

Foreword

By Dr. David P. Gushee

I SPENT MUCH of 2013 reading the collected works of the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by the Nazis in April 1945, just three weeks before Adolf Hitler killed himself in a Berlin bunker. Bonhoeffer was a genius, and as a young prodigy with two dissertations already under his belt by the age of 24 was slated for a brilliant career in the elite German university world. But his emergence occurred concurrently with Hitler's emergence. Bonhoeffer's steadfast resistance to the Nazi regime and the Nazi seduction of the churches eventually cost him everything: reputation, opportunity, career, freedom, and finally his life.

In a December 1942 letter to his co-conspirators against the Nazi regime, most of them also drawn from elite ranks of German society, Bonhoeffer reflected on the costs that he and many others had already paid. Already banned from publishing, preaching, or teaching in Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote:

There remains an experience of incomparable value. We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled—in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.

(from Letters and Papers from Prison)

In many contemporary evangelical churches, gays and lesbians are the premier outcast group. They are the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, and the reviled. And they have suffered much. They have suffered at the hands of the church, especially its preachers and pastors; they have suffered at the hands of millions of Christians who have believed the rejection and exclusion of gays to be an appropriate application of the Christian faith.

The maltreatment of gays and lesbians in Christianity has been the result of a particular reading of particular biblical passages that has calcified into a hardened tradition over the course of church history. This tradition has created a Christian moral world in which gays and lesbians can find no place other than as the condemned. Sometimes that condemnation has been physically or verbally violent; more recently, in part due to gains by gay activists, it has retreated toward a more mild but still unsatisfactory “love the sinner, hate the sin” motif, as Ken Wilson notes in this important book. But even this modification has not been enough to spare gays and lesbians the constant experience of rejection and exclusion at the hands of Christians, in families, schools, and churches.

By asking first his Vineyard Church movement, and now through this book the wider Christian world, to reconsider its posture toward gays and lesbians, Wilson has already tasted “the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled.” By even suggesting that the traditional interpretation of biblical passages might need to be reconsidered, and that the sexual morality of

committed gay relationships might be viewed as a “disputable matter” of opinion (Romans 14) rather than settled and non-negotiable dogma, Wilson has moved from the religious “above” to the religious “below.” He has tasted that “experience of incomparable value . . . the perspective of those who suffer.” By standing in pastoral solidarity with gays, his reputation has been tarnished. And that will only deepen after this brilliant book is read across the land in days to come.

I believe that this is a breakthrough work coming from the heart of evangelical Christianity and offered into the heart of evangelical Christianity. It is unlike other books that demand revision of traditional Christian sexual ethics but do so primarily by rejecting the authority of the Bible. That is not how evangelicals think, and it is not what Wilson does here. Instead Wilson shows how God has led him on a journey toward a rethinking of what the fully authoritative and inspired Bible ought to be taken to mean in the life of the church today.

There is so much to love here: the way Ken so thoughtfully leads the reader on the journey with him; the skillful biblical/scholarly digging that actually reveals how careless much “biblical scholarship” is on this matter; the deeply respectful treatment of differences; and the pastoral heartbeat that pulses through the whole book. Perhaps most surprising and moving is Ken’s emphasis on God’s Spirit at work in his own life and ministry. Ken reports experiences with God’s Spirit here that will seem alien to those of us whose faith is not quite as supernatural as in his own tradition. In a sense this book is a gift from the more Spirit-attuned part of the evangelical world to the rest of us.

How do ancient religious communities change their minds? How do traditional scriptural interpretations that have hardened into dogma get broken open for fresh thinking? A key role is played by courageous religious leaders who become convinced that change is needed. Only such leaders have the experience, skill, and authority to make a faith community

consider the possibility of changing its mind. The problem is that such leaders generally have too much at stake in the religious status quo to be able to see the need for a change; or if they do see such a need, they risk too much to be willing to pay the price to initiate it, and so they remain silent.

You may not find yourself persuaded by Wilson’s argument in *Letter to My Congregation*. But I challenge you to enter with him on the journey he describes in this book. Read it from the first page to the last page. Read it prayerfully. See what God wants to say to you through the reflections of this conscientious and courageous pastor.

David P. Gushee is the Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics and Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University. An active Baptist, Professor Gushee was the principal drafter of both the Evangelical Climate Initiative (2006) and the Evangelical Declaration against Torture (2007), both of which changed the conversation in church and society about their respective issues. His many books include A New Evangelical Manifesto: A Kingdom Vision for the Common Good; The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision is Key to the World’s Future; and Evangelical Peacemakers: Gospel Engagement in a War-Torn World.