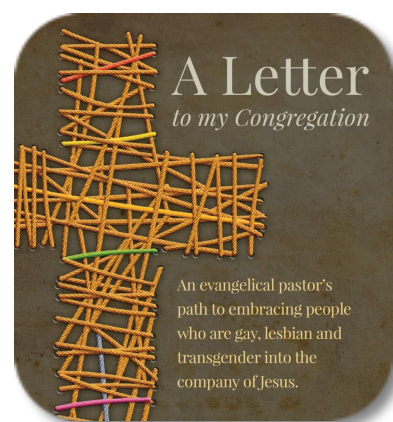


# A Letter to my Congregation

A pastor's path to embracing people (a summary by Pat Evert)

We rarely think of our clergy as men and women who routinely spend agonizing hours and days and weeks pouring studiously over sacred texts in relentless, ongoing attempts to penetrate the mysteries contained there, to discover their wisdom, their instruction, their relevance, and to consider the means and repercussions of their implementation within our here and now.

**Chapter 1 – A fleeting unease, quite easily dismissed.** A pastor stands at the crossroads of a congregation's conflicted conscience. "You can't be baptized, or receive communion, or become a member, or serve in this or that capacity here." For a pastor to answer a question like this without deep reflection, without a brutally honest appreciation for its impact on real people, is, I think, and I say this advisedly, cowardly. The way we find our way through this controversy matters—not just the side we land on, but how we get there. We're not just singling "the issue" out. We are singling people out. This pleases the hater of humanity and grieves humanity's lover. It has to do with the very heart of the gospel: Who belongs? And how do they belong? Imagine walking into a meeting knowing that people were discussing the most tender, most vulnerable aspect of your being. You would feel singled out, stigmatized. We do so hoping they've done the homework, the praying, the discerning, the wrestling with Scripture, the pastoral engagement with people. This doesn't invite the participation of the Holy Spirit, and hearing God is the ultimate aim of any good conversation. Deeper into the Bible, deeper into what it means to belong to God (the meaning of holiness) and deeper into the reality of a new community leaning into the New Creation? If there are exclusions to be enforced, it's up to me to enforce them. Pastors must specialize in managing church conflict. I've refused to perform weddings if I didn't think the marriage had a chance. And here's the truly unusual part of my occupation: people ask me what the Bible or God or Jesus would have them do. But we rarely wrestle with God as if their dilemmas were our own. Why should our unity in the Spirit be based on something more than the gospel? It's to be accepted by God because of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The traditional approach is the cause of unnecessary harm. This path emphasizes acceptance over either affirmation or exclusion, in keeping with the demands of the gospel.



**Chapter 2 – Intuitions toward a new way found:** I didn't think that the "open and affirming" position was developed with a high enough regard for Scripture. I like its emphasis on inclusion—my instinct tells me Jesus would expect us to err and would prefer that we err on the side of inclusion—but I'm concerned about how this approach shapes our understanding of the gospel. As time goes on, the traditional position will soften further—that is, it will insist on excluding gay people from less and less—but it will always demand some form of exclusion. In the Ignatian model, discernment of God's will is reserved for choosing between two or more possible goods. I didn't examine the practices carefully for two reasons: 1) at first, I wasn't personally in charge of excluding anyone, and 2) when I was, exclusion per se didn't need to be exercised because gay people who wanted to remain gay stayed away. This progression went from excluding them from temple worship (Deuteronomy 23:1), to the anticipation of their acceptance in the Hebrew prophets (Isaiah 56:4), to the recognition of a place in the kingdom of God for eunuchs in the ministry of Jesus (Matthew 19:12) and the inclusive practice of the early church in the book of Acts (Acts 8:27-39). I encountered more and more divorced and remarried people for whom the teaching didn't seem to fit. Exclusion from membership, disqualification from leadership—even when softened with contemporary compassionate language, seemed harmful. Don't be quick to define a child's orientation. Sexual orientation, especially in adolescence, isn't always firmly fixed (though it can be). But the longer a teenager's same-sex attraction continues, the greater the likelihood that it will persist for a lifetime. Sex isn't recreation. It forges deep bonds, not easily broken. It's about finding someone to forge a deep bond of loyalty with—a mate who offers security through thick and thin. The "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach wasn't good enough. In practice, it was too harmful. Their powerful same-sex attraction didn't abate and impeded their ability to bond with their mate. I could see that the exclusionary approach that kept these men and women away from church, or kept them in hiding in the church, was more harmful than helpful to them. Since this issue has become the focal point of a raging culture war, I had to tread carefully to see if there was openness to discussion. I simply couldn't shake the growing conviction that enforcing the traditional exclusion of gay people seemed inconsistent with that duty as a pastor. That the church, including its evangelical wing, is losing, not attracting, young people at alarming rates. Stewardship, rethinking the faith-based suspicion of evolution, pursuing ethnic, racial and cultural diversity, resisting the culture-war framing of modern American Christianity, advocating for the inclusion of women at all levels of leadership, and promoting contemplative forms of prayer is rooted, I believe, in this experienced work of the Spirit. Fear played a prominent role. Would I lose the respect of trusted colleagues? Where was my willingness to question the traditional consensus coming from? Did I have a perverse interest in rocking the boat for its own sake? Was I harboring resentments against authority? Did I have a desire to play the hero?

**Chapter 3 – A closer look at the prohibitive texts:** But Jesus also had a way of reading Scripture that was surprising, unconventional, and paradoxical. This is part of what first fascinated me about Jesus in the gospels. Only experience pressed me to scrutinize the text and my assumptions about the text more carefully. The Greco-Roman world was rife with a practice, unknown to us moderns, called pederasty. Pederasty refers to a widespread practice in Roman

society in which men took young men and boys (pre-pubescent minors) under their wing as mentors. This raises an important question of interpretation. Is the text a sweeping condemnation of all same-sex practice or does it speak to the predominant practices of the time, especially temple prostitution and pederasty? We have three very significant and pervasive sexual practices that would have been well known to Paul's audience and would shape their view of same-gender sexual practices: temple prostitution, pederasty, and the sexual services required of slaves. Yet, these same practices are virtually unknown to many modern readers. Characteristic of pederasty, temple prostitution, and slave sex, which were grossly perverse, demeaning, and exploitative. In fact, the exhortation that flows from Romans is to condemn those who would judge others, while participating in any of a wide range of other sins! But in Romans 1, Paul says that "God gave them over to shameful lusts" as a punishment for their end-stage paganism. These relevant examples are missing with respect to same-sex relationships. In fact, there is not a single condemnation in scripture that is specifically and explicitly aimed at monogamous gay couples. The first word, *malakoi*, has the basic meaning of 'soft' but it also came to mean 'effeminate,' most likely referring to the younger, 'passive' partner in a pederastic relationship—a common form of homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world. The next term, *arsenokoitai*, is even more problematic. Fee notes that the word is a compound with roots meaning "male" and "intercourse." Liberal approaches seemed willing to dismiss some of my biblical concerns while conservative approaches failed to take my pastoral concerns into account. My discomfort with an exclusionary policy was too much. I couldn't justify it enough to practice it.

#### **Chapter 4 – The third way: “disputable matter”—something we can agree to disagree on.**

But it clearly rejects exclusion in all its forms. Exclusion is the most severe punishment in the New Testament. It is equivalent to capital punishment in the Old Testament. There are only two specific cases of exclusion recorded in the New Testament. The first is the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, struck down by God for holding back a part of the proceeds of the sale of their property (or perhaps for lying about it.) The second is in 1 Corinthians 5, where Paul urges the exclusion of a church member who is having sex with his father's wife (and the church is proud!). This informal "pre-exclusion" is probably the more powerful and widely exerted form in many churches. Stigmatizing a vulnerable minority is something we should repent of, not something we should perpetuate. We tend to reserve exclusion in its various forms for the most clear-cut cases and for situations in which a person's behavior is causing noticeable harm to others. By "harm," I don't mean "hurting someone's feelings," but placing an obstacle in the path of their pursuit of Christ, the path of human flourishing. We have to consider harm to the community as well as the individual. But harm is an important consideration.

We have the biblical rule to consider: "Love does no harm to the neighbor" (Romans 13: 10). It seems to me that this ethic is emphasized so strongly precisely because the Jesus movement knew all too well the danger of over-zealous or harmful application of the Bible. I saw first-hand the harm that can result from an over-zealous exercise of exclusion. Categorical disqualification from ministry for gay, lesbian or transgender people was too harmful to continue. We can accept

each other without approving each other's moral standing on this or that issue. God does, or we couldn't be saved. That's the gospel, isn't it? Those who come our way sense that we are a church in transition on this issue and they don't have any interest in drawing attention to themselves. And I realize I am their pastor. It's my job to make a place for them here. The ambiguity in the prohibitive texts, based on a careful reading that takes their historical context into account, combined with the self-evident harm—to gay people and the Christian mission—was enough for me. We're aping something that has nothing to do with the Kingdom of God, claiming moral superiority as we do. But I had a further desire—to find a framework that would help me understand the gospel itself more deeply. What do we not understand or appreciate about the gospel that could help us find our way out of this mess? I'm proposing an approach that respects the differing convictions of those who disagree and emphasizes the gospel demand of acceptance (over affirmation on the one hand, and over exclusion on the other – one of four “church fellowships” in a covenant relationship with each other (Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Lutheran and our loosely evangelical congregation.) We enjoyed this level of mutual commitment despite serious dogmatic disagreements, having to do with the gospel itself. In danger of rending the unity of the Jesus community and thus damaging its powerful witness to the glorious gospel. He characterizes these two groups with two terms: “the weak” and “the strong.” Vegetarians abstaining from the eating of meat (and some, wine too) and they observe “special days.” Paul urges each group to welcome or accept the other despite differences that threaten to tear them apart. Jesus demonstrates a more powerful lordship than Caesar in that he holds an equally diverse community together without resorting to force. He does so, in fact, by the power of God demonstrated in human weakness. Those who feel more bound to the strictures of law and those who feel free from these strictures. It fits: Paul warns the weak (conservatives) to stop judging the strong and he warns the strong (liberals) to stop treating the weak dismissively, with contempt. Without Romans 14-15 or something like it, such differences, it seems, must divide us. As the surrounding society becomes more diverse, we should expect, even welcome, more of the same. That is, it would actually help us to maintain a unity in the Spirit in the face of big differences. The church would have a powerful tool to help her witness in a world flying apart. Indeed some think the Noahide Code may have been in the background of the Jerusalem council's ruling that Gentiles should avoid meat sacrificed to idols and meat improperly drained of blood. What seems to be in view is the condemnation by ‘the weak’ of the conduct of ‘the strong’; that is the firmly held judgment that the conduct is unacceptable, which in this context means ‘unacceptable to God,’ had not been certified as kosher, or that had been offered to idols, would seem just as ‘pagan’ and hence evil as sexual immorality. Stott, Dunn and others regard Sabbath-keeping as a likely candidate of the concern over “special days,” enshrined in the Ten Commandments. Even more, it is embedded in creation. So what do we have in Romans 14-15: a robust category that can help us maintain unity in the face of serious moral and doctrinal differences, and required all of Paul's powers to persuade the Roman believers to see them as “disputable,” as matters over which not to divide for the sake of the gospel. The Lord knows we live in a highly polarized time when a robust category like this would be needed to maintain unity in the face of great diversity. Our readiness to break fellowship over lesser matters is indication of the need. We mourn this divisive spirit until it

comes to a controversy over which we feel great passion, then we can hardly believe good Christians could differ in good conscience over such a thing. It's a matter of conscience. That too, is a mark of disputable matters. And I am definitely not applying this category to the homosexual acts that were so prominent in the biblical period—homosexual services demanded of slaves, homosexual relationships spawned in pederasty, and homosexual acts in the context of temple prostitution. I am only invoking this category to the question of how the Bible speaks to people in monogamous gay relationships seeking to maintain lifelong fidelity. What are reasonable criteria for inclusion in the category, “disputable matters”? As background, I found Roger Olsen's book, *Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity in Diversity* to be quite helpful in thinking through this question of criteria. Dogma: Olsen defines dogma as truths essential to Christianity itself; to deny them is to follow something other than Jesus. Christian identity is at stake. Doctrine: Olsen defines doctrine as a secondary category of teachings central to a particular tradition of Christians.

Paul's “disputable matters.”

1. When it doesn't involve a matter of basic Christian dogma such as we find in the great ecumenical creeds (Apostles, Nicene, Chalcedonian, etc.) without changing the nature of Christianity itself.
2. When the debate brings two or more biblical truths into dynamic tension (e.g. mercy-judgment, law-grace, free will-predestination) so that both parties make reasonable appeals to Scripture.
3. When faithful Christians take different views on the issue.

Previous generations, often our betters in Christ, had significant blind spots. I am convinced that how the biblical prohibitions apply to monogamous gay relationships is indeed a disputable matter and that the teaching of Romans 14-15 should guide our response.

**Chapter 5 – The gospel way:** Applying the teaching of Romans 14-15 requires a deep understanding of the gospel. Following this teaching upholds and reveals the gospel's power. Walking in this path requires the full devotion of a disciple willing to die to self in order to follow the Risen Lord. A true unity of the Spirit is possible without adopting a common perspective on this question. A third approach says, “We can agree to disagree on this question” without separating from each other. We can hold our respective positions as firmly as our conscience dictates. But we have chosen not to treat this matter as something we have to hold in common in order to share a true unity of the Spirit. Acceptance is the key biblical demand of a third way. Depending on how strong our convictions are on the question, such acceptance can be very demanding. It requires the power of the gospel to practice. We gladly embrace such. A third way practices acceptance by choosing to respect the conscience of those who hold differing views, so long as they do so, “unto the Lord.” A third way urges disputants to recognize the limits of their personal responsibility for the actions of others and to leave the execution of a judgment to God. A third way provides time and space for a community to eventually resolve some disputes peacefully. However, both groups are called to practice embrace, not exclusion or separation. Therefore, Christians in gay or lesbian partnerships committed to fidelity, are

accepted for the sake of Christ. They are embraced, not excluded from full participation in the life of the community. Christians who believe such relationships to be sinful are accepted for the sake of Christ. They are embraced, not excluded, from full participation in the life of the community. In a word, they are wanted as full members of the community. We take an inclusive and empowering approach to leadership, believing that all Christians are called to the work of ministry. In a church like ours, the lines between “ministry” and “leadership” are not sharply drawn. What many churches call leadership we view as simple discipleship. The sharp distinction between “clergy” and “laity,” common to other settings, does not exist in ours, in keeping with our forward leaning kingdom emphasis. To do so will hurt the mission of the church among the modern day Gentiles. Paul did not abandon his Jewish identity. We can’t assume that he renounced torah observance as appropriate for Jewish believers. Why would he side with “the strong” unless their approach advanced the mission among the Gentiles? The effect was to open the doors to the Gentiles. A third way allows this disagreement to play out until the “strong” can be shown to be right or wrong. It is not their job, in this case, to pressure their brother or sister to agree with them. The ability to live out convictions that are not shared by others. In a third way approach, children can learn to practice within the church community skills that will come in handy outside the church community, where diversity of thought and practice will be even greater. There is a real advantage to exposing children to diversity of thought when they are still living at home, under the supervision of parents. A third way challenges liberals to refrain from holding conservatives in contempt (or mild condescension, as the case may be). The “liberal” is called to practice restraint in their attitude toward the “conservative.” Society models a different approach: it nurtures a posture of contempt. Both “liberal” and “conservative” are called to take the energy of their respective moral concerns and redirect it from “the issue at hand” to “the judge who is standing at the door. Both “liberal” and “conservative” are called to take the energy of our moral objections and redirect it from “the issue” to our gospel obligation: to accept one another as Christ has accepted us. We are eating, instead, from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was the Pharisees, not Jesus, who believed that the granting or withholding of moral approval was a sacred obligation of the religious life. You are involved in the wrong project: granting or withholding your moral approval of other human beings as if that were your religious duty. I’m calling you to abandon that project and take on my project. My project involves eating from the tree of life, ... the birthright of the new creation, which is the acceptance afforded us in the gospel. There is something more powerful that the gospel calls us to give each other: not affirmation, not moral approval, but acceptance. The beauty of the older married couple is in their hard fought acceptance of each other despite core differences. This is the beauty of the gospel as Paul applies the gospel in Romans 14-15. In the meantime, we are called to practice the gospel discipline, the gospel glory, the gospel enactment, of mutual acceptance. The only fitting response to this gospel is worship. It is not by accident that Paul closes his exhortation in Romans 14-15 with a prayer leading into a fugue of worship. These two goods are: 1) the good represented by the ultimate correctness of their position, and 2) the good of bearing witness to the Lordship of Jesus and his power to maintain a unity of the Spirit despite significant moral differences like this. Paul points out a greater good: accept each other as Christ has accepted us. Ignatius taught that the ultimate

goal of any discernment process is to choose the option that is “for the greater glory of God and the well-being of people.” It’s a relief to let go of all the pressure that comes with having to judge this matter correctly.

**Chapter 6 – Yes, but this is a BIG change:** We were ardently focused, as only the idealist young can be, on doing everything right. Marriage as an indissoluble union—does not settle the matter. Is marriage permanent or temporary? When we divorce, is it dissolved in God’s eyes, or are we still married to the original spouse no matter what the divorce courts say? Jesus defined marriage as a lifelong union that cannot be dissolved (or at most, can only be dissolved in one particular situation). For centuries, the church turned this definition into a rule: no remarriage after divorce. We look for ways to make accommodations for the difficult circumstances of the people we know and love in light of what seems to be the plain teaching of Scripture regarding marriage. It turns out that interpreting and then applying this exception to the rule—if it’s meant to serve as a rule—is very difficult. As recently as 1957, the great Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis, wanted to marry a divorcee named Joy Davidman. Despite Lewis’ contention that her previous marriage to an alcoholic and abusive husband had not been a true marriage, a bishop refused his request since it was contrary to canon law. Is the biblical teaching on marriage simply descriptive, that is, does it simply describe what marriage is meant to be as a norm? Or is it also prescriptive, that is, does it lay down clear rules that must be followed in every case? I’ve determined, by my pastoral practice, that it is legitimate to regard the text as descriptive, as generally normative, not prescriptive—that is, not prescribing what must happen in every case. Simply playing it safe by always erring in the direction of strictness—when in doubt assume that the Bible doesn’t allow remarriage—may feel safe for us, but it can be dangerous for others. It’s especially easy for a married pastor to say this, but we have to be thoughtful about the burdens we insist that other people carry, especially when we don’t have to carry those same burdens ourselves. We are perhaps reflexively merciful to them because they are us. These children are not just sexual beings in order to have sex. They are sexual beings to help them find a partner who can be a source of comfort, consolation, and security through a life of suffering and hardship, even into old age. But it is quite another, quite another thing altogether, to have the burden of lifelong celibacy thrust on you (with no hope of it ever being lifted) simply by virtue of your being gay, lesbian, or transgender. The hope, in a very real way, is the substance of the thing hoped for. The hope matters. Its absence, in the case of the gay person consigned to lifelong celibacy, is a salient difference that is also a substantial and significant one. This is not “precisely the same situation” as the heterosexual person who has not yet found a mate! For them, the now traditional teaching that the biblical view of marriage—one man, one woman, for life— is descriptive but not prescriptive in the case of remarriage, is absolutely prescriptive in the case of gender. This means that it can only ever be for a man and a woman. Can we understand how that might constitute an unbearable burden? I don’t think the human authors of Scripture anticipated what modern heterosexual married relationships have become, let alone gay relationships. As I read the biblical witness to marriage, I don’t see a monolithic, unchanging institution. I see a patchwork of different arrangements over the centuries. Sexual attraction is a key component in forming lifelong unions. We’re dealing with the gay issue today because gay

people are coming out of hiding after being driven underground for centuries, in part by distorted readings of Scripture promulgated by the church. Because they are few in number compared to the ranks of the divorced, we can have successful churches without them. If we are perceived to be too friendly to them, we risk losing members who object to their presence. I think we need to step back from the overheated controversy and get our bearings on how the kingdom of God, revealed in Jesus, influences our view of marriage in the first place. Elevating marriage, which seems like a good thing, can actually be harmful to marriage. The more ambivalent New Testament perspective on marriage is helpful to consider as we try to understand what marriage can and cannot provide. In Christ there is no male nor female. I'm not saying gender is no longer significant. I'm saying its significance seems to diminish as the kingdom of God nears. If marriage is given as a concession to weakness for all of us, perhaps it should be granted as a concession to those among us who are gay, lesbian, and transgender. Like so many in my generation, I first perceived the "gay community" as a subset of the larger category called "criminals" or "perverts." I see a once-criminalized group of people, just coming out from living in the shadows, after centuries beneath a dark cloud of intense social shame and substantiated fears of physical violence. Today we have gay people whose relationships, until just recently, have been branded by society as extraordinarily shameful, as uniquely perverse—worse than incest. This doesn't seem to me to be a "slippery slope." It seems to me that it might actually be instead, a redemptive trajectory. At least this is a possibility that we might thoughtfully consider, rather than something to resist at every turn. Do you let the fires of controversy shape your response? Or do you give your full attention to the person before you. Let's participate with them in a ceremony in which they express their commitment to each other and invite God to be the center of their relationship. It just means that we have to accept each other for the sake of Christ. The fact is, the gospel empowers us to be in relationship with each other despite our moral disapproval over any number of concerns.

### **Chapter 7 – I am willing:**

I am willing....

To go wherever it is these treasures are from  
To be led by the fire of divine love  
To offend the tribal phantom projected from below over evangelicalism  
To seek and save what is lost  
To become docile and receptive to the advances of the Holy Spirit  
To learn how to sing the Song of Songs  
To be the Lord's handmaiden  
To be misunderstood  
To be fearless  
To be wrong again"

Together we found ourselves staring into a fire. I've since come to regard that fire as the fire of divine love. What else would Jesus be staring into? ... I was sitting next to Jesus in that cave, and his perfect love was casting out fear. I left with it because I was holding onto it. ... This has



by Ken Wilson

given me some way to measure just how potent is the fear around “the gay issue” ... I don’t think we should give it the credence or the pride of place that it wants. We should see it as something much smaller than it appears. ... Ken, if you choose to speak out on this topic, your work as a pastor will be forever defined by this issue. Are you willing to do that? ... As a good shepherd, Jesus had an eye out for the lost sheep. When we lose sight of that, I think we’ve lost sight of what it means to be a pastor.