

## OPINION

# American churches must reject literalism and admit we got it wrong on gay people

Oliver Thomas, Opinion columnist    Published 4:00 a.m. ET April 29, 2019

*Churches will continue hemorrhaging members until we face the truth: Being a faithful Christian does not mean accepting everything the Bible teaches.*

A sad thing is happening in America. The church is killing itself. A great revelation has occurred that is bringing joy and happiness to millions, but it is being met with resistance and retrenchment from many of my colleagues inside the church.

The revelation is that LGBTQ people are just like the rest of us — only LGBTQ. They are not perverts nor are they abnormal, as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual ([https://www.aglp.org/gap/1\\_history/](https://www.aglp.org/gap/1_history/)) of mental health experts once declared them to be. People don't choose their sexual orientation any more than they choose their race or gender. This is what lay behind a recent comment by Mayor Pete Buttigieg of South Bend, Indiana, that Vice President Mike Pence's quarrel — if he has one — is not with the mayor. "Your quarrel, sir," said the openly gay Democratic presidential candidate, "is with my creator (</story/news/politics/elections/2019/04/07/pete-buttigieg-god-being-gay-and-mike-pence/3330897002/>)."

The United Methodists, one of America's most beloved denominations, are doubling down on their opposition to gay clergy and gay marriage by threatening expulsion to congregations that don't toe the line. The threat is particularly ominous given that the denomination — rather than the local congregations that paid for them — hold title to the church buildings (<http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/para-2501-requirement-of-the-trust-clause-for-all-property>).

Conservative columnists like Patrick Buchanan warn of the "crackup (<https://buchanan.org/blog/mayor-pete-and-the-crackup-of-christianity-136855>)" of Christianity.



In Prairie Village, Kansas, on April 19, 2019. (Photo: Charlie Riedel/AP)

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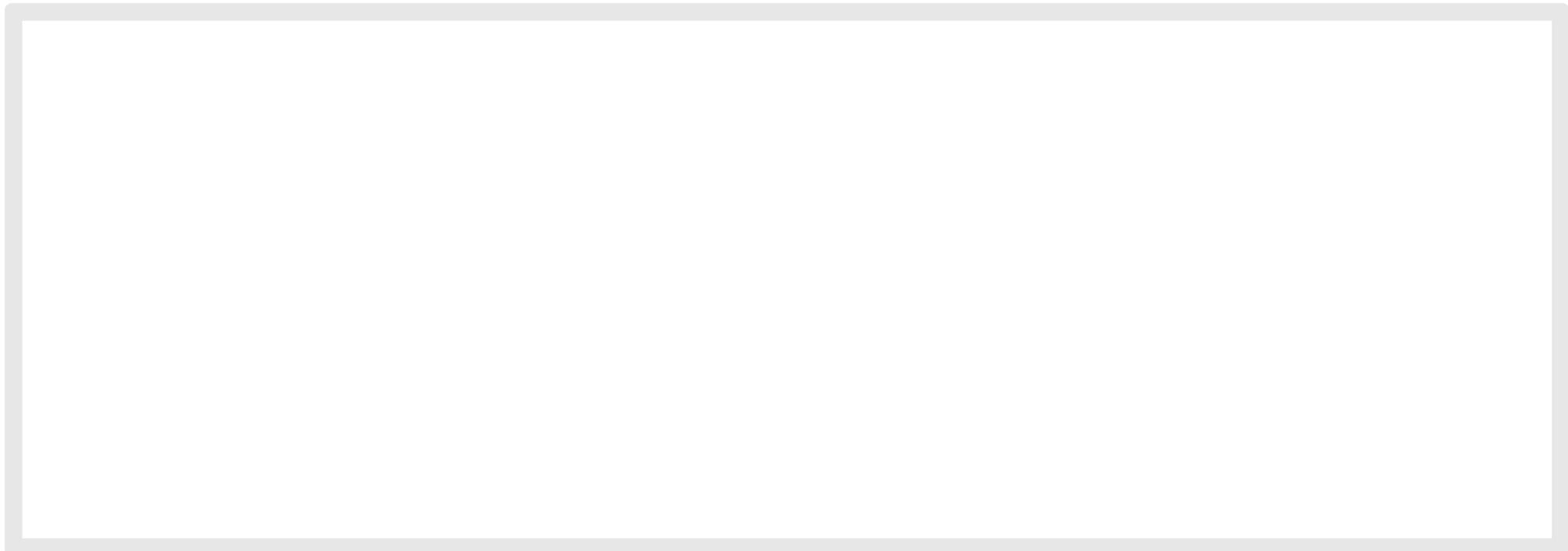
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Here's the corner we have painted ourselves into. *The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.* Yet, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures did not float down from heaven perfect and without error. They were written by men, and those men made mistakes. A few of the more obvious ones include the sources of inspiration for the census taken during the reign of King David ([II Samuel \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Samuel+24&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Samuel+24&version=ESV) attributes it to God, while [Chronicles \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Chronicles+21&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Chronicles+21&version=ESV) attributes it to Satan), the date of the crucifixion ([John \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+18&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+18&version=ESV) says it was on Passover, but [Matthew \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+26&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+26&version=ESV), [Mark \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+14&version=ESV) and [Luke \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+22&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+22&version=ESV) say it was a day earlier) and the date of Abram's (<http://www.bibleinsight.com/crn1p3.html>) pilgrimage from Mesopotamia to Canaan ([Genesis \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+11&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+11&version=ESV) says it was before the death of his father, Terah, but [Acts \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+7&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+7&version=ESV) says it was after).

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# Reason, experience contradict scripture

The most difficult challenges arise when the teachings of Scripture are contradicted by reason and experience. Slavery is the best — or perhaps worst — example. In hindsight, we can see the obvious. “Love your neighbor as yourself” does not leave room for the enslavement of others. But Southerners had Scripture on their side. Slaves were admonished to submit to their masters in the writings of both [Peter \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%202:17-19&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Peter%202:17-19&version=ESV) and [Paul \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+6%3A5-9&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+6%3A5-9&version=ESV). The [Hebrew Scriptures \(https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/biblical-slavery/\)](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/biblical-slavery/) likewise considered slavery as part of the divine order.

But we knew better. Even so, it took a bloody Civil War before Southern Christians came to grips with the fact that blacks were not inferior to whites and should not be systematically kidnapped, murdered, raped and enslaved. And even that wasn't enough. The rise of the Ku Klux Klan, [White Citizens Councils \(https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/white-citizens-councils-wcc\)](https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/white-citizens-councils-wcc) and private K-12 “[segregation academies \(https://www.jstor.org/stable/795573?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/795573?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)” across the South attest to how slowly prejudice dies when it is supported by proof texts from the Bible.

A similar thing happened with women's rights. While the Apostle Paul, again, exhorted women to [submit \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+5%3A22-33&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+5%3A22-33&version=ESV) to their husbands and [keep silent in church \(https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians+14&version=ESV\)](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians+14&version=ESV), reason and experience taught otherwise. Despite Catholic and evangelical resistance, more and more of today's churches are elevating women to positions of leadership and authority.

## We got it wrong on gays and lesbians

Churches will continue hemorrhaging members and money at an alarming rate until we muster the courage to face the truth: We got it wrong on gays and lesbians. This shouldn't alarm or surprise us. We have learned some things that the ancients — including Moses and Paul — simply did not know. Not even Jesus, who was fully human and therefore limited to what first century humans knew, could know about cancer, schizophrenia, atomic energy and a million other things the centuries have taught us.

It's difficult to watch good people (and the churches are full of them) buy into the sincere but misguided notion that being a faithful Christian means accepting everything the Bible teaches. We don't impose the death penalty on adulterers, Sabbath breakers and rebellious children. Nor do we chase women from God's house because they are menstruating or exclude men because of their physical handicaps.

Yet all of this, and more, is commanded by the Bible. The time has come for Christians to take a deep breath and ask themselves, “What does loving my neighbor — and my enemy — as myself look like?” And then proceed accordingly.

*Oliver Thomas is a retired American Baptist minister and a member of USA TODAY's Board of Contributors.*

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