

Finding Hope and Peace: A New Way of Thinking
A guide for Evangelical Christian men living in the closet

Who am I?

My name is Dan Ferren. You may wonder what qualifies me to write something like this on so personal and sensitive a topic. Let me explain.

I grew up the son of an Evangelical Pastor in a small, holiness denomination in the Midwest. My childhood was full of Sunday School, children's church, church camp, and Vacation Bible School.

We were a conservative family, so I didn't go to the movies with friends until I was 13 and wasn't allowed to wear shorts until around that time. This resulted from a different mindset in the church my dad began to pastor around that time.

I grew up and sensed very strongly that I was supposed to study Christian Ministry in college, but I didn't feel specifically called to preach – a serious thing in our church. However, once I had the degree, I worked as a youth pastor and later pastored two churches of my own. Along the way, I obtained an MA in Counseling and worked in that field for a time.

In the process, I did what all good Christian boys were supposed to do. I got married and had a family. The problem throughout all of this is that I'm gay.

In January 2022, I came out to my wife, and we began divorce proceedings.

To finally be able to stand in my truth and take such a life-changing step, I had to do a lot of soul-searching. I dove into the Bible and original languages, context, and culture. I remember praying, "God, if I'm going to go down this road, I need You to guide me and turn me away from anything that will steer me wrong or give me the wrong information." And here I am.

Why this?

As a previously closeted gay Christian, the feelings of guilt, fear, and shame were near-constant companions. I exerted incredible emotional and mental energy to police myself and make sure I didn't do or say anything that would cause suspicion.

I had adopted the belief that my homosexuality resulted from my upbringing. I didn't believe it was a choice. I knew better. But as an Evangelical wrestling with the six famous 'clobber passages' in the Bible, I couldn't believe I was born this way.

I've worked with no less than four therapists and spent countless hours processing and thinking about my life. While those therapists helped me deal with the issues I presented, not one of them was ever able to help me move the needle from gay to straight.

I prayed, read my Bible, and 'trusted the Holy Spirit' to help me change or at least control myself. And while I was frequently successful at controlling my thoughts and temptations, I could never move beyond that into heterosexual desires (or even temptations). Eventually, the effort became too great, and I'd give up. Perhaps, like me, you don't have to imagine how it makes you feel to ask God to give you a desire and passion for your wife and never see the prayer answered.

Through conversations with other men, I have learned that I am not alone in any of this. I believe many more closeted Christian men live the same miserable existence while trying to please God and go to heaven. Many of us give up and live double lives.

And yet, if God condemns homosexuality, how could He call me to pastor those churches, give me inspiration for sermons, passion to preach them, and love for some pretty difficult people? If I were such a sinner, why would He choose me to fill that position and minister for Him? It doesn't make sense.

And so, I'm writing this e-book for you, reader. I'm writing not to change your mind or encourage you to do something drastic in your life. Those choices are very personal, and I wouldn't assume to guide you there without your express permission. I'm writing because I've been where you are. I know the misery, fear, and shame. I'm writing to give you some hope and peace. I'm offering you a different way to think and process who you are in light of your beliefs.

Your part.

Before I can ask you to do your part as you read this, I need to give you a history lesson so you understand why your part is essential.

The Enlightenment was a period that technically ended around the time of the French Revolution but whose effects lingered well into the 20th century. Rene Descartes was one of the prominent philosophers of the Enlightenment period. He attempted to deny everything until it could be proven true, which led to his famous statement, "I think. Therefore I am." If something is going to be proven true, then the one thinking must also be true, right? The enlightenment challenged faith and encouraged understanding of the world and man's place in it from a rational perspective. The mind and thinking were held up as the way forward.

You can imagine, then, that this idea of denying anything that can't be proven true might be seen as a challenge to people of faith. How can we believe in God if we can't prove His existence? Why read the Bible if we're not sure of its authenticity or perfection?

And so, to simplify a long story, the Christian Church adopted the belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and that the Bible was written as a static document with absolute truths applicable to all people in all places, at all times.

If you're an Evangelical, you likely have heard these ideas in various forms and probably hold them true. Here's the problem. We don't live in a static society that never changes. Nor did the Biblical writers expect their words to be taken as static. They understood that the next generation would look at their writings and apply them to their individual lives.

Here's your part: read this e-book with an open mind. Consider, if you will, that perhaps what you've been *taught* about the Bible isn't correct. Notice, I didn't say that the Bible isn't right, but what you've been taught about it. There's a difference. Allow yourself to be open to other interpretations and ideas about Scripture and its place in our lives.

Why is that difficult?

I imagine that the very thought of questioning what you've been taught about the Bible struck a chord of fear in your heart, but why? Because, as Evangelicals, we are taught that the Bible is the inerrant (perfect) Word of God. There are no mistakes, no inconsistencies in it (regardless of the truth of that statement). To question the Bible, then, is to question God. Over time, the position of the Pastor as the authority on all things Scriptural was elevated to a place where the pastor could say just about anything and never be questioned. He is, after all, the one you pay to study and prepare a sermon, right?

What if that pastor is only part-time and prepares his sermons during a two-hour window on Saturday morning? What if he's never been to Bible college or seminary? What if he attended a denominationally aligned school with a fundamental or conservative understanding of Scripture? And so, there is a uniquely American Evangelical problem created by this. Pastors are imperfect. They may also be homophobic and have a personal ax to grind.

But because we are taught not to question the authority of Scripture or, by extension, the pastor, we end up wrestling with pain in our lives and no way to find peace.

I say all of that to offer this word of encouragement. The following may be difficult or challenging, but God is big enough for your questions. To doubt isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign of faith. It signifies that you realize that you don't know everything and are willing to search for the answer. That search proves you have faith. If you didn't believe an answer existed, you wouldn't look in the first place.

The conundrum

Let's begin with the root of the problem. We've been told that the Bible condemns homosexuality as a sin, yet here you and I are, wanting to please God, but we can't change our sexuality. What's going on? Well, obviously, you're choosing to be gay, right?

Frankly, I think that's the dumbest thing I think anyone could say in response to homosexuality, that it's a choice. People speak it with no concept of what it's like to live in our shoes. A choice? Who in their right mind would choose to be gay? It's too hard!

To suggest that I chose to live in misery for so many years, that I chose to exert all that emotional and mental energy, that I chose to carry around guilt and shame needlessly is ludicrous. Besides, could any of them have chosen, at a low moment in their marriages or lives, to go out and find someone of the same sex to experiment with just because? I highly doubt it.

But many Evangelicals have to believe that it's a choice. Why? Because they believe the Bible says it's a sin, and that's that. So, if we were born gay, God would unjustly condemn us for something we couldn't control. God isn't unjust, but these two concepts must be rectified, so it's a choice.

Others might suggest, as I did, that it results from our upbringing. Overbearing mother, absent father (emotionally or physically). Some might say that it's because of molestation or sexual abuse. And while I think our upbringing might accelerate our progress, and we may have been abused because a predator sensed something about us that made us a target, I do not believe that these things are the cause of homosexuality.

I deny these two implications for one significant reason. I know there are men in this world who suffered so much more than I did, whose family life makes mine look like a Sunday afternoon picnic, who never once felt anything like same-sex attraction. They're married, have kids and never once thought or felt anything but heterosexual feelings.

That leaves the only other option. We were born this way.

And so, the problem is deciding what you believe about why you're gay. If you're an Evangelical, you will either believe you're a sinner destined for hell, or that Scripture has been misinterpreted.

To find peace and hope in your life, there must necessarily be some deconstruction of Evangelical belief. Evangelicalism and homosexuality are diametrically opposed, and Evangelicalism has made it so.

Of the whole Bible and all the lessons and stories, and instructions it contains, Evangelical Christianity has chosen six passages of Scripture to draw a line in the sand. The two cannot co-exist.

Answering the critics

Die-hards will suggest therapy or prayer as a means of overcoming same-sex attraction.

I've already mentioned my time with four therapists, none of whom helped move the needle toward heterosexuality.

Furthermore, conversion therapy is not effective at all. The former chairman of Exodus International, a prominent Christian conversion therapy program, said, "Today, I do not consider myself 'ex-gay,' and I no longer support or promote the movement. Please allow me to be clear: I do not believe that reparative therapy changes sexual orientation; in fact, it does great harm to many people."

(https://www.huffpost.com/entry/exodus-international-shuts-down_n_3470911) In 2013, Exodus International shut down.

What about prayer? Maybe you haven't prayed enough. The funny thing is, there is no documented case of anyone ever having their sexual orientation changed because they prayed about it. And if God found homosexuality so abhorrent but chose never to help anyone in the history of the world change to please Him, despite our desperation to do so, what kind of God would that make Him? Would you want to worship Him?

Why doesn't God answer our plea? I have three possible explanations.

- 1) He's simply unjust. He doesn't love everyone (the Bible has yet again been misinterpreted), and He relishes the idea of sending us to hell. But no, that's not right. That's so far-fetched that it's ridiculous.
- 2) Perhaps we've found the one thing God can't do. He can do absolutely everything else, but He can't change a person's sexual orientation or even help them change. No, that's likely not it.
- 3) The last option is simple... He sees no reason to change us.

Perhaps all those years of praying to change were wasted. Maybe when we were in anguish and grief over the sinfulness of our sexuality, God sat mercifully beside us and tried to help us understand that there was nothing wrong with us. He loves us just the way we are.

What about the Bible?

What about those six passages of Scripture often called the “clobber passages” (because they’re used to clobber and beat down those with same-sex attraction)? I’ll not spend the time here to go over them. Plenty of other books and websites already created do a much better job than I could. I’ll leave a list at the end for you to look at on your own.

The critical thing to remember is that if you look to Evangelical authors, you will only get more of what you’ve already heard. Even the most ‘compassionate’ authors will find a way to make it a sin. You’ll have to challenge yourself to read outside the lines.

Realize, please, that if you left America and went elsewhere in the world, you’d soon realize that many Christians think and believe far differently than we do here in the US. We live in a fishbowl of sorts. What might be called progressive here could be mainstream elsewhere. American Evangelicalism does not have a corner on the worship of God or the correct interpretation of Scripture.

Does that challenge you? Would you like to know why? Because a hallmark of the Evangelical faith is a strong emphasis on Biblical accuracy. Evangelicals know Scripture, quote the Bible, and can tell you how many times they’ve read it through. Interestingly, I doubt anyone will ever stand before God and hear Him condemn them for not being Biblical enough.

So, to read someone outside the circle of Evangelicalism seems to open yourself to heresy or inaccuracy. But do you have so little faith in yourself as to believe that you can’t reason things in your mind well enough? Trust yourself. Trust God to help you. He gave you a mind to use, don’t be afraid of the wisdom and insight you find there.

When it comes to faith, the person willing to say, “I know that I don’t know,” has more faith than the pastor in the pulpit on Sunday morning. Being sure of the meaning of every passage of scripture and how God feels about every issue is no faith at all. I suggest that we actually show *more* faith when we aren’t so sure. That’s the very essence of faith.

The result

Let’s imagine that you begin the journey of allowing yourself to doubt what you’ve been taught. As frightening as it may feel, there will likely be a sense of excitement or anticipation because you’ll be moving in a direction that finally feels aligned with who you are. Let me encourage you to notice something. As you begin to search the internet or read books or watch YouTube videos and listen to creators that are affirming, progressive, or gay, pay attention to how you feel about yourself. But especially, pay attention to how you think about God and how He feels about you. If you’re anything like me, you will notice that the more you lean into your

authenticity and truth, the more you love yourself and the more you feel God's love. However, the more I lived a lie, the less I felt that love and acceptance.

At some point, you will be faced with the ultimate decision. After you have taken in information about a more loving view of the Bible and homosexuality, you will have to decide what you believe.

You can decide that everything you've read is wrong and hold to your Evangelical teachings, or you can choose to deconstruct that part of Evangelicalism in your life. Both choices have their pros and cons.

What matters is that you make a choice based not on fear or doubt but on the truth that resonates in your heart.

My Own Journey

It may be helpful to know how I went through this process and where I am in life now.

To be honest, I never allowed myself to say I was gay. I always told myself I was bisexual because 1) I was married, right? And 2) it was somehow easier to deal with in my mind. Acknowledging that I was gay was simply too difficult and fraught with challenges.

One day, in the summer of 2020, as I drove down the road, I had an epiphany. Really, it was just a moment of clarity, but I remember saying to myself, "I'm not bi; I'm as gay as the day is long. Who do I think I'm kidding?" And from that moment on, I began a journey of self-discovery and authenticity.

Part of that journey was to work with my own life coach about being authentic and finding my true self. But I knew that if I weren't completely open with him, our work would not be successful, and he'd know something was being withheld or resisted. He became the first person I ever came out to. I don't think he was completely surprised, but he was completely supportive. He immediately offered me unconditional love and encouragement.

It was through the process of working with him that I came to understand my worth, learned to love myself, and saw that I had choices in life. I could make choices from a place of strength and love rather than fear and shame.

Of course, with my experience as a pastor and a person of faith, I wasn't going to simply throw the Bible out the window for the sake of living my life as a gay man. I had to know if what I'd been *taught* the Bible said was really what it meant. Because, at face value, it truly appears to condemn homosexuality outright. I decided I had to look for myself. I had to dig into language, context, and culture. Faith is saying, "I know that I don't know, and yet I believe." That's what I

was doing. And I prayed, “God, I’m going to investigate this; I have to know what you actually feel about me as a gay man. But as I search and look, if I begin to head down a path that is going to lead me astray to something untrue, I need you to check my spirit.”

Give me one good reason why God wouldn’t honor that prayer. That’s the kind of prayer He LOVES to answer. In Isaiah, He says, “Come, let us reason together.” You have questions? Good! Let’s wrestle with it, let’s talk about it, let’s argue over it. Think, use your brain, engage with Me! So that’s what I did.

As I dug in and read and researched, I knew I had to steer clear of Evangelical authors. Basically, if you go to the people you’ve always gone to, you’re going to get the same answer you’ve always gotten. I had to allow myself to believe that people of other faith persuasions (namely progressive Christians) might have something of value to say about this. I read commentaries, language guides, and cultural information.

At no time did I ever feel that check in my spirit. I never sensed God telling me I was headed in the wrong direction. In fact, the more I looked, the more I came to believe that God didn’t condemn me. And (please hear this), for the first time in my life, at 50 years of age, I believed in my heart that God loved me.

Now that I had begun to understand and accept who I really was and came to believe and understand that God doesn’t condemn me for being gay, the love for myself that I had newly experienced began to grow. It was at this point that I was able to face and make some very difficult decisions.

This is the difficult part. To be clear, my wife and I have divorced. I knew God doesn’t approve of divorce, though arguably, the Bible doesn’t outright call it a sin. But I also knew that I was completely unhappy in my marriage. Thoughts of being an empty nester or growing old with my ex filled me with dread. We weren’t best friends, and in hindsight, our relationship was very surface. We had problems in our marriage, and it had really been ‘dead’ for several years. We continued to have sex, but it was scheduled for once a week and felt like one more box to check in a long list of to-dos that never ended for me. I believe we both felt the disconnect but hadn’t identified it yet. In the long run, was it a real marriage at all? Regardless, I knew that to stay in our marriage meant death to my spirit and unhappiness for both her and me.

What I want to be very clear about here is that I faced these difficult decisions about divorce in a very different place than I would have even six months earlier. Because I now loved myself and accepted who I am, I was able to think about this from a position of love and power rather than fear, guilt, and shame. Which decision do you suppose would render the best results for all involved? The decision still wasn’t easy, but it looked different from my new perspective. It wasn’t terrifying or overwhelming. I didn’t feel the enormous guilt and shame that would have accompanied it previously. I believed in myself and knew, in the long run, it would be better for all of us. My wife, my kids, and me.

I talk with many men who immediately want to run their minds ahead to these difficult decisions and get overwhelmed and simply shut down. If you're doing this, you're putting the cart way before the horse. If you haven't done the work of loving yourself and finding your worth, you're not ready for those decisions. Lay them aside and focus on the work at hand. Learn to love and accept yourself.

The Big Step Forward

It was at that point when I had decided that I had to live authentically as the man I was made to be that I began working with a coach specifically about coming out. He helped me form the words I would share with my wife to tell her I am gay. He gave me advice on what words to use and phrases to avoid. He posed challenges and questions I might have to answer and helped me prepare for those. We role-played and practiced. This was the most difficult thing to do because I knew that with every session, I was getting closer and closer to the biggest, most life-changing event of my life.

On January 20, 2022, I sat with my wife in my office and opened the closet door and stepped into the light. Even as I type this, I have tears in my eyes. There was a lot of emotion that came with it. Though I was nervous, of course, I wasn't terrified. I spoke clearly and with strength. Finally, after 27 years of giving away my power, I was standing in my own strength.

My wife and I had had periods in our marriage where she became aware of my same-sex attraction. But because of her beliefs about what the Bible says and her own biases, she believed that homosexuality was a choice. Her initial reaction of surprise wasn't so much that I was telling her I'm gay, but that I was owning it and "choosing" it. Really, the only choice I made was to quit living a lie. We discussed divorce and the next steps. The next few days and weeks at home were difficult and challenging, to say the least.

We told our three kids about the divorce on February 20th, and I moved out of the house on March 18th. Our kids were initially deeply hurt and upset, naturally. But at 17, 19, and 22, they weren't unaware of the problems that existed. In short order, they each came around and saw that it was almost inevitable. At my ex-wife's request, I didn't come out to them at that time as I had planned. She felt like the divorce would be hard enough. I thought telling them would help make sense of things. But I honored her request.

Finally, on July 27, 2022, I told my kids. One at a time, I sat with them and shared the deeper reason why their mother and I divorced. In their own way, each of them told me it didn't matter to them, I was their dad, and they loved me. That was the happiest day I'd had in years.

I've since told my two sisters, who received the news with mixed feelings, but both acknowledged that I am their brother, and they love me. I have decided not to tell my mother.

There are many reasons that have gone into that decision, but I believe it to be the best one for her and for me. If she finds out, or if I have a partner someday, I'll deal with that when it happens.

What Now?

Since then, I have been learning to live alone. It's actually nice. While I am still available and involved in my kids' lives, I am free to come and go as I please. I am making new friends (which I didn't have before). I am learning to be comfortable in my own skin, to figure out what I like and enjoy in life, and to live an existence free of shame and guilt, free of having to police myself constantly. I have come out to a handful of other people that I know and have found them to be supportive and loving, even a pastor friend that I've known for several years.

While everyone's journey will be different, and the experience will be challenging in different ways, I hope this has offered some hope. My trust is that, amid the fear and darkness of 'what-ifs' about the future, there is a glimmer of light that all is not bad and that there is love, acceptance, and support. Joy can be found.

While, at the time of this writing, my wife still believes that my sexuality is a choice, I can be cordial with her, discuss the kids, and be around her without problems. I see her with eyes of compassion because I understand her hurt, confusion, her own saboteurs, and life traumas. I know that she isn't functioning from a place of real awareness. I truly hope that she will open her heart to someone else in her life one day. It would bring me joy to know that she is being loved the way she deserves, the way I wasn't able to.

A last word

Whatever you decide, know that you're not alone. And you don't have to process, decide, or walk alone. I and others like me are here to help you. Please get in touch with me if you need help, want to talk, or have questions. We can schedule a confidential free one-on-one call to discuss your concerns, fears, and hopes.

Below is a list of resources to get you started. I trust you'll find them helpful and hopeful.

Life Coaches:

Dan Ferren

Instagram: Danferren

LinkedIn: Dan Ferren

Facebook: Dan Ferren Coaching, LLC

Eric Feltes

Instagram: ericfeltes

TikTok: eric.feltes

Kirk Barnett

Instagram: Kirk_barnett80

Live_out_proud and www.liveoutproud.store

Books:

Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like Christianity. Wolsey, Roger, 2011. Excellent resource to compare Evangelical belief with progressive Christianity.

Unclobber, Rethinking Our Misuse of the Bible on Homosexuality. Martin, Colby, 2016. A careful, considerate, and thorough exegesis of the passages used to condemn homosexuality and what they really say.

Deconstruction:

Paul Swearingen

TikTok: pastorpaul_tiktok

Youtube: Unconventional Pastor Paul

Colby Martin:

Instagram: colbymartin

LinkTree: linktr.ee/colbymartin