

*I'd like to dedicate this book to my Tacoma friends, now
extended family, who made this book possible: Teresa and
Todd Silver, Kent Thomas, Dave and Teresa Hillis, Kris and
Lana Roche, Steve Lantry SJ, Noah, and Nic. Without you
this would not have been!*

YOU CAN, IF YOU WANT TO

Navigating Christian Faith,
Conscience and Matters LGBTQ+

JAMES ALISON

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Contents

Introduction I

PART ONE THE BUILD-UP AND THE CORE II

I	Aesop and Christ	12
2	A hell issue	18
3	Wholeheartedness	22
4	Wholeheartedness: an example	26
5	In the beginning . . . oh, not so fast!	34
6	The beginning in the middle	37
7	Honouring our coats	46
8	What's going on in the central dynamic?	53
9	Telling the tale backwards	60
10	Happy ending or stunning beginning?	69
11	Death and glory	76
12	The Lamb and its viscera	84
13	Lamb and sacrifice	89
14	Lamb and substitution	98
15	Lamb and forgiveness	107
16	Lamb and creation	115
17	The breath and the wind	123
18	Hints of a new protagonist	128
19	The package unleashed	134
20	Holiness in transition	143

21	The Spirit beds down	153
22	The culmination	163

PART TWO COMING ALONGSIDE: A BRIDGE
FROM THERE TO HERE

		173
23	Hints of history	174
24	Hints of science	183
25	An almost traumatic aliveness	191
26	Sideways teacher	199
27	Sideways learning: the image and the mirror	209
28	Sideways learning: conspiracy theory or knowledge?	217
29	Sideways learning: shame and guilt	225
30	Sideways learning: belonging and gaslighting	233
31	Sideways learning: shared conscience	240
32	Alongside, at last	247

PART THREE SOME FUN WITH THE 'CLOBBER'
TEXTS

		255
33	Before the plunge	256
34	Just a second...	260
35	And so to Sodom...	267
36	A very 'knowing' tale	274
37	Leviticus and holiness	284
38	Textual mysteries in Leviticus 18:22 and Leviticus 20:13	292
39	What comes before Romans 2?	302
40	What comes before Romans 1?	312
41	Words change meaning over time	322
42	A lesson in being deft: Paul and the Corinthians	331
43	<i>That's all, folks!</i>	341

Introduction

This is a book about basic Christianity. One written by a Catholic priest and theologian who, as is not uncommon in his profession, is a gay man.

For some of you the words 'Catholic' or 'priest' may raise hackles; for others the word 'gay' may do the same. And for some of you the three terms applied to the same person may seem some sort of contradiction in logic: something that just shouldn't be.

My hope is that by the end of the book, and perhaps especially, but by no means only, if you're Protestant and straight, my self-description will seem unimportant, and you will have found your appreciation for your Christian faith enhanced.

Some of you, as you have sought to live the fullness of faith, may have had worries of conscience about accepting the full humanity of LGBTQ+ people, or indeed some other group, within the life of our churches. I pray that it will become obvious to you how an ability to move on in this field flows naturally from what I will share with you: a fairly rigorous, conservative account of how our Creation and Redemption in Christ works.

Let me start with an analogy: that of the detective story.

There are at least two basic structures to detective stories. In the classic one, a corpse is found. The police are called to determine the initial facts. Once 'natural causes' are ruled

out, an intrepid sleuth, who may be neither associated with nor respected by the police, manages to untangle what really happened. The author keeps the pot boiling by throwing out red herrings, false clues and probably a few other murders along the way. These pepper the path towards the sleuth's brilliant revelation. In the final scene, the veil is ripped aside, we are shown 'whodunnit' and the culprit is escorted away by a dumbfounded officer of the law.

In this type of story, the tension is provided by the outcome not being known, along with the ritual assurance that all will be revealed. The pleasure of the drama lies in the author's skill at misleading you as to what's going on while convincing you that the detective's intelligence is greater than your own. A failed detective story of this kind would be one where you rightly guessed 'whodunnit', and for what reasons, too early and too easily. With the tension dissolved, the denouement seems banal.

The other common structure I will call the Columbo variant, after Peter Falk's TV detective of that name from the 1970s and 1980s. Here we begin by watching the murderer commit the crime – so we know 'whodunnit' from the start. The detective appears to intuit this from the beginning, so we all know where this is going to end. The pleasure arises from accompanying the detective as he progresses sagaciously from observation and deduction to being able to prove it, while simultaneously trapping the murderer in a failed cover-up.

No account of basic Christianity, such as I promised at the beginning, is a traditional detective story. We know all about the murder, and there is no corpse. Nevertheless, there is always theological detective work to be done in discovering why there was a murder, who planned it and for whose benefit, as well as in finding out how we ourselves are on our way to becoming the reverse of a corpse: a resurrected body, in fact. We are forgiven for our complicity in producing corpses, or for our cover-up of, or indifference towards, their production by others.

I've chosen the Columbo method, because I don't seek to lead you to a brilliant denouement in which you will suddenly 'know' something you didn't know before – something cerebral, perceived as if by a distant observer from outside the situation described. Instead I'll seek to share what it might be like to find your way inside a situation, the facts of which you already know, in order to discover what is really going on. In other words, I will be working inductively rather than deductively. This is slower work, and less flashy than proceeding deductively, because I am not trying to stun you with some brilliance of my own. Rather I hope you will allow me to move alongside you, enabling me to share with you something of a radiance very much not my own.

So here's the starting point, the scene where we get to watch 'whodunnit' at the beginning. It is the well-known scene from Chapter 10 of the Acts of the Apostles. Much has happened since Jesus ascended and the Holy Spirit rushed down on the Apostolic group at Pentecost. A number of key texts from the Law and the Prophets have been seen to be fulfilled, and various signs and wonders follow. All is understood within the framework of Israel. All those involved are Jewish or Samaritan.

Some time later Peter, the leader of the apostolic group, finds himself accepting an invitation from a Roman centurion and his household, which would have been composed of not only family members but also servants and maybe slaves, and been not Jews but pious Gentiles. Following the lead of their 'paterfamilias', they would have attended Synagogue in a special fenced-off area, and known the Scriptures but not undergone formal conversion. It was not uncommon for well-respected Gentiles of this sort to be close to Jewish communities in the Mediterranean world. They were known as 'God fearers', but were still Gentiles, with all that meant in terms of their impurity. So Jews could not enter their houses and remain pure.

Peter has walked 40 miles north from Joppa to Caesarea and enters the centurion's house. At his host's invitation Peter begins to explain to those assembled what has happened

concerning Jesus of Nazareth: his preaching and healing, his execution and resurrection, and how Jesus had

commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*

Peter is giving his stump speech, which he has offered with slight variations among different Jewish groups throughout the Holy Land. Before he gets to the end of it he, and those who have come with him, are astounded to perceive that the Holy Spirit is falling on these impure Gentiles: the same Holy Spirit that had fallen on them, circumcised Jews, at Pentecost: the living holiness of God. Now, against all expectation, it is Gentiles who have clearly been taken outside of themselves in their speaking in tongues and praising God.

Peter, witnessing this, says,

‘Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.†

This is the ‘whodunnit’ moment: the moment the Holy Spirit falls upon Gentiles, and Peter is moved to baptize them into the Church on the same footing as the Jewish people who had likewise undergone both experiences.

In the pages that follow I will take you inside this moment, so that it is not simply ‘something important that happened’. In fact, the first half of the book will walk you inside this

*Acts 10: 42–3.

†Acts 10: 47–8.

scene, so that the next time I describe it you will find yourself in a much bigger space.

You see, there are ways of talking about this scene as though it is relatively simple. For instance:

After Jesus died to pay the price for our sins and rose so that we know the price was accepted, God sent the Holy Spirit. Now people who by believing in Jesus had been forgiven their sins would receive the inner fibre and strength not to sin anymore. They would thus be able to fulfil Torah, the Law, from the heart, and no longer by arduous effort. To begin with, this happened among the Hebrew people, whether resident in the Holy Land or from the Jewish diaspora. The moment came, however, when God decided to include the Gentiles in this arrangement, so he gave Peter a vision which nudged him into going off with some Gentiles. Whereupon the Spirit fell on those Gentiles, they were baptized, and the Universal Church was born.

This account offers a succession of facts, with God making decisions and decrees without it being clear if there is a logical structure containing them all, and if so, what that inner logic is. So, Jesus’s coming, dying, being raised and the Holy Spirit being given first to Jews and then to Gentiles are just things that happened, about which we are supposed to know, and that’s that. There’s not a lot of mystery. Or, just conceivably, there’s so much mystery that we can’t possibly know what it’s all about. God is free, sovereign, doing what God wants, God says what God wants, it is written down, accept it and move on.

However, this account assumes the text of Acts 10, written by St Luke, to be much flatter than it is. In fact, there are all sorts of mysterious hints in it that something rather richer is going on. For the moment I’ll just point out some of them, for they raise questions I will encourage you to ponder as you accompany me through this book. My hope is that next time we look at Acts 10, halfway through this book, you may be better placed to resolve them.

For instance, why does Chapter 10 begin with an angel visiting a Roman centurion in Caesarea and telling him to send for Simon Peter, who is staying in Joppa? Why not simply tell Peter to go to Caesarea, preach and baptize? Why does Luke think it worth mentioning that Peter was staying in the house of a tanner?

The story then turns to Peter in Joppa, who falls into a trance and has a vision of a sheet, or sail, being lowered down from an open heaven, and in it all sorts of four-footed beasts, birds and reptiles. The voice that accompanies this doesn't say 'Go to Caesarea and baptise some Gentiles': it says, 'Get up, Peter, sacrifice and eat.' Why would the voice say to Peter, who was not of Levitical or priestly family, that he should sacrifice, rather than merely eat?

Peter clearly understands enough to see that many of the animals in the sheet are of the sort an observant Jew was forbidden to eat, and so he refuses the instruction. He has been taught by the book of Leviticus the complex distinctions between the Holy and the profane, on the one hand, and the clean and the unclean on the other. So he refuses anything that might be profane (as opposed to holy) and unclean (as opposed to clean). The voice then says: 'What God has made clean you must not call profane.' The instruction, and Peter's refusal, are repeated three times.

But if you were Peter, what had God made clean? And when? Could it not be that this was some sort of diabolical temptation, seeking to lead Peter astray from the path of holiness? To add to the confusion, this was not the first time that Peter has been challenged three times and refused each time. The previous occasion was, to his shame, the night Jesus had been handed over for death.

Any suggestion that this repetition of three refusals is accidental is removed when Peter hears the messengers from the centurion 'shout out with a great voice' from just outside the tanner's house. In Greek, that's the same word as the cock he had heard 'crowing' as he stood in the high priest's

courtyard. Peter is being nudged, to help him work out what his vision meant. But why?

Peter is told by the Spirit to go off with the three men straight away, which he does. So, the Spirit is perfectly capable of giving straightforward instructions. Why then the complicated dream stuff if direct communication would have sufficed? Peter heads for Caesarea and, rather than objecting to entering the house of a Gentile (which would have been customary), he goes inside and says,

'You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with, or to visit, a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came . . .'

But the vision he had had was of animals that could be eaten! What has happened to Peter such that he has come to understand the vision as having to do with humans?

In a brief interlude, the centurion explains the angelic instruction and his invitation. He indicates the assembled household's readiness to listen to what his guest has to say. Now Peter, just before he starts his stump speech, says, 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

But why? What has happened that Peter should move from meats to people to nations? None of this is explained in a 'flat' way in the text. Luke's assumption is that the reader is on the inside of a dynamic; one which has its own internal logic to the extent that what happens next isn't arbitrary, but a comprehensible part of an ongoing plan. Each of the questions I have raised is a moment which pushes the contour of the dynamic wider than our protagonists could at first have understood.

I want to share with you the internal logic of that dynamic, so that by inhabiting it together we may see how the same dynamic pushes our contours wider than we might at first have imagined.

Each chapter in what follows is short: no more than 3,000 words. No need to hurry, and plenty of breaks. In Chapters

1–4 my aim is to take you to what the book is about, and give you a chance to think through where you find yourself in the midst of the turbulence that arises when issues to do with matters LGBTQ+ and Christianity coincide.

In Chapters 5–11 I begin to set out the central vision of Christianity I am seeking to introduce you to. I start with its completion in the Lamb standing as one slain from the book of Revelation, and work backwards. So I begin with the Ascension, move back to the Resurrection, and then look at Jesus's death on the Cross. I try to speak both 'Protestant' and 'Catholic', to be as easy as possible for those formed by either tradition to find their way into the centre of the Christian mystery.

There then follows, in Chapters 12–16, an extended meditation on why Christianity has found in the symbol of the Lamb the dynamic around which a huge change of meaning is to take place. Here we look at sacrifice, love, substitution, forgiveness and creation in ways which flow together.

In Chapters 17–22, having seen what it is that Jesus was doing for us, we turn to the Holy Spirit. What was going on in the Holy Spirit being poured out on us? This is central. It really does make a huge difference. Is Christianity all about Jesus forgiving our sins, with the Holy Spirit coming, as it were, as a stage extra to make sure we can behave properly thereafter? Or is there a much more open-ended narrative available for us as Jesus sets in motion the giving of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit comes to open us up from within to a New Creation (forgiving our sins on the way)? At the end of this section we'll have another go at looking at our earlier 'whodunnit' set-up. It should make much more sense by the time we get there.

Part II of the book is my brief attempt to show how we might find ourselves inhabiting the dynamic of the Spirit set out in the previous chapters, especially as it relates to what we now call LGBTQ+. After a short historical introduction I open a sketch (in Chapters 23–32) of what I call 'Sideways God' – a habitable anthropology of the Spirit. In these pages

I try to be more personal, sharing how living in this reality is, I trust, humanizing me, all with a view to showing that how you receive this, and what you do with it, is not a matter of any external authority.

Finally, in Chapters 33–43, I offer readings of the famous 'Clobber Texts' – the Bible verses that are often misused to close down discussion about matters LGBTQ+ in our churches. Some of you will be tempted to go to Part III first. I cannot stop you, but I think you'll enjoy them more if you come to them with lenses altered by your previous journey through Parts I and II. There's nothing like a sense of fun to undo fear, shame and the dread-serious voice of the accuser.

Madrid, January 2025

I

Aesop and Christ

I would like to start with Aesop, an ancient storyteller. Here is his fable about the North Wind and the Sun.*

The North Wind and the Sun had a quarrel about which of them was the stronger. While they were disputing with much heat and bluster, a Traveller passed along the road wrapped in a cloak.

'Let us agree,' said the Sun, 'that the one who can remove that Traveller's cloak is the stronger of us.'

'Very well,' growled the North Wind, and at once sent a cold, howling blast against the Traveller.

With the first gust of wind the ends of the cloak whipped about the Traveller's body. But the Traveller immediately wrapped the cloak more closely around, and the harder the Wind blew, the tighter the Traveller held it. The North Wind tore angrily at the cloak, but all efforts were in vain.

Then the Sun began to shine, at first with gentle beams. In the pleasant warmth, after the bitter cold of

the North Wind, the Traveller unfastened the cloak and let it hang loosely from the shoulders. The Sun's rays grew warmer and warmer. The Traveller's hat came off, and there was much mopping of the brow. At last the Traveller was so hot that she pulled off the cloak and, to escape the blazing sunshine, threw herself down in the welcome shade of a tree by the roadside.

When the tale is accompanied by pictures, you get a stern, pouty-lipped Wind and a radiant smiley-faced Sun. It looks as though they are two equally matched sparring partners, and there is some doubt as to the outcome. But if we take a step back from the story, that isn't really the case. Winds come and go over the surface of our planet; they are strong or mild, cold or warm, violent or refreshing. But the Sun is not in fact in rivalry with them at all. The Sun's warmth comes from a huge distance, and is able to reach us and have a slow and gradual effect on us with a quiet permanence and a reliability that dwarfs anything any wind can do.

In this book I'd like to offer you a way through some of the violent winds blowing through the Christian world concerning LGBTQ+ people. These winds affect us all, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, as well as the secular environments in which we all live. I'll suggest that going into rivalry with violent winds is not a good idea, and that allowing ourselves to be bathed by the Sun until we genuinely want to take off our anxiously clasped cloaks is the way to go.

You see, the Sun knew that the Traveller would take off her cloak *when she wanted to*. The Wind, on the other hand, thought it had to fight with the Traveller every step of the way. And that is the key idea in this book: you can move on in this area, *if you want to*.

I've been dealing with the winds personally for more than 50 years, and I'm delighted to report that I am at last someone who has been warmed by the sun. Every now and then I'll share with you bits of my own story. But one of the things I've

*This is the classic *Aesop for Children* version, adapted by me.

learnt over the years is that in this matter nothing is decided by debating or shaming or name-calling. Just as it isn't resolved by 'The Bible says . . .', 'The immutable teaching of the Church . . .' or 'The irrefutable evidence of modern science . . .'. Each of these very quickly becomes part of Wind's tug of war with us travellers. Whatever element of truth we grasp onto loses its truthfulness the moment it gets weaponized.

So who might want to read a book like this? Who do I think you are, my reader?

I think you may be a frightened young person, brought up in a strongly religious family. As you begin to sense that you are probably one of 'them' you may be feeling engulfed by panic, and the fear of hell. That was me, from the age of nine. Having been there, I don't want to sugar-coat what you are going through. No offer of an 'easy way out'. No cheap arguments. Because I know from my own experience that that would be to dishonour the depth of your pain and your fear. I want to offer you the fruits plucked along the way I have travelled myself. One that has involved working through every one of those fears, 'testing all things and holding fast to that which is good' until such time as you can see that it is in fact the Holy Spirit whose gentle warmth is bringing you into being; that you will not be betraying Jesus by becoming who you are, but that is warming you out of your chill-dread cloak.

Or you may be an anxious parent, faced with the growing, even sudden, realization that your child is queer, rainbow-spectrum, LGBTQ+ whichever version is most familiar to you. You may feel torn between a sense of loyalty to your religious belonging and convictions, and your love for your child. You may even feel that this is a terrible test and that, like Abraham, you may need to sacrifice your child, at least metaphorically, to show your obedience to God. You may fear that you will be shamed by friends and contemporaries, members of your church or community. Or that you did something wrong that your child should have turned out this way.

To you I want to offer something that honours what lies behind that anxiety, while allowing the sense of the drastic to dissipate.

Or you may be a parent whose feelings are not so drastic, yet, as your love for your child takes you into a new space of understanding, you still wonder what will become of your Christian faith. You may fear that you are moving into a watered-down version of it, trying to protect your child from some of the consequences of taking Christianity seriously. You have all the right convictions as you learn to support your child, but are aware that, in getting there, you may have jumped a step or two in reconciling what you now know to be true about them with your faith.

I want to offer you a way of filling in those steps. I don't want you to be left feeling that you are painfully astride two worlds, one in which you are a full-hearted Christian, and another in which you find yourself engaged in special pleading on behalf of your child. Instead, I hope to show a path to knowing that it is by 'moving on' in this sphere that you have in fact entered into the most wholehearted Christianity; that it is not you who have been engaged in special pleading, but the Advocate who all along has been pleading in you.

Wholeheartedness is what this is all about. Hard-won wholeheartedness.

Or you may be a person in a position of responsibility: a teacher, a pastor, a priest, a board member of a religious or a social organization. You may have moved on in your heart some time ago, but long for your school, your Church, your organization to move on too, yet be aware of all the tensions which LGBTQ+ issues raise. Matters of funding; the naked anger unleashed when this issue is discussed; the rigidity and impossibility of these matters for colleagues you have long trusted and admired. This tension may be a cause of shame for you: shame that you don't feel free to speak your mind; that this, of all subjects, is making a coward of you.

You may have noticed among your colleagues and friends two equal and opposed reactions: on the one hand those who have hardened into taking an ever more dogmatic line, and then those who have flipped entirely 'to the other side', and become as fundamentalist in their liberalism as their mirror images are in their conservatism. You may suspect something not quite right here, and wish you knew how to move on more organically, how to take the fundamentals of your religion seriously while being able fully to inhabit its genuinely liberating consequences. I am seeking to offer you just such an organic route.

Again, it's a kind of wholeheartedness I'm wishing for you: the kind that sets you free to decide and act because you know, peacefully, and for yourself, not because others have told you, but from within. You will know you can if you want to.

Maybe you're a closeted priest or pastor, or figure of authority in a religious-dependent environment. You do not need me to tell you about fear, or shame or impossibility. They will have dominated your life. Nothing you read here will bully you or shame you. I have dwelt in the place of shame. No one who has been there, could conceivably wish it on anybody else. I hope the pages of this book will enable some of the ice to melt, some of the rigidity to be made subtle, the grip to loosen. But nothing will be forced. I hope to make accessible to you a gently warming Sun who will show you how and when you may step free.

You may be someone for whom this issue has always been easy. I hope you will discover how lucky you have been. I will be offering you a way into the life of the Gospel that will allow you to honour the precariousness of others, empathize with a struggle that has not been yours, and see how it might share elements with issues that are difficult for you.

Finally, I think you may be someone who knows exactly what is right and what is wrong. Someone utterly convinced that God is implacably imposed to any concessions to

LGBTQ+ people. Sorry, but that's just how it is; even if you wanted to, it would be wrong to move on.

If you are such a person, then this book has probably been forced into your hands by a wretched relative or a 'concerned' colleague. Don't read it. It won't argue with you. It will gently insinuate that your 'I can't move on' is a form of idolatry, of being bound by a cold wind. If what I say is true, grace may hint that the little statement 'You can, *if you want to*' suggests that *if you don't want to*, it is not God's will but yours that is coming to the surface. So put the book down. The suggestion that your position is a choice for which you are responsible, rather than an imposition you must obey, may just be too hard to bear.

One last thing, before we get into matters of substance. A question: by what authority am I sharing these things with you? In the pages that follow, you'll find talk of authority. Not my own, but Christ's. How his authority is made available to us and among us. I don't want to anticipate that discussion here. For the moment, let me say this: I have no authority to be writing and talking the way I do. I'm not even interested in acquiring such authority or being recognized as 'an authority'. I have not been authorized to communicate with you by any religious or secular authority. Nor am I going to be arguing from authority, which is the weakest form of argument, since it tends to browbeat rather than convince.

I will be sharing with you a vision from alongside. Insofar as you find yourself stepping inside the vision and discovering it to be life-giving and true, you will perceive that such authority, such solidity, as is involved is being given to you. Then you will know from within by what authority I am sharing these things with you.