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HATH GOD SAID? ASSESSING THE CHURCH'S "CHANGE OF HEART" ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

by Joe Dallas

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"First one starts questioning, based on what the world around us is saying, then one looks at Scripture, then theology, then scientific study—until finally what the Scriptures teach is completely subjected to whatever view is currently accepted by the world."

—Francis Schaeffer

Eve was approached by the serpent with a simple inquiry: *Did God really say what you think He did?* (Gen. 3:1). Her first mistake was engagement (Gen. 3:2), when she began a dialogue with someone who not only questioned the obvious but also went on to cast aspersions on God's intentions, then minimized the seriousness of disobeying Him (Gen. 3:4–5). There's no overstating the catastrophe that followed. Eve was deceived, Adam sinned, and in Adam all die (1 Tim. 2:14; Rom. 5:12; 2 Cor. 15:11).

Old stories get remakes; remakes get updated. So to this day, we face again the phenomenon of God's clear instructions being subjected to challenge, minimizing, and revision. And nowhere is the story being played out with such gusto as it is within churches that are reconsidering their position on homosexuality.

In January, *Time* magazine noted and reported on this in a feature story titled "A Change of Heart."¹ Citing a number of cases in which prominent evangelical churches and leaders have adopted a pro-gay interpretation of the Bible (accompanied by a strong commitment to promote pro-gay causes openly), the article concluded that

“change is coming to one of the last redoubts of opposition to gay marriage in America.”²

Which is, in a growing number of cases, quite true. The article offers striking examples, including the shift of Seattle’s Eastlake megachurch to become a gay-affirming congregation, hosting and performing same-sex weddings.³ New Heart Community Baptist Church of Southern California went a similar direction when Pastor Danny Cortez, after fifteen years of ruminating over the subject and following his own son’s admission of homosexuality, decided to make his church “gay affirming.”⁴

Other recent examples not mentioned in the *Time* article would include GracePointe Church of Franklin, Tennessee, another megachurch also identified as evangelical, which announced in January its policy change from rejection of gay marriage to support.⁵ And citing a “nudge from Jesus,” Vineyard Christian Fellowship Pastor Ken Wilson now endorses and performs same-sex weddings in his Ann Arbor, Michigan, church.⁶

All of which must be music to the ears of the Reformation Project, a Wichita, Kansas, group spearheaded by openly gay and evangelical-identifying Matthew Vines, author of *God and the Gay Christian*.⁷ The organization’s goal is to raise up pro-gay voices “in every evangelical church in the country”⁸ by training “reformers” at regional leadership workshops who will then return to their own churches and “serve as advocates.” Their ambition is to have representatives in all fifty states by the year 2018.⁹

The question isn’t whether change is happening, because the growing tide is undeniable, showing clear promise of becoming a tidal wave. The question becomes whether the wave should be praised or lamented. Is modern evangelicalism on the cusp of embracing a God-ordained civil rights movement or a grotesque error masquerading as reformation?

OF DOCTRINE AND DELIVERY

When discerning the validity of a trend, we begin by asking, as Paul did, “What saith the scripture?” (Rom. 4:3). If movements harmonize with both sound doctrine and the church’s mission as outlined in the Bible, then they warrant our full support. If not, then open resistance and criticism are called for instead.

By this criterion, any move toward dismantling sound *doctrine* cannot be validated, while a move toward more effective *delivery* deserves an enthusiastic amen. In this light, we can’t help but see this “change of heart” as a disheartening change that does, in fact, chip away at doctrinal essentials.

First, it attempts to revise essential prohibitions against homosexuality in both Testaments, while chipping away at a general, critical standard reiterated by Jesus Himself. "In many evangelical communities the Bible itself is on trial," the *Time* article observed,¹⁰ but this is a case the judge has already ruled on. Erotic acts between those of the same sex are openly condemned in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13; Romans 1:26–27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10. And in Matthew 19:4–6, Jesus referred to created intent for the marital union when He defined it as permanent, monogamous, and heterosexual. Redefining these verses or the intentions of their writers requires something akin to mental gymnastics and blurs essential sexual boundaries that are meant to stay intact. (The effort to revise our understanding of the Bible and homosexuality has been refuted in prior issues of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL¹¹ and in my book *The Gay Gospel? How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible* [Harvest House, 2007].)¹²

Second, it hampers our ability to fulfill the Great Commission by preaching the gospel (Matt. 28:18–20). Since conviction of sin is necessary for anyone to recognize their need for salvation (Acts 2:40; Rom. 3:23), if we tell people that what God calls sin is in fact something less, then we're interfering with their ability to understand their own need. The physician who tells his patient that his cancer is merely indigestion is no physician at all; a church that tells a transgressor that his transgression is merely an inborn preference can hardly be called salt and light.

Third, it cripples our ability to make disciples. A disciple is not just a believer but also a learner; an eager pupil who follows his instructor's teachings and imitates the teacher Himself.¹³ The church is called to nurture disciples to maturity (Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:12), encouraging them to lay aside whatever hampers their spiritual health (Heb. 12:1), and insisting that certain behaviors, including sexual uncleanness, have no place in their lives (Eph. 5:3). Rather than *discipling* and, as needed, *disciplining* believers who engage immorally, proponents of this new move are *dismissing* the seriousness of sexual sin altogether, citing love and inclusion as their motive. Pastor Meeks of Eastlake Church, for example, said his change of heart came when one of his staff members admitted she was dating another woman but had been afraid to tell him so.

His response is telling: "I refuse to go to a church where my friends who are gay are excluded from Communion or a marriage covenant or the beauty of Christian community. The message of Jesus was a message of wide inclusivity."¹⁴ Well, yes and no. Christ's invitation was certainly inclusive: "Come unto Me all ye who are weary and heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28); "Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37); and "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17). But His terms, both for salvation and discipleship, were in fact quite exclusive. He established Himself as the only way to the Father (John 14:6), a very noninclusive concept indeed.

He described the way to life as being narrow and found only by the minority (Matt. 7:14). And He gave no amnesty to those who rejected truth because it was inconvenient to them (John 3:19). Indeed, even among His own, most of the churches He addressed in the Revelation got words of rebuke and correction (Rev. 2–3). Clearly, then, His welcome and His approval are two very different things.

So yes, the invitation to salvation is broad, but its requirements aren't. Likewise, and contrary to Pastor Meeks's assertions about Christian community, the standards for communion within the church are clear and fixed, requiring conformity to exclusive truths, both in doctrine and lifestyle. So Paul, far from inclusive on such matters, ordered the Corinthian church to disfellowship a member who was in unrepentant sexual sin (1 Cor. 5:1–8) and further instructed believers to withdraw from other believers whose lives were significantly and deliberately being lived outside God-given parameters (1 Cor. 5:9–12).

Regarding sexual behavior itself, Scripture not only condemns anything falling short of created intent but also uses language that carries a certain urgency. When addressing the Corinthians' casual attitude toward sex, Paul adopts a tone of indignant shock when he asks, "What! Know you not that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Cor. 6:19). He further cites immorality in its own category of severity, describing it as a sin against the body itself (1 Cor. 6:18) and considers the will of God for the believer to include abstinence from all forms of sexual sin (1 Thess. 4:3–4). In short, sexual conduct outside God's will is biblically underscored as a serious offense, excluding people from fellowship with both God and the church, and forbidden to go unchecked within any congregation. Thereby any movement that sanctions the forbidden is one that's inherently deceptive, because true disciples aren't made by compromised affirmations, no matter how well intended. The message of Jesus to all potential followers—"If any man come after Me let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24)—is inclusive in its scope and exclusive in its requirements. "He that does not take up his cross is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:38) is, after all, an awfully clear either/or proposition: live for self and die, or die to self and live. There is no curtain number three.

IMPROVED DELIVERY

But if sound doctrine shouldn't be touched, delivery can always be improved on. Here, more than ever, we're challenged to review and revise the way we express truth and the means by which it's expressed. The message isn't the problem, but the messenger can always do better.

That said, let's be careful not to believe our own bad press. Those promoting a biblically based view on sexuality are often called "haters," categorized alongside racists, and written off as ignorant, no matter how intelligently and lovingly they present themselves. In response, too many Christians are pulling back from speaking truth because they're afraid of the name-calling and accusations that inevitably will come, and they likewise fear—wrongfully, though sincerely—that if they call something a sin, they are thereby injuring the person practicing the sin. So the video played before services at Eastlake Church is telling when it announces: "Gay or Straight Here, There's no Hate Here."¹⁵ The implication is that the traditional view on homosexuality is a hateful one. But truth is not hate. Properly delivered, it's still the Great Liberator (John 8:32). Still, we can do better.

EXPOSITORY TEACHING, EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION, ENCOURAGING MINISTRY

First, we can pay closer attention to *expository* teaching in our churches, making sure what's delivered from our pulpits is doctrinally sound. We are especially in need today of renewed instruction in Pauline theology regarding the old versus new nature Paul outlined in Romans 5 to 7, and how to best manage the struggle between flesh and spirit referred to in Galatians 5:17.

Second, we can be more *explicit* in our instructions, both to adults and minors, regarding the biblical view on human sexuality, the challenge of stewarding our bodies properly, and the best means of communicating biblical truths to an evermore cynical culture. In these times when hostility to the biblical view is epidemic, those holding to *sola scriptura* need more than ever to be equipped with the tools needed to make a compelling defense of the faith they hold dear.

And we can (and must) develop more in-house *encouraging* ministries to help those wrestling with their own sexual conflicts and to support their families and loved ones. These three areas of effort are, to my thinking, demanding an immediate response, a response that is also, to my thinking, nonnegotiable.

Pastor Meeks is quoted in the *Time* article as saying, "Evangelicalism is way behind on this. We have a debt to pay."¹⁶ Ironically, I fully agree with the statement *per se*, though our ideas about what the debt is and how to pay it couldn't be further apart. But he's right on this one point: we have an obligation to God, a responsibility to the church, and a duty to the world to pay a debt of truth and love. On this we are behind. By God's grace, may we catch up on our accounts.

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NOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Dias, "A Change of Heart," *Time*, January 26, 2015.
- 2 Ibid., 45.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid., 46.
- 5 Jill Cowan, "GracePointe Church in Franklin Will Now Support Gay Marriage," *The Tennessean*, January 30, 2015, <http://www.tennessean.com/story/news/religion/2015/01/30/gracepointe-church-franklin-will-support-gay-marriage/22588889/>.
- 6 Niraj Warikoo, "'Nudge from Jesus' Changes Minister's Gay Marriage Views," *USA Today*, April 7, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/04/07/evangelical-minister-supports-gay-marriage/7420513/>.
- 7 Matthew Vines, *God and the Gay Christian* (New York: Convergent Books, 2014).
- 8 "A Change of Heart," 46.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See "What Does the Bible Say about Homosexuality?" <http://www.equip.org/perspectives/what-does-the-bible-say-about-homosexuality/>; C. Wayne Mayhall, "Is Arsenokoitai Really That Mysterious?" *Christian Research Journal* 30, 6 (2007); <http://www.equip.org/article/isarsenokoitai-really-that-mysterious/>; and Hank Hanegraaff, "President Bartlet's Fallacious Diatribe," *Christian Research Journal* 23, 3 (2001); www.equip.org/article/presidentbartlets-fallacious-diatribes/.
- 12 Joe Dallas, *The Gay Gospel? How Pro-Gay Advocates Misread the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2007); available through the CRI bookstore at <http://www.equip.org/bookstore/the-gay-gospel-how-pro-gay-advocates-misread-the-bible/>.
- 13 *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, s.v. "disciple," <http://www.blueletterbible.org/search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?topic=VT0000751>.
- 14 "A Change of Heart," 45.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 48.