

Evangelical Megachurch Embraces Practicing Gays Into Fellowship

Lately, megachurches keep making headlines for all the wrong reasons. If it's not bishops (or their wives) fornicating, it's pastors taking up \$65 million offerings for private jets. And if it's not adultery or the appearance of greed, it's embracing practicing homosexuals as card-carrying church members of the church.

In February, I wrote about megachurch pastor Stan Mitchell who prayerfully started allowing gays into leadership. Now, San Francisco's City Church is putting an end to its policy of banning LGBT members who are unwilling or unable to take a vow of celibacy.

What led to the change of heart at City Church? Apparently, Ken Wilson's book *A Letter to My Congregation* was a big part of it. Fred Harrell, senior pastor of City Church, feels the mind-changing book "shows great empathy and maturity to model unity and patience with those who are at different places in the conversation, all while dealing honestly with Scripture."

"Our pastoral practice of demanding life-long 'celibacy,' by which we meant that for the rest of your life you would not engage your sexual orientation in any way, was causing obvious harm and has not led to human flourishing," Harrell wrote in a letter to the church from the elder board. "It's unfortunate that we used the word 'celibacy' to describe a demand placed on others, as in Scripture it is, according to both Jesus and Paul, a special gift or calling by God, not an option for everyone."

What Would Jesus Do?

Harrell says stories about the harm caused by the demand for LGBT people to remain celibate started accumulating. He turned to social science research that offers heartbreaking statistics about the climbing rates of depression, suicide and addiction in the LGBT community. Harrell's conclusion: City Church's celibacy rule has left many LGBT people feeling deeply damaged, distorted, unlovable, unacceptable and perverted. Of course, no God-loving human wants any other person to experience those feelings.

"Imagine feeling this from your family or religious community: 'If you stay, you must accept celibacy with no hope that you too might one day enjoy the fullness of intellectual, spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical companionship. If you pursue a lifelong partnership, you are rejected,'" Harrell said. "This is simply not working and people are being hurt. We must listen and respond."

But what about listening to the Word of God's stance on practicing homosexuality—or fornication, adultery or greed or drunkenness for that matter? What about dealing honestly with Scripture? Harrell and his board have come to the conclusion that the thrust and focus of the gospel is to break down boundaries of exclusion. He points to "multiple respected evangelical scholars and theologians" who are debating inclusion, and "there is no longer clear consensus on this issue within the evangelical community."

But what would Jesus do?

"If Jesus were the pastor of City Church, what would He say to the people who are asking if they can belong? As we consider the life of Christ, His example of love, His call to embrace the outsider and cast down and His patience with those earnestly seeking Him, what is a Christlike response?" Harrell asked.

Staying True to Scripture

I have compassion on LGBT people who are struggling with their identity or feel rejected by society or the church. I agree that the church needs to work harder to help and not hurt LGBT people—and all people. But giving a nod to a sinful lifestyle is not helping—it's hurting.

Think about it for a minute: Would we allow the fornicating worship leader to continue leading worship every Sunday or would we sit him down and help him overcome the sin? What about the adulterous pastor? What about the leader caught in a financial scandal? What about the kid's church teacher caught molesting the children? Do we let them continue without discipline? Why does the LGBT community get a pass on practicing sin in the name of compassion? Is that really love?

No church that I know of is rejecting LGBT people from attending. But offering membership is embracing and condoning sin. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and the blood will be on our hands if we don't preach the truth. Paul was clear in his judgments against sexual immorality in the church. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul admonishes us not to keep company with sexually immoral people:

"Yet I did not mean the sexually immoral people of this world, or the covetous and extortioners, or the idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. But I have written to you not to keep company with any man who is called a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner. Do not even eat with such a person. For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But God judges those who are outside. Therefore 'put away from among yourselves that wicked person'" (1 Cor. 5:10-12).

When we're ministering to LGBT people, trying to win them to Jesus, counseling them in the church office, praying with and for them, we're showing compassion. But when we call them

Christians, give them membership in the church and welcome them into leadership while they openly practice a lifestyle the Bible forbids, we are violating Scripture and we are not showing God's love. It's really that black and white.

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