As a delegate to the United Methodist General Conferences in 1984 and 1988, I voted to reaffirm and expand the restrictive language regarding homosexuality. I did so out of sincere conviction as the right thing to do, even though the issue was an abstraction to me. I knew no one who was admittedly gay, and the notion of same-sex attraction was foreign to my experience.

I now deeply regret those votes! Over the intervening thirty years, I have changed my mind and now support the removal of all restrictive language in the United Methodist Book of Discipline . The following are the factors that contribute to my change of mind.

First, I got to know people who fall into the category of “homosexual.” I came to realize that many of them had long been in my circle of relationships but were afraid to share this important component of their identity. Some are beloved members of my own family!

Many are faithful, devoted, life-long church members who can’t be open within the body of Christ for fear of rejection and condemnation. Some are parents of LGBTQ children who shared stories of bullying and abuse of their kids.

A few were colleagues on the staff of congregations I served, and their ministries reflected the qualifications identified by John Wesley—grace, gifts, and fruits. Many were exceptionally gifted, devoted seminary students whose call to ordained ministry seemed evident to me.

Hearing the painful stories of these beloved children of God cut me to the quick. The issue of sexual orientation was no longer a theological or ethical abstraction. It became embodied in people I loved, from whom I learned, in whom I experienced God’s grace-filled presence!

Secondly, the evidence is overwhelming that sexual orientation is not a choice. I have yet to meet a heterosexual who can tell me when he/she decided to be attracted to the opposite sex; nor have I met a gay person who decided to be attracted to persons of the same sex.

Sexual identity and desire are complex realities with biological, social, environmental, and psychological components. While the Discipline labels “the practice” of homosexuality as “incompatible with Christian teaching,” the implication is that a person’s being is contrary to the Christian gospel. That is incompatible with our doctrine of creation.

Thirdly, by the 1992 General Conference I had not only begun to change my mind about the language of incompatibility and exclusion, I had become convinced that legislation is the wrong way to deal with the issue.

The pivotal decision was made in 1972 when the language of incompatibility was added to  Social Principles Study Commission Report, by an amendment from the floor with limited debate. The consequence of that political parliamentary action has disproportionately dominated subsequent General Conference agendas and expanded legislative restrictions. It now threatens to split the denomination.

We have legislated ourselves into a box, maybe into a regrettable schism. Whatever our position on this issue, legislative action will not resolve it!

Fourthly, I came to realize more fully the meaning of Martin Luther King’s words in his letter from the Birmingham jail:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

During my first eight years as a member of the Council of Bishops, I was deeply immersed in the Initiative on Children and Poverty. I felt that the persistent discussion of homosexuality within the Council and other denominational circles was distracting us from fully addressing economic injustice.

I shared my concern with a friend, a theological consultant to the Initiative. His response lodged my conscience: “But, Ken, you can’t portion God’s justice for one group and ignore it for another.”

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Fifthly, I’m convinced that the discrimination against LGBTQ people is being justified by inadequate biblical interpretation. I’ve read arguments from the Bible used by southern preachers to justify slavery, and I see a similar hermeneutic operating in support exclusion of gay persons.

Using the Bible to support misguided causes is a long-standing scandal in the church. Scripture has been used to justify such evils as the Crusades, genocide, slavery, the subordination of women, persecution of scientists, and burning of “heretics.”

I firmly, unapologetically believe in the primacy and authority of Scripture! What we mean by “the authority of Scripture” determines how we use it.

Here is my understanding: The authority of Scripture lies in its authentic witness to God’s mighty acts of salvation supremely in the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in its power through the Holy Spirit within community to transform individuals, communities, nations, and the entire cosmos into the likeness of Christ.

The test of commitment to the authority of Scripture is this: Is it shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ and enabling us to love as Christ loves and to witness to his present and coming reign of compassion, justice, generosity, hospitality, and joy?

The influence of the Gospel over the centuries has enabled us to see Scripture through the lens of the Word-Made-Flesh, Jesus Christ. Such a lens enables us to avoid misusing  some troubling passages in the Bible.

Three glaring examples: massacring of religious opponents as did Elijah with the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:40); slavery which was taken for granted in many Old and New Testament narratives; women keeping silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:34).

Finally, my understanding and experience of what it means to love as Christ loves has deepened and widened over the years. People whom society relegates to the margins have taught me about the nature, depth, and expanse of God’s love. I have experienced profound faith among the incarcerated, the homeless, the frail elderly, orphans, immigrants, the poor, and LGBTQ persons.

I have met the Crucified and Risen Christ in my relationships with those whom society treats as “outcasts.” I know from experiences with them that Christ has broken down ALL dividing walls between us. Paul makes it clear:

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

ALL includes gays and straights, LGBTQ and heterosexuals, “progressives” and “traditionalists.” Christ died for ALL, includes ALL, and invites ALL to “love one another as I have loved you.”

It is the quality of our love and its imitation of Christ’s love that is definitive, not gender or sexual orientation. As committed couples, our LGBTQ brothers and sisters should be able to love each other in ways mutually fulfilling to them, as surely as we who are heterosexual.

I’m still growing in my understanding and my ability to love as Christ loves. God grant me the humility to keep learning and growing toward the fullness of God’s perfect love!

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9/26/2018