

Peterson retracts same-sex marriage affirmation

July 14, 2017

After a conservative outcry—including LifeWay Christian Resources threatening to pull his books from their retail store shelves—popular Christian author Eugene Peterson retracted statements made in an interview in which he seemed to affirm same-sex relations and indicated he would be willing to perform a same-sex wedding.

“To clarify, I affirm a biblical view of marriage: one man to one woman,” Peterson said in a statement issued July 13. “I affirm a biblical view of everything.”

In an [interview](#) with Religion News Service columnist Jonathan Merritt published online July 12, Peterson voiced an accepting view of same-sex relationships and said he would be willing to perform a same-sex wedding ceremony.

Within a few hours after Merritt’s article appeared, [Baptist Press](#)—the information service of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee—reported LifeWay Christian Resources no longer would sell any books by Peterson if he confirms “he does not hold to a biblical view of marriage.”

Peterson ‘would like to retract’ his response

The next day, Peterson issued a statement clarifying his position and saying he regretted “the confusion and bombast” the interview caused. Peterson said he “would like to retract” his answer to a question about whether he would perform a same-sex wedding ceremony if asked.

As reported by [Christianity Today](#), Peterson said: “Recently, a reporter asked me whether my personal opinions about homosexuality and same-sex marriage have changed over the years. I presume I was asked this question because of my former career as a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), which recently affirmed homosexuality and began allowing its clergy to perform same-sex weddings. Having retired from the pastorate more than 25 years ago, I acknowledged to the reporter that I ‘haven’t had a lot of experience with it.’ To clarify, I affirm a biblical view of marriage: one man to one woman. I affirm a biblical view of everything.”

Of his long career as a minister, Peterson noted: “I’ve never performed a same-sex wedding. I’ve never been asked and, frankly, I hope I never am asked.”

“Put on the spot”

When asked by the interviewer if he were in the pastorate today and a gay Christian couple asked him to perform their same-sex wedding ceremony, Peterson responded with a one-word answer, “Yes,” according to Merritt’s column.

“When put on the spot by this particular interviewer, I said ‘yes’ in the moment. But on further reflection and prayer, I would like to retract that,” he said. “That’s not something I would do out of respect to the congregation, the larger church body, and the historic biblical Christian view and teaching on marriage. That said, I would still love such a couple as their pastor. They’d be welcome at my table, along with everybody else.”

In the interview with Merritt, which the interviewer noted was recorded, Peterson recalled fondly gay and lesbian people he had known during his years of pastoral ministry, and noted with pride a former church he served accepted a gay minister of music.

“I wouldn’t have said this 20 years ago, but now I know a lot of people who

are gay and lesbian, and they seem to have as good a spiritual life as I do,” Peterson told Merritt. “I think that kind of debate about lesbians and gays might be over.

“People who approve of it, they’ll probably just go to another church. So, we’re in a transition, and I think it’s a transition for the best, for the good. I don’t think it’s something that you can parade, but it’s not a right or wrong thing as far as I’m concerned.”

As reported by *Christianity Today*, Peterson sought to clarify those remarks in his July 13 public statement.

“There have been gay people in a variety of congregations, campuses and communities where I have served,” he said. “My responsibility to them was the work of a pastor—to visit them, to care for their souls, to pray for them, to preach the Scriptures for them.

“This work of pastoring is extremely and essentially local: Each pastor is responsible to a particular people, a specific congregation. We often lose sight of that in an atmosphere so clouded by controversy and cluttered with loud voices. The people of a congregation are not abstractions, they are people, and a pastor does a disservice to the people in his care when he indulges in treating them as abstractions.”

Columnist Merritt responds

In a follow-up [column](#), Merritt responded to Peterson’s retraction of his previous statements. Merritt noted he asked Peterson about his views on LGBT issues because “he is one of the most influential Christian thinkers in the world, and homosexuality is one of the most contentious debates in the church today.”

Merritt also pointed out he had talked with “several prominent pastors, authors and theologians who had intimated to me that Peterson had told

them privately that he was affirming of same-sex relationships.”

The 33-minute phone interview, arranged by Peterson’s publicist, took place July 6, and it was recorded with Peterson’s permission, Merritt wrote.

“It is possible that Peterson felt he had been placed on the spot and offered an answer that doesn’t reflect his true conviction. But it is also important to note that in the week prior to the publication of his answers, there was no attempt to clarify or change his answers to these questions,” he said.

Merritt dismissed suggestions the 84-year-old Peterson was “senile.”

“Quite frankly, this smacks of ageism to me,” he said. “And it doesn’t align with either his cogent state during the interview or the eloquence with which he answered my questions.”

‘Feels like an other church-induced bruise’

In his follow-up column, Merritt apologized to gay and lesbians in the church for any pain the dust-up caused.

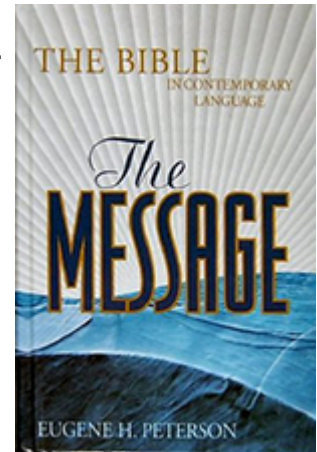
“To all the LGCT Christians who read Peterson’s words and felt a sense of hope but today feel like deflated tires: I am sorry if today feels like another church-induced bruise,” he wrote.

Merritt indicated his continued admiration for Peterson.

“His life and ministry bear witness to his love for God, love for people, and his love for the Bible. Peterson’s views on same-sex marriage —whether he affirms it or opposes it—have no bearing on my respect for him or his ministry,” he wrote. “I have nothing negative to say about Peterson today, and I wish many of the outraged conservative Christians had taken a similar posture yesterday.”

Clarification satisfies LifeWay

Peterson, pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Md., for 29 years, is the author of 30-plus books, including *The Message* version of the Bible, which has sold more than 16 million copies worldwide.



After the initial Merritt interview appeared, LifeWay issued a statement: “LifeWay only carries resources in our stores by authors who hold to the biblical view of marriage. We are attempting to confirm with Eugene Peterson or his representatives that his recent interview on same-sex marriage accurately reflects his views. If he confirms he does not hold to a biblical view of marriage, LifeWay will no longer sell any resources by him, including *The Message*.”

A LifeWay spokesperson confirmed in light of Peterson’s retraction and clarification, LifeWay Christian Stores will continue to sell his books.

Last October, LifeWay quit selling books by bestselling Bible study author Jen Hatmaker after she voiced approval for same-sex marriage—also in an [RNS interview](#) with Merritt.

At the time, [LifeWay announced](#) it discontinued selling her resources because Hatmaker “voiced significant changes in her theology of human sexuality and the meaning and definition of marriage—changes which contradict LifeWay’s doctrinal guidelines.”

Compiled from reports by Religion News Service, Christianity Today and Baptist Press.