now brought together into one nation in Acts through Jesus' blood. The Jerusalem Council is led by Leviticus 18 and its injunctions which are not just for Jew but also for Gentile—they refer to a more universal creational ordering that

64. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 199–202 in particular and also pp. 5, 10, 67–69, 213–14.

65. See for contrastive example where this dilemma is taken seriously: Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 129–43.

66. See also how the Hayeses do not mention the need for sabbath and commandment obedience in Isa. 56.3-6 by the eunuch, which would have included Leviticus 18 stipulations for the foreigner (Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 157–59).

67. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, p. 59.

must not be infringed upon. Sexual immorality, including same-sex acts, are not part of Gentile distinction.⁶⁸ Instead, the Gospel which upholds radical inclusion and radical holiness is undermined, dismantling elements of the foundation of Jewish and Gentile unity. Kingdom ethics are split from creation ethics in a way that is hard to call biblical.⁶⁹

While the Hayses present some profound moments of self-reflexivity on how Richard's previous work was pastorally damaging to some, a new path forward which upholds truth and love is missing; and the same damage is now done to the other 'side'. Some effort to empathise with a group of LGBTQI+ Christians is given, and to his friend Gary, but little thought to Side B gay Christians who are leading with a very different, non-repressive paradigm in the Church (one instantiation of the 'eunuch' in the house of the Lord today).⁷⁰ I wish the book could have navigated the liminal territory of what is at stake which helps LGBTQI+ Christians of all types. Instead, we are watching the culture war profiting and selling books apace with authors who are themselves heterosexual, cisgender, and male benefiting.

A robust theology of difference which retains the ontological element of gay difference and suffering was missing from the attempt to move us beyond the God of the text. I hope my review helps to reveal the suffering the book has undoubtedly caused for many Side B LGBTQI+ Christians, and the witness of the Church called to cross-carrying, a theme strangely missing from the whole book, and one which after this century should deeply concern us.⁷¹ This cost is spurned by the easy (heterosexual) quietism built on the automatic assumption that (gay marriage) must be accepted within the Church that this book will no doubt embolden. Marriage continues on as the idol we need to flourish, rather than centring the cross as the door to resurrection flourishing where there will be no marriage.

As Oliver O'Donovan observes, 'Once totalised, criticism merely evacuates itself of content and turns into a series of empty gestures. One cannot gain a truer understanding of the world by criticism alone, any more than one can make a dish of mince with a grinder and nothing to put in it.'⁷² The critical theory of two biblical scholars, one who we remember in his recently passing and the other, who has come to this sudden change of mind, feels a little like such grinding. The heterosexual or liberal quietism, a pallid and empty stereotype in academia, ignores the difficult and theodicean wrestle of LGBTQI+ people with God's created order and will, and thus, away from the tensions

68. Cf. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 176–87.

69. Cf. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 68–69; Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Evangelical Outline of Ethics* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1996), pp. 89–90; Oliver O'Donovan, *A Conversation Waiting to Begin* (London: SCM Press, 2009), pp. 86–101.


70. Hays and Hays, *Widening*, pp. 223–25.


71. David Bennett, *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), particularly pp. 267–68 for definitions of Side A and B.

72. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 11.

of real, embodied queer and ascetical life, as well as the call for living in the tension of inclusion and holiness in the Church; and a layered and rich diversity of understandings within broader societal spaces. The essential offering of this book is a 'wide' mercy which arrives as yet another underwhelming and misleading form of cheap grace which covers over and explains away the queer rather than illuminates it.

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