



Can Gay and Lesbian Clergy Be Called to Pastor Traditionally Black Churches?

Reverend Dennis A. Meredith (with 29 years of pastoral experience in the Black Baptist Church) is openly Gay-Bisexual and leading a congregation of over 1000 members, of which 80% are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. He has had the privilege of serving Tabernacle Baptist Church for 16 years in Atlanta, Georgia. He is divorced and the father of three sons, all of whom are currently serving with him at the church, along with his former wife.

First of all, I do not believe it is a matter of *if* Gay and Lesbian clergy can be called to pastor traditionally Black churches but rather it is a matter of *when* will Gay and Lesbian clergy be permitted by Church and society to serve openly as pastors—and *when* will closeted Gay and Lesbian clergy feel courageous enough to disclose their sexual identity to their churches even at the risk of expulsion or massive loss of membership.

I have been a pastor since 1981, serving in three different churches across the country. I have traveled and ministered to thriving congregations from Alabama to California, and now I am currently serving as pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church in the Old Fourth Ward-Midtown Community of Atlanta, Georgia. Tabernacle Baptist Church is located in the heart of this community with the highest population of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender residents. Unfortunately, this area has the highest HIV/AIDS infection rate in the state of Georgia. I have always been a gay-bisexual man actively living out my sexuality during the entire time I was leading these churches. However, I concealed my sexuality because I thought being gay (same and both gender loving) was a sin—during this period of my life. This belief was a reflection of my embedded theology (the knowledge of God taught to me from childhood through adulthood) and consequently shaped my image of God. Today, that image has changed and I no longer believe that being gay or lesbian is a sin.

The first area of thought that changed my belief system was scientific rulings. In his book *Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality*, John Shelby Spong, a Christian theologian and retired American bishop of the Episcopal Church Diocese of Newark, shares his common distress: “Many scientists have been distressed that official church bodies make decisions and ethical pronouncements based upon premises not supported by the scientific community . . . Sanctified ignorance is still ignorance.”¹ Thousands of scientists, including the American

Psychiatric Association, have ruled that homosexuality is not a mental disorder: “Psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals agree that homosexuality is not an illness, a mental disorder, or an emotional problem. More than 35 years of objective, well-designed scientific research has shown that homosexuality, in and of itself, is not associated with mental disorders or emotional or social problems.”² According to Spong, “Since the evidence points to the conclusion that homosexual persons do not choose their sexual orientation, cannot change it, and constitute a quite normal but minority expression of human sexuality, it is clear that heterosexual prejudice against homosexuals must take its place alongside witchcraft, slavery, and other ignorant beliefs and oppressive institutions that we have abandoned.”³

The second area of thought that changed my belief system was biblical scholarship and critical biblical interpretation. The Bible is a collection of stories written by inspired men— influenced often by prejudicial and oppressive agendas. These stories reflect what the men who wrote them believed about God—their God image. We have attempted to interpret these ancient stories to reveal the meanings behind these writings—evidenced by thousands of commentaries attempting to determine who God is and what God likes and dislikes.

Some of these commentaries have imaged God as a God who hates some people but loves others. Jack Rogers, Professor of Theology Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary and Moderator of the 213th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) explains in his epic writing Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, and Heal the Church that the church has “changed its mind” about oppressive interpretations throughout its history. For example, he cites how the traditional church claimed that “(1) the Bible records God’s judgment against the sins of people of African descent and women from their first mention in Scripture; (2) people of African descent and women are somehow inferior in moral character and incapable of rising to the level of full white male, ‘Christian civilization’; and (3) people of African descent and women are willfully sinful, often sexually promiscuous and threatening, and deserve punishment for their own acts.”⁴ These are no longer the beliefs of the traditional church. Why did the church change its mind about its view of oppression of Blacks and Women? How did the church get the message so wrong in the first place and their beliefs led to the most heinous form of enslavement the world has ever known, resulting in the holocaust of millions of people of African descent not to mention the atrocities against women down through the ages? “What is instructive about these examples is that a similar pattern is emerging today regarding people who are homosexual: (1) the Bible records God’s judgment against the sin of homosexuality from its first mention in Scripture; (2) people who are homosexual are somehow inferior in moral character and incapable of rising to the level of full heterosexual ‘Christian civilization’; and (3) people who are homosexual are willfully sinful, often promiscuous and threatening, and deserve punishment for their own acts. The church is once again repeating the mistakes of the past.”⁵ Rogers maintains that we have failed humanity in church and society because we have not used a “Jesus Christ”-centered approach to biblical interpretation. Today, the image we are pressured to believe from the biblical text is that God hates the fag—God hates gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people.

Yes, Gay and Lesbian clergy can be called and are called to pastor traditionally Black churches. Thousands are leading traditionally Black churches “closeted and un-closeted” all across America and the world! Our challenge is to bring liberation to same and both gender loving clergy and people in general for the common good of bringing love, peace, and unity to humanity. This is the call of Jesus Christ to us all.

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Notes

1. John Shelby Spong. Living in Sin: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1988, 78–79.
2. American Psychological Association, “Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality.” Online location: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/sexual-orientation.aspx> accessed 3 January 2011
3. Spong, Living in Sin, 79.
4. Jack Rogers. Jesus, the Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 33.
5. Ibid., 33–34.