The homosexuality issue is not about "them" but about you and about us.

One of my friends is a man who several decades ago sat in this very audience as a dedicated DTS student. He is still a dedicated student of the Bible and dedicated believer. His lifelong homosexual attractions have never been altered or healed despite fervent prayer to that end. He has struggled mightily but imperfectly to maintain sexual purity, and sacrificed much in following Christ as a chaste single man. He is far from perfect, but his tenacity and sacrificial obedience inspires me. And he has not been well-served by the evangelical church. How can we do better?

I have been a participant in the sexual morality conflicts around homosexuality for almost three decades. I was drafted into this debate reluctantly. I wish desperately that I had been asked to speak here because I was known as a man of exemplary Christian virtue, or because of the breadth of my biblical knowledge, or because people found me to be irresistible eye candy. I am here instead because of my plodding involvement in the homosexuality battles of the church and culture, from which I have learned a number of hard lessons. I want to share with you the core failures that I believe continue to compromise the witness and hobble the ministry effectiveness of the evangelical church. I hope to point the way for you, the next generation of church leaders, to learn from the failures of my generation and handle these matters with greater success.

Our God is not surprised when we fail miserably. Our God is in the business of turning failure into triumphant success. He is the God who turns darkness into light, tragedy into triumph, and indeed death into life. I challenge you to follow the highest standards possible as you engage these crucial issues that confront the Church and the world.

1. The failure of treating GLB persons as “the Enemy” in the cultural wars
First, the evangelical church has failed by treating homosexual persons, gay men and lesbian women, first and foremost as our bitter enemies in the culture wars. When we position ourselves this way, our main or primary message becomes that of naysayers, the ones who say No to that which the world is embracing with a triumphant yes.

Our God is a God of yes. But God's yes in the area of sexuality is not a yes of license, of chaos, of dissipation. Our God is a gracious gift giver, and our human sexuality is a profound good. I stand upon the historic teaching of the Christian church which has always understood the revealed will of God in the Bible to be that full sexual intimacy is something reserved for one man and one woman to experience within the bounds of holy matrimony.
God's "No" to homosexual intimacy is expressed in Leviticus, Deuteronomy, Romans, first Corinthians and other places, but this No should neither be the starting point nor the ending point of the discussion. The way forward demands that churches begin to discuss sexuality in a positive broader context, and that we see sexuality as the gift God intended. While affirming marriage and the nuclear family, we must not make an idol of marriage and the nuclear family. Not everyone is married, and the witness of Scripture is that chastity is an equally blessed state. There are cultural trajectories that we must resist as a matter of conscience, but we must do so while articulating and embodying a healthy and beautiful dedication to godly sexuality, love, marriage, friendship, community and family. We must exercise the discipline to consistently articulate the bigger picture.

It is necessary to make moral judgments. But evangelicals have made the mistake of letting moral judgment be the first and dominant thing they have to say on this issue. We have the opportunity to contextualize our message about sexuality in the broader context of God's redemptive work in all of human life and in the cosmos. When we build a relationship with a gay man or lesbian woman and introduce him or her to the Lord Jesus Christ, we have the opportunity not just or first to tell them that some of their sexual choices are immoral, but rather to recast the entire story of their lives with ours in the context of God's redemptive work.

2. The failure of treating “them” as irredeemable, and missing our own brokenness
Our second major failure is that by treating persons who identify as gay or lesbian as irredeemable, we miss the opportunity to honestly confront our own brokenness. We point the finger and thus break fellowship with those we push away. The reality is that we are deeply broken ourselves. Sexual brokenness is not a characterization of those degenerates over there, but of the entire human family. The way forward is to reestablish our fellowship with the entire human family, recognizing that we together share God's gift of sexuality and together share the burden of the brokenness of that gift, a brokenness that can be redeemed by God.

A couple of specific points bear emphasis. You all know the Church has been hurt badly time and again by the revelation of the hypocrisy and moral brokenness of its leaders. Make no mistake about it: One of your primary life callings is to pursue sexual purity and wholeness. It is no mistake that the New Testament Apostles time and time again feature the call to sexual purity prominently on their lists of the core requirements of faithful discipleship. They were realists. You will never have it right; you will never have it nailed down. The need for brutal honesty and rigorous discipleship will always be there in the pursuit of sexual purity.

Also, I mention a complex point that I cannot unpack for you, and that is that we should resist viewing the categories of homosexual and heterosexual as enduring creation realities, instead seeing them as our human constructions of the complex realities of our lives. It is real that some people engage in same-sex behavior. It is real that some people feel predominant and stable same-sex attraction. But our society's construction of these into the two definitive categories into which everyone falls - gay and straight - ignores much of the complexity of our human experience. We should resist using these labels as
ways of fundamentally identifying all persons. You are not either a heterosexual or a homosexual; you are a person with complex proclivities and possibilities for choice.

3. The failure of our clumsy, anti-intellectual, rejecting engagement with culture

Our third major failure has been our clumsy engagement with culture, our embarrassingly deficient representation of the richness of the Christian perspectives on human sexuality. Recent surveys suggest the majority of the public sees evangelical Christians as anti-intellectual and hateful. While this perception is in part the creation of a spin machine that pushes terms like “extreme” and “homophobic” and generates grotesque pseudo-controversies like the recent Chick-fil-A dust-up and the Mark Regnerus scandal at University of Texas, these negative evangelical characterizations are not without justification given the way that some of us have responded.

The way forward is to demonstrate love and respect for those whose views differ from our own. We should be quick to listen and slow to speak, circumspect in everything that we say. As someone who engages the scientific literature, I must say that it is often embarrassing how evangelicals handle their engagement with science. We need to develop a well-grounded Christian appreciation for the possibility of truth coming through empirical study by believers and nonbelievers, even as we recognize the way that science has been used often against the church and its moral stances in the cause of gay advocacy. We need to be literate, we need to ask deep questions, we need to manifest curiosity, and we need to explore how we can grow to a deeper and fuller understanding of the complexity of the human condition.

In our engagement with culture, we have to recognize and respond to one of the biggest challenges of all. Christians rightly frame questions of homosexual conduct around morality. In response, the world is saying to us "You just don't get it: This is not a question of morality but a question of civil rights." We have largely failed to address the reality that increasingly in the Western world sexual orientation is treated as the equivalent of race. Sexual identity is presumed to be a fundamental given of your very existence, determined before birth, and the bedrock of our identity. This is one area where being literate about science can help. For instance, many think homosexual orientation is genetically caused, even though the best science says “not so fast.” The latest and best behavioral genetics study of identical male twins looked at 71 twin pairs where one male co-twin could be defined as gay. How often do you think the other identical twin in the genetically-identical pair was also gay? They found that in only 7 cases out of the 71 was the second identical twin also gay. When it comes to race, 100% of identical twins match for race. Sexual orientation, whatever it is, is clearly not like race if only 10% of twin pairs match on this variable, so the analogy with race breaks down. This identical twin discordance suggests how little we understand about the homosexual condition, and how hasty it is to define personal identity around sexuality.

Christians, positively, assert that our identity is found first in Christ, in membership in the Church and in the family of God, and in faithful discipleship. Identity is not first or foremost found in our sexuality. We have a beautiful and compelling alternative to offer. And we must not ignore an important reality about construing sexual identity as a civil
right, and that is that those who see themselves as "sexual minorities" often really have been subject to reprehensible treatment by and in our culture. I cannot endorse gay marriage, because I see marriage not as a right but as a gift and reality created by God. But I do see gay and lesbian persons fully as human beings, my brothers and sisters as members of the human family, and as endowed with the same rights that I enjoy. We should be responsive to correct injustice and to support the well-being of those who are different. If we want our religious liberty to be treated with respect, we must treat respectfully those who morally dissent from us.

4. The failure of our pastoral care of individuals, families, and church

Our fourth major failure is that of our pastoral care for God's people among us. As we have construed gay and lesbian people as the enemies in the culture wars and as the irredeemable other, we have pushed our brothers and sisters out of our churches. We can and must do better. Effective pastoral care begins with learning to talk about sexuality in our churches, and to do so in a healthy, biblical, and loving way. Many churches avoid the topic of sexuality like the plague. The reality is that sexuality is a difficult and contentious subject that pastors and church leaders avoid for fear of offending, of creating schism or misunderstanding. We need to get over that and get on with God's calling of formation of God's people. Churches need to support comprehensive shaping of sexual character in our young people.

Our primary calling is to love, but love is not subjectively defined. Love for Christians is defined by Scripture, and requires telling the truth about sexual morality and sexual immorality. As we minister as fellow sojourners to those who experience sexual brokenness, we must not expect or demand easy answers and instant solutions. We should instead walk in fidelity alongside strugglers. I urge you to contemplate the difference between cure and care. As instant-solution, fast-food Americans, we yearn for the easy fix. We are implicit Pentecostals of the worst sort who want to believe that Jesus will smite this person and heal instantaneously and miraculously so the person won't be a bother. I've talked to a lot of people with homosexual backgrounds, and the "miraculously cured" people are hard to find. I know a lot of people, however, who have experienced significant change in their lives. The most common path is the path of chastity as a single person. I also know people who have shifted away from homosexual attraction to be able to function in a heterosexual relationship, though rarely without complications or challenges. Be ready for complex ministry walking with your sheep over the long haul. Something like a total cure may occur in the long run for some, but all will require steadfast and tenacious care all along the journey.

5. The failure of our leadership and governance of churches

A final failure: I have seen time and again over the last three decades theological conservatives outmatched by the political sophistication, tenacity, and creativity of those pushing the gay affirming agenda. I have been involved in some form another with the mainline Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Presbyterians. I have watched those denominations lurch ever more definitively into the acceptance of sexual practices that are deplored in Scripture. I have seen conservatives outmaneuvered and outworked in the governance of individual churches and in denominations.
One of the things we must do is to examine these topics in our churches. Our churches should be structured to create an atmosphere of inquiry and loving examination, but within the boundaries of stable confessional commitment. If you avoid these issues, you are fostering the eventual capitulation of your church to cultural standards. The progression I've often seen is the church that refuses to address the issue, which then grudgingly allows airing of nontraditional perspectives, followed by dialogue groups of incompatible views, followed by suspension of commitment to biblical teaching while consensus is sought, to toleration or authorization of minority perspectives with some privileged respect for the traditional view, and finally the embrace of full affirmation of what was previously out of bounds.

How will you keep the church that you will lead in the future consistent with biblical standards? Doing so will require that you teach with clarity, rigorously screen and develop church leadership, and lovingly and strategically exercise church discipline, all in humble prayer for the Spirit's work and blessing. Will you have the strength and wisdom to discern where your future elders and deacons stand on these issues? Will you have the clarity to insist on biblical fidelity on these matters? Will you have the strength to allow and encourage dialogue and debate, but always from the basis of confessional confidence that God has spoken on these matters and that fidelity requires that we stand with the traditional view?

Tim Keller was right when, at a recent meeting of the Gospel Coalition, he stated that issues of sexual orientation and sexual identity are today's most pressing issue of apologetics and church credibility. I hope, as a representative of the passing generation of leaders, that these reflections can challenge you, the rising generation of leaders, and guide you to fidelity to Christ and to succeed where we have not. I hope that in your churches, people like my DTS graduate friend will have a very different and much improved experience.

Remember that our Lord Jesus Christ himself said, "If you love me, you will obey my commandments." Our Great Shepherd also said "Feed my sheep." May God equip you in all to which he has called you. He is a faithful God, and will do so if you turn to him. Amen.