

Who Will Go On Record?

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Pope Francis is “evolving.” According to the *New York Times*, in the documentary, “Francesco,” Pope Francis rearticulates his perspectives on LGBTQ people and rights, stating: “Homosexuals have a right to be a part of the family. . . . They’re children of God and have a right to a family. Nobody should be thrown out, or be made miserable because of it.” Francis further extends this articulation of the belonging of LGBTQ people in the family of G*d with regard and concern for their legal status: “What we have to create is a civil union law. That way they are legally covered.” And why can’t *we* evolve? We *can* evolve – and we should! What could evolution look like for us?

Pope Francis’s evolution provides some insight. He explicitly affirms that there is a distinction between the civil rights afforded to individuals and the ecclesial access extended to Church members. (While I believe the Church should do *more* in terms of rights and access than the state, the point here is that Pope Francis *rightly* observes a **distinction between church and state**.) Implicitly, Francis concedes that same-sex civil unions are **not harmful** to the institution of marriage or the communities who seek them. Francis’s determinative claim, however, is this: there is a **social and moral good** for LGBTQ people and *all* people if we affirm same-sex civil unions; to oppose same-sex civil unions is to deny LGBTQ people certain human rights (e.g., legal rights for same-sex partners and health care benefits). Francis’s position does not necessarily change the teaching or the practices of the Catholic Church with respect to heterosexual marriage or to LGBTQ people. However, his position *does* change the posture of the Roman Catholic Church; Francis goes on record for LGBTQ partners seeking public, legal commitment to one another.

A loving Church and loving disciples of Jesus affirm the dignity of choice! As disciples of Jesus, even if some of us *did* believe that “homosexual acts” were “intrinsically disordered” and “homosexual orientation” was, therefore, “objectively disordered,” as Catholic teaching states, Jesus teaches that G*d *invites*, but never *forces* or *coerces* our love, faithfulness, and obedience. G*d does not intimidate us until we comply; G*d *wants* our love *freely* given. *Even* if some believe that homosexuality is worthy of damnation, *Jesus* never took interest in ruling the Roman Empire or establishing laws in his region that increased the vulnerability of sexual minorities. (In fact, Jesus hung out with sexual minorities.) Jesus did not lobby for laws that favored his disciples or make provisions for discrimination according to their prejudices. Likewise, for most of United States history, religious freedom has been about freedom to believe and worship as one wills and to be protected from discrimination – especially when one’s beliefs are *not* in the majority. The imposition of our beliefs on others is *never* a way of following Jesus. We should not block others’ rights because *we* fail to see the value of a separation between church and state for *any and all* of us whose rights have been denied. Jesus followers do not defend discrimination as a right.

A loving church and loving disciples of Jesus are confident! In Luke 9.49-50, “John answered, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you.’” That G*d uses LGBTQ people (and even AME and/or married LGBTQ people) to do great things – often in G*d’s name – is beyond question. What healthy marriage has suffered because of a same-sex couple’s civil union? Are we so insecure as an ecclesial body that because someone does not understand or express erotic love “our” way we are harmed? How can we preach “if you’re not for

us, you're against us," when Jesus preached, "if you're not against us, you're for us"? And remember that many LGBTQ people and communities have left and protest our churches *not* because they did not feel at home in church, but because church influencers have not felt at home with "out" LGBTQ people. When we are confident in who we are and what we are doing as the Church we do not accuse LGBTQ people of pedophilia, human trafficking, rape, or harassment as though being LGBTQ has anything to do with these.

A loving church and loving disciples of Jesus are eager to do good! Jesus was so eager to do good that he would *even* do it on the Sabbath Day – against the religious law of his time. When ecclesial bodies fight for the state to defend the *disinherited* (i.e., LGBTQ people vis-à-vis human sexuality), we fight for *ourselves* (c.f., Deuteronomy 10.19, Exodus 22.21). Because *we* were once enslaved, we defend the enslaved. Because *we* were once strangers, we defend strangers. Because *our* families were separated, we defend separated families. Because *we* were bred, we defend sexual and reproductive agency. Because *we* were denied self-determination, we defend those yet denied this right.

Nearing the completion of the 2020 election cycle, it is worth considering how the AME Church has handled human sexuality. Instead of defending and partnering with LGBTQ people *at least* in the public sphere, we have silenced LGBTQ voices *within* our Zion. Knowing that Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists were essential partners, we neglected to humble ourselves in the light of leaderful BLM diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity. Our refusal to change rendered us irrelevant in the face of the most dramatic civil rights violations against people of African descent and movement of resistance since the 1960s. And do we wonder why, even before Covid-19 emptied our churches, our churches were bleeding out people? The *least* the AME Church could do is affirm the legal right of LGBTQ people to civil unions. If we have any hope of enjoying an ecclesial, planetary, or political future, we must unequivocally support LGBTQ rights and all who are dispossessed. If we refuse, we support electing bigots and misogynists, appointing rapists and colonizers, and defending murderous law enforcement. When the rights of LGBTQ people to civil unions *or* marriage come before the Supreme Court, the church of Allen and Lee should be ready to defend those rights – even if cowardice and spiritual sloth prohibits participation in ceremonies. Eager to do good, we *must* lean left.

In ecclesial discourses on human sexuality it is a given: G*d loves *everybody* regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity; the integrity of our confessions of faith depends on *our* love for *everybody* regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Who among us will go on record – *at minimum* to affirm the dignity of choice, the distinction between church and state, and the validity of same-sex civil unions; to confess that LGBTQ relationships are not intrinsically harmful; and to do good for the least among us?