



**WHAT DOES IT MEAN  
TO BE WELCOMING?:  
NAVIGATING LGBT  
QUESTIONS IN YOUR  
CHURCH**

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# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE WELCOMING?: NAVIGATING LGBT QUESTIONS IN YOUR CHURCH

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Few issues have torn up the contemporary Christian church like 'the LGBTQ issue'. Some have dug in their heels, while others have avoided it at all costs. But many churchgoers are just confused and looking for sound guidance. *What Does It Mean to Be Welcoming?* is the most recent installment attempting to calm the waves and provide lay persons with such direction from a 'traditional' Christian perspective on homosexuality. (Despite the title, the book does not address bisexuality, transgender issues, gender ambiguity, queer theology, or other related topics.)

This popular-level book is written by Travis Collins, the senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama. It is evident given Collins' personal testimonies from pastoral ministry and denominational politics that even in the heart of conservative evangelicalism, these issues cannot be ignored and require response. Collins is up for the task and clearly lays out his experience, goals, orientation, and conclusions – which are as follows: '(1) I welcome all people to membership in the church family; (2) I do not affirm same-sex sexual behavior' (p. 10), and gay/lesbian Christian members should not occupy positions of church leadership (p. 132). Of course, the issues are always more nuanced than that.

The first chapter navigates the ups and downs of the debate. 'While both sides have their narrow-minded, acrimonious crusaders', he writes, 'this debate is usually between people with good hearts' (p. 11). In his opinion, neither 'side' can claim moral high ground nor can one simply claim the issue is 'just a generational thing' (p. 13). 'Conversion' efforts are unreliable; we cannot 'make our love for those who are same-sex attracted conditional on that liberation' (p. 17). The second chapter continues along these lines, where he approves of attending gay weddings, since 'My counsel is always to err on the side of love' (p. 31). The third chapter looks at the concept of church unity and dispute. 'I understand that no tent can hold everyone', he opines, 'Any church or denomination that tries to be all things to all people will lose its identity, focus, and mission' (p. 35). The Jerusalem Council in the early New Testament church showed that 'when considering complex matters, sometimes the best we can do is say, "it seems"' (p. 36). But in the end, 'A seat at a diverse table requires commitment. A commitment to each other ... And a commitment to remain at the table when the family needs to make a decision and our opinion does not prevail' (p. 43).

The next several chapters look at 'the topic' itself. Chapter 4 summarizes the 'affirming position', and Chapter 5 'the traditional position'. Collins implements some recent research on the subject, but as a

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popular work of the 'traditional' variety, remains extremely introductory and predictable. The same for Chapter 6, which answers 'What does the Bible say?' by rehearsing the regular set of proof texts/clobber passages'.

Chapter 7 concludes with further such remarks, such as the distinction between 'sexual attraction' and 'sexual behavior' (p. 110), and that those with same-sex attraction should remain abstinent (p. 111). Chapter 8, 'We Can't Just Sing Kumbaya Forever', encourages churches to cautiously but firmly develop a public 'position statement' on the issues surrounding homosexuality – which is 'essential' (p. 123). Chapter 9 continues this topic and argues that 'I am welcoming when it comes to membership. Because I am not Affirming, however, church leadership is a different matter' (p. 132). Leadership has higher standards, and those in same-sex relationships cannot

meet those standards. As to what qualifies as 'leadership', Collins simply says 'A congregation must wrestle with these hard questions' (p. 134).

Finally, Chapter 10 concludes with exhortation towards more honest

and open dialog in churches. The conclusion summarizes the ground covered and reiterates that his proposal will 'require a softening of our tone without a relaxing of our convictions' (p. 157).

What Does It Mean to Be Welcoming? is extremely introductory: The reading level is high school to college, and the content is unoriginal. It also comes off as being a quarter-century late. Compared to other works of its kind (DeYoung, Sprinkle, etc.), the necessity of the book is difficult to locate – except for an apparent demand of Collins' personal opinion. (The phrase 'I believe' appears dozens of times throughout the book, which cues readers into the implied readership and purpose; cf. first sentence of p. 153). When compared to those who categorically deny the existence of 'gay Christians', refuse church membership to them, and are fearful of the topic in general, the book is a welcome set of reflections. But despite welcome nuance and corrections of rhetoric, the synthesis remains notably unsophisticated. The approach is explicitly biblicist, where simple reference to 'what the Bible says' (i.e. an appeal to authority) constitutes finality – and as Kaufman pointed out, 'Appeals to divine revelation as the ultimate authority in theology [are] a warning flag: they are made when the theological conceptual frame is not working as well as it should' (In Face of Mystery, p. 48). Consider such sentiments as 'I believe your primary job is to decide if what I'm saying is true to Scripture' (p. 10); 'Certainly, the Bible's position on this seems clear to me' (p. 21); 'my understanding of the Bible will not allow me to be neutral on this matter' (p. 38); 'our deep regret over [the sins of slavery] does not justify a re-reading of Scripture on LGBT issues' (p. 83); 'Love between two people, no matter how sincere, does not validate an invalid, self-serving interpretation of revealed truth through Scripture' (p. 85); and 'Right and wrong are not determined by majority

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opinion or trends but by divine revelation' (p. 76) – where 'divine revelation' simply equals the uninterpreted, unenculturated text of the 66-book Protestant canon. Collins briefly addresses the views of Loader, Wink, and other dissenters but dismisses them simply because they are different (p. 57). It is clear that the 'Traditional' position is only relevant to Christians who hold to the evangelical dogma of 'verbal plenary inspiration'.

Readers might also ponder how successful the delimiting rules for gay Christians in church (somewhat reminiscent of Jim Crow laws) will turn out to be. Collins' hope is that gay Christian members will stop behaving like gays. In the meantime, such members should not be in positions of 'leadership'. The trouble is that New Testament servant leadership and the organic 'Body' may not exhibit such clear hierarchies. And when a church refuses leadership to gay members, this tells others in the congregation that something is seriously wrong with them – which will likely amplify (not reduce) prejudice against gays. (This discussion also reminds one of the

rather arbitrary 'complementarian' rules for women in ministry; teaching is fine, but not teaching men on Sundays, etc.)

Collins' candor and clear writing is admirable – as is his on-the-ground effort at hammering out this extremely divisive topic and trying to put out needless fires. But for those more curious, familiar with the debate, and who have different starting points about the scriptures' purpose, there remains much to be desired.

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Being Saved: Explorations in Human Salvation, Marc Cortez, Joshua R. Farris and S. Mark Hamilton (eds), SCM, 2018 (ISBN 978-0-334-05495-5), xxii + 362 pp., pb £35

Being Saved is a fertile collection of essays centered around two closely related loci of Christian theology: soteriology and anthropology. Besides exploring their interconnection in theology, the collection also aims to bring them into conversation with contemporary – especially analytic – philosophy (pp. xiii–xiv). The twenty essays are divided into four parts:

(I) Sin, Evil and Salvation – roughly, what we are saved from; (II) The Nature of Salvation, focused on understanding salvation as a whole; (III) The Process of Salvation, focused on aspects of this whole; and (IV) The Body, the Mind and Salvation.