

Voices: Response to The Widening of God's Mercy, Part I

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Timothy Pierce is dean of the School of Christian Studies and associate professor of Christian studies, specializing in the Old Testament, at Wayland Baptist University. He is responding to *The Widening of God's Mercy: Sexuality within the Biblical Story* by Christopher B. Hays and Richard B. Hays, published by Yale University Press.

Pierce was asked to respond to Part I of the book, "The Widening of God's Mercy in the Old Testament." The full text of his response follows, [a summary](#) of which was published in the Voices column of the *Baptist Standard*. A full response by Kimlyn Bender to "Part II: The Widening of God's Mercy in the New Testament" is [available here](#).

Part I: The Widening of God's Mercy in the Old Testament

The Widening of God's Mercy represents one of the latest attempts within scholarship to address the matter of sexual orientation as it relates to Christian thought and practice. Most of the recent works on the matter have sought to revisit the relevant texts (Genesis 19:1-9; Leviticus 18:22, 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Romans 1:18-32, and 1 Timothy 1:10) in order to argue, based on historical/literary contexts or linguistic/syntactical evidence, these texts in fact do not apply to same-sex relations as they are understood and practiced today. Therefore, they argue, there is no biblical basis for arguing against such activities.

Christopher and Richard Hays (son and father respectively), attempt a

different tack at addressing the issue. Instead of arguing whether the biblical texts negatively assess same-sex relations, they admit the texts, in fact, do consider such activities as wrong, but argue the Bible presents a God who is constantly widening and redefining the expressions of his mercy toward people, even to the degree that things he once considered wrong no longer are to be viewed as such. Ultimately, they argue, this widening of God's mercy not only allows us to put aside biblical prohibitions concerning sexual mores, but actually challenges us to do so if we are going to be faithful representatives of the God of the Bible.

Appreciation of grace and mercy

The part of the book to which I am responding was written by Christopher. My former and current students will tell you that one of my great emphases in my Old Testament class is to argue the Old Testament essentially is about grace and mercy. So, in reading Hays' arguments highlighting many aspects of God's mercy evident in the Old Testament, I felt a certain kinship with the approach on many levels. Indeed, I would agree with the sentiment implied in the book that so much of Christianity has lost its way in terms of finding a path forward that reflects the abundance of God's grace and mercy. Despite this affinity for some of the underlying presuppositions, the book is not one I can recommend for a variety of reasons.

Presuppositions about love and mercy

First, at the core of the argument is the idea that love and mercy inherently will lead to compromise and permissiveness. That is, Hays' argues in several places that opposition to same-sex relations comes from fear, ignorance or a faulty commitment to tradition—all of which grow out of a lack of love.

Perhaps his approach was purposefully reactionary to attempt to instill a self-realization of those who reject his ethic, or perhaps it was to try and give them a taste of their own medicine, as it were, but I found the arguments against those who believe same-sex activity to be sinful as lacking any recognition of nuance or charitability. While such a stance certainly is the author's right, if the goal really is to find a peaceful path toward reconciliation and healing, this seems like a strange route to take.

Presuppositions about the Bible

The second problem I have with the argument is some of the basic presuppositions about Scripture. While the authors argue that they are not wanting to replace the Bible but to use it, the whole basis of their argument is that portions of the Bible are outdated and God essentially has moved on from them. Though they attempt to show such changes have occurred repeatedly in the Bible itself, even if one can demonstrate such is the case, the argument that modern interpreters have the same freedoms and abilities to speak for God as the biblical writers did is tenuous at best.

To say the Holy Spirit is still at work today—something with which all believers would agree—is not the same as saying the Holy Spirit works in the same way today that he worked during the inspiration of the Scriptures. If there is no distinction between then and now in the Spirit's work, then we can write Scripture today. Such a position would render the Scriptures ultimately unnecessary. While neither Christopher nor Richard seem to go so far as suggesting we can produce Scripture today, I am not certain their practice of creating a disposition of God that is blatantly different from God's clearly stated position on a topic is any different than producing new Scripture.

Presuppositions about God

The third problem I have with the argument is some of its basic presuppositions about God. Though Christopher never comes right out and says it, the presentation of God is very reminiscent of the presentations found within open theism. Open theism essentially argues that God is “open” to the future. That is, God doesn’t have complete knowledge of what will happen in the future. Like any position, there is a spectrum upon which proponents will fall, from those who believe God lives out the future just as we do, experiencing it only as it happens, to those who argue he knows all possible outcomes, but not the specific outcome that will take place until it does.

The motivations for open theism generally are the desire to preserve God’s goodness in the face of the presence of evil and bad outcomes. Hays’ motivation seems to be to highlight God’s nature of expansion and inclusion—a good thing—but it comes at the expense of God apparently not really understanding the evil man will do. At one point, Hays essentially argues God discovers mankind is nothing but trouble but decides to stick with us anyway. God is constantly having to adjust his precepts and laws because we constantly are abusing them, and we matter more to God than his rules do, Hays argues.

Problems with interpretation

The final problem I have with the argument of the book is the few places Hays does choose to interpret a text. In particular, I believe Hays thoroughly abuses the meaning of Exodus 22:28-29 and Ezekiel 20:25.

Hays argues that the Exodus passage contains God’s demand for child sacrifice. He argues this despite the fact Scripture in numerous places in the Law and Prophets distinguishes how one offers a first-born human and

a first-born animal, and consistently expresses God's hatred for the act of child sacrifice. He has to make this argument, however, because it is the basis for his position that just as God previously had statutes that were harmful to humanity and ultimately changed those so more people could be saved, our use of God's statutes against same-sex activity is harmful to people and therefore must be changed to open up the doors to more salvations as well.

Because Ezekiel 20:25 refers to God giving Israel bad statutes and then goes on to mention the sacrificing of children, Hays believes he has warrant to make this assessment. The problem is the Ezekiel passage is dealing contextually with the stubbornness of Israel in refusing to keep the laws of God and how God eventually handed them over to their passions by allowing them to harm themselves and their future through child sacrifice. The order of discussion in Ezekiel makes it clear that God is not saying he commanded them to offer their children and then they took that too far so He now has to correct the command. Ezekiel is saying the end result of their rebellion was a hardened heart that resulted in actions under Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) and Manasseh (2 Kings 21) that made child sacrifice essentially statutory. Unlike Hays' argument that Ezekiel and Jeremiah are at odds over God's disposition toward sacrifice, they actually are very much on the same page in saying God never has desired child sacrifice.

Child sacrifice

Finally, concerning child sacrifice, Hays I believe is extremely careless, almost flippant, about the biblical accounts of Abraham and Isaac, and Jephthah and his daughter. Hays states that these accounts are evidence of the once-heroic nature of such activity and suggests the writer of Hebrews even honors Jephthah for such an act. Time and space do not permit a thorough appraisal of these statements, but anyone who reads the Jephthah account as laudatory in any way is simply not paying attention to the text.

While the Abraham narrative indeed does create some difficulties, it's important to see that for purposes of the narrative, the account is more interested in Isaac as the fulfillment of all of God's promises to Abraham rather than him being Abraham's son. This factor is implicit in the fact it is the promise God uses to distinguish Isaac from Ishmael as Abraham's "only son." Such a statement is only true in a promissory way.

Additionally, I find it interesting that Hays mentions Hebrews regarding its passing mention of Jephthah but ignores the lengthy explanation the inspired writer gave of Abraham's mindset concerning the Isaac incident.

There is much more that could be said about Hays' interpretation and approach. In one place, he essentially argues that those who hold to a traditional sexual ethic are following a false god to the detriment and death of their LGBTQ friends and family. In doing so, he has suggested, perhaps unintentionally, that the God of Scripture who made such commands is essentially a false, or at least wrong, god. For Hays, the only true God is the one who opens wide his gates to call "right" what he previously called "wrong."

Significance of grace

Grace truly is amazing, and it is costly to God. But when we dilute, diminish or dismiss the reality of sin, grace becomes meaningless. Grace is not a great cosmic shoulder shrug of God saying, "Oh, well." It's a transformative engagement with sin and power to overcome.

Hays calls abstinence a "not viable" option and argues from the perspective that surrender, compromise and capitulation are the only way forward with regard to sexuality and the church. While his compassion and empathy are heartfelt and important qualities for us all to seek to grow in, when God has spoken consistently and clearly on an issue, it is neither compassionate nor loving to go a different route.

Paul challenges us in Ephesians to speak the truth in love. While many Christians today have abandoned the love part, as we try to correct that drift, we can't abandon the truth part. Finding the balance is a vital temporal concern. Walking in that balance is a vital eternal concern.

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