

Transcribed from Joe's presentation at Focus on the Family's conference on homosexuality, Love Won Out, this article presents a challenge to the Church to confront the issue of homosexuality head-on through a three-part action plan of repentance and recommitment.

**How Then Should We Respond?
Developing An Effective Answer to the Gay Rights Movement**
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***"Controversy for its own sake is a sin.
But controversy for the sake of the truth is a divine mandate."
-Walter Martin***

The first time I was asked to address a congregation on the subject of homosexuality, the hosting Pastor ushered me into his study before the service began, to offer a warning: "Some of my people will think you're too liberal, because you say we need more compassion for homosexuals, but some will also think you're too conservative, because you think homosexuality's a sin. Some of the teenagers here can't stand homosexuals, but some of the parents here have homosexual teenagers, so be aware of both groups. And by the way, we just got word that some AIDS activists are going to show up and heckle you."

He paused for emphasis, then admonished me: "So when you speak, be sure you don't offend anyone!" That says it all. Taking a position on this issue guarantees tension and immeasurable controversy; avoiding offense is hardly an option. As short as life is, then, it's tempting to avoid controversy by refusing to take on stand on "hot-topics." Yet as the late apologist Walter Martin reminds us:

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Like it or not, at times the Church has a mandate to be controversial, whatever the discomfort or sacrifice involved. The question, then, is not whether we should respond to the homosexual issue. We should, we must. The question now raised is, "How then should we respond?"

Paul gives us a cue in Ephesians 2:10 when he refers to the Church as Christ's "workmanship", the Greek word for workmanship being "poema", from which we derive the English term "poem." Just as a poet would seek to express himself through his work, so God seeks to express His heart and mind through His visible poem, the Church. Ideally, then, should a non-believer want to know what the God of the Bible thinks about homosexuality, he need look no further than God's poema to get a clear picture of God's mind on the subject. Likewise, should the same non-believer want to know God's heart towards the homosexual, he need only ascertain how Christians - God's poema - seem to feel about homosexual people, and thereby know God's heart towards homosexuals. We know, from both Testaments, how God hates being misrepresented. So if we, God's

workmanship, should fail to accurately represent Him, He will surely call us to repentance. In this vein, I'm convinced that as we seek to respond effectively to homosexual people, God would call us to repentance in three crucial ways.

First, I believe the Church must repent of whatever immorality exists within her own ranks. Samson was a powerful, authoritative figure. Remember, though, that his strength lay not in muscularity alone, but in obedience to his vow of separation to God. So long as his vows were intact, his strength remained. When his vows were compromised, i.e. through Delilah's haircut, his strength was compromised as well. Compromised obedience generates compromised strength, whether the compromise exists in a man, or a church, or the Church at large.

Signs of widespread moral compromise have distorted the message and image of God's poem for decades now. If George Barna's assessment of a fifty percent divorce rate among Christians is correct, and if *New Man Magazine* and *Christianity Today* magazines are correct in their assertions that ten percent of Christian men surveyed evidenced symptoms of sexual addiction, while three out of ten pastor's surveyed used internet pornography, and if the scandals we've seen among evangelical leadership over the past two decades is an indication of what's going on in the broader Christian community, then where lies our moral authority to speak to the homosexual?

Imagine a severely overweight man dressed in spandex shorts, shirtless in his pot-bellied glory, selling workout equipment on a televised infomercial. "This stuff works!", he enthuses while he jiggles about. "You gotta try it!" Of course nobody's buying - the equipment he promotes may be great, but because of his own condition, you'd never know it. "It is always easier to fight for our principles", Alfred Adler observed, "than it is to live up to them." (Christian activists take note.) No wonder columnist Cal Thomas posed the question:

"Why should the majority accept something they have not seen
fully lived out by those who profess to believe?"

Jesus warned us to remove the log from our own eye before addressing someone else's speck. Not only does it prevent hypocrisy; it enhances credibility. To this end, the Church must admit her own moral shortcomings, take remedial action to correct them, and then, with appropriate humility, address immorality in the culture.

Second, the Church must repent of hostility towards homosexual people.

When Christians are angry over the celebration of sinful behavior, they do well. Anger, properly used, sees a problem and attempts to correct it. But hostility, expressed through contempt or disrespect, corrects nothing and sullies everything. Too often, the Church's anger over homosexual sin has been accompanied by a tone of hostility towards homosexuals themselves. And it is the hostility of the anti-homosexual message that is remembered long after the message itself has been disregarded.

The prophet Jonah's extraordinary mission comes to mind. You'll remember that Jonah

was commissioned to preach to a group of people he was loathe to deal with. So loathe, in fact, he took great pains to get out of his commission. God's intervention via a whale is the most well known aspect of the story, but Jonah's message and apparent attitude afterwards are noteworthy. After arriving on Ninevah's shores, he preached what must go on record as being the world's worst evangelistic sermon. "Destruction's coming", he proclaimed. And that was all he proclaimed. No invitation to repentance was offered; no concern for his listeners was expressed. In fact, having predicted that judgment would soon fall, we find Jonah grabbing a front row seat to watch Ninevah's doom!

Yet from that one-note sermon sprang national revival, as all of Ninevah feared and repented after hearing it. Far from pleased, Jonah complained bitterly to God, disappointed that the objects of his own contempt were being spared as a result of his preaching. In short, he was more interested in seeing Ninevite's destroyed than he was in seeing them redeemed.

A similar attitude, which I call "The Jonah Syndrome", seems to have infected too many believers. To hear some of us talk, you'd think it's more important to politically defeat homosexuals than it is to see them won into the Kingdom. To be sure, good stewardship requires involvement in the political system, and my wife and I are unapologetically a part of that "vast right-wing conspiracy" Mrs. Clinton bemoaned years ago. But there are more important issues than defeating pro-gay legislation. There are the souls of gays and lesbians themselves. And when our desire to block their agenda is greater than our desire to see them reconciled to God in Christ, then our priorities are clearly skewed, and the Jonah Syndrome has taken hold.

It is possible - necessary, actually - to condemn homosexuality without needlessly alienating homosexual people. Pastor Ed Dobson, a former member of the Moral Majority in the 1980's, realized this when he began ministering to AIDS patients, many of whom were openly gay. After visiting several of them at the local hospital, word got out that this conservative Pastor had a heart for all people, homosexuals included. This led several openly gay people to attend his church, not necessarily to abandon their behavior, but to at least hear what this man had to say. He welcomed them from the pulpit, and from the same pulpit, when teaching on sexual mores, condemned all forms of sexual sin, homosexuality included. In so doing he compromised neither his compassion nor his convictions, and his acts of charity towards AIDS patients gave him added credibility when he upheld Biblical standards of morality.

Mother Teresa modeled this credibility when she roundly condemned abortion at a Washington DC function in the presence of President Clinton, a staunch defender of abortion rights. While Clinton may have disagreed with her pro-life position, he could hardly argue against her proven love for humanity, a love which, over years of verifiable service, lent her a mantle of authority when she spoke on ethics and standards. We do well to resist and even denounce the acceptance of sexual perversion in our culture. We do better, though, when our pronouncements are accompanied by tangible and practical acts of love and service, and when they are free of hostility or sarcasm. Robert Dugan, former President of the National Association of Evangelicals, put it well:

"I have watched too many Christians display anger, animosity and even outright hatred toward their political 'enemies.' How could they be unaware of Jesus command to love their enemies? Not only is it right to treat people with love, but pragmatically, it works in the long run."

Finally, I believe the Church must repent of being intimidated by the gay rights movement, and reassert Her prophetic role. Dr. Martin Luther King declared that the Church must be reminded that it is neither the master of the state nor the servant of the state. Rather, it is the conscience of the state. That being the case, God's people dare not abandon Her prophetic responsibility to speak truth in a time of error.

A man without a conscience becomes that most frightening of all horror movie characters: a sociopath. The sociopath, absent a conscience, will do whatever is expedient, feeling no remorse or compunction over his behavior. Perhaps the only thing more frightening than a sociopathic man is the prospect of a sociopathic state. Yet if Christians abandon their role to speak as the conscience of the state, what other possibility is there for the culture's future?

Here we meet with formidable intimidation. A casual glance at any county or nation that has embraced the gay ideology will show that where gay rights go, a rigid enforcement of political correctness follows. Dr. James Dobson's "Focus on the Family" radio broadcast, for example, has to be censored when it plays in gay-friendly Canada. (References to homosexuality are deleted to avoid stiff fines for making statements about sexuality that are deemed offensive.) In Sweden, where gay rights advancement is significant, lawmakers have given initial approval to a "hate speech" law restricting any criticism of homosexuality in public, and Christianity Today reports that prominent Swedish homosexuals have publicly committed themselves to report preachers who "speak disparagingly" about gays. And while similar outrages are brewing in our own nation, they tend to be under-reported or disbelieved.

The understandable tendency is to cower in the face of lawsuits and coercion. But if the conscience of the state allows itself to be silenced on this issue, on what other subjects will we also be muzzled? The fear of offending has a paralyzing effect on our ability to speak truth, but to the Christian, this should be one of the most loathsome fears to yield to. The Gospel message is, at its core, a tremendous offense. It confronts false notions of essential goodness and autonomy, it rebukes natural wisdom, and its description of the human condition is anything but flattering. If we are intimidated out of speaking the truth about human sexuality, how can we hope to speak the truth about human sin in general? And if preaching against sin is disallowed because it's deemed "disparaging", how can the message of redemption survive? Clearly, there's more at stake here than the right to publicly discuss morality. Our very ability to fulfill the Great Commission will likely be nullified if we are unwilling to resist the more radical, oppressive aspects of the gay rights movement in America.

Our willingness to repent of our own sin, love without rancor, and stand for truth in the

face of danger, will indicate our broader commitment to Christ-like living in a fallen world. God grant that now, more than ever, that commitment remains intact.

This article is by Joe Dallas, Copyright 2002
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