

## **Fellowship Memphis' Position on Homosexuality**

Approved by the Elders of Fellowship Memphis

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### Introduction:

Those who visit our website, church or look at any of our official stationary easily pick up that one of the things we are intentionally pursuing is diversity. By diversity we specifically mean in a racial, cultural and socio-economical context. However, as we all know words only have meaning in a given context, and we live in a world where the term diversity is being used in a much broader (diverse) way.

One of the ways the term is being used is to refer to the homosexual community. When attached to a church, therefore, more and more people are wanting to know if the church is not just diverse racially, but also when it comes to sexual orientation. So that when people ask if a certain church is diverse one of the things they could very well be asking is if that church allows into their membership people who are living in the homosexual lifestyle.

As we've grown we are getting this question with increasing frequency. People are wanting to know if Fellowship Memphis' pursuit of diversity extends not just across racial, cultural and socio-economical lines, but they are also wanting to know if our pursuit of diversity extends across homosexual lines as well. It is because of these growing questions that we as an elder team feel the need to answer the question, by articulating our heart on the matter.

### A Biblical Response to Homosexuality:

It's more than stating the obvious when we say that the issue of homosexuality and the church is an extremely volatile one. Unfortunately, because of some very bad remarks and actions by some under the guise of Christianity, the church as a whole has been seen as judgmental and condemning of those in the homosexual lifestyle. So where do we begin when we try to not only articulate our position, but engage those who not only have a different opinion, but who live a different lifestyle?

We begin where God begins. The Bible tells us that all of humanity has been made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). The implications of this are astounding. The image of God is universal, and is not attached to a spiritual condition or belief. In other words, regardless of your religious positions (or lack their of), all of mankind has been made in His image. Not just Christians bare the image of God, but so do Mormon's, Atheist's, Buddhist's, etc. The image of God is universal.

What this means is that all of humanity deserves to be treated with dignity, love and respect, because all of humanity bares the image of God. Again, this is beyond religious affiliation, sexual preference, race and gender!

This is what Jesus modeled for us- treating everyone with love, respect and dignity (John 4; Luke 10:25-37). Jesus also taught this. His instructions to love everyone, even our enemies, and to go the extra mile with those who mistreat us were unheard of (Matthew 5-7; John 13:34-35).

The early church modeled this. Their love for one another regardless of class, gender or any kind of difference so shocked the Romans who had set up a society predicated on class, that they accused the early Christian community of incest! They had no category to describe their love, so they said it had to be sexually profane!

It is important to remember these things when we talk about those who live in the homosexual community because all of humanity, and even more so Christians, bare the responsibility of bestowing love on everyone, because everyone has been made in the image of God.

For this reason, we believe that the question of whether or not people were born homosexual means nothing when we talk about our joyful responsibility of loving everyone. We're not commanded to love categories, we're commanded to love people! This is the second part of the great commandment- a love for our neighbor, and our neighbor is everyone we see (Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 22:39).

The church in America has woefully blown it in this area. The venomous way we have attacked the homosexual community. The words we've used, our tone, and even the passive way we've turned our backs on them has created a seemingly insurmountable chasm between the Christian community and those living in the homosexual lifestyle. Unfortunately, for most in the homosexual community, the only times they hear from us is when we are picketing one of their events! This is not the example Jesus left us.

At the very least the church can be accused of being more passionate about our issues and positions than with the people we have our issues with. This is illustrated clearly in the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). Here the religious leaders of the day drag her to the Temple, and drop her at the feet of Jesus. They then enter into a dialog over how to interpret the Law when it comes to the manner of execution.<sup>1</sup> What is glaringly obvious is that these religious individuals were more passionate about the issue (manner of execution) than the poor woman! Sadly, this issue is still very much an issue today.

So what is our position on the homosexual community? Our position is that they are people who are made in the image of God who, like everyone else, demand being loved by everyone, particularly Christians! The second part of the great commandment, the commandment to love our neighbor, propels us to do nothing less than to love them.

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<sup>1</sup> One Jewish source said that the woman should be stoned, and another said she should be strangled.

Admittedly, there is the first part of the great commandment- to love God with every inch of our being (Matthew 22:36-38). To love God means that we love His Word, and that we keep his commandments (Psalm 119; I John 2:3). In other words, to love God, and therefore to love others, means that there are responsibilities that we must embrace, a standard that must be held, if mutual love is to be expressed in a God honoring way.

The obvious place to illustrate this is the parent-child relationship. Parents love their children. They want the best for them. They embrace them. They tell their children they love them. They cheer them on. They provide for them. But loving parents also hold their children to a standard. We know this because any loving parent disciplines their children. Their love for them is not simply a do as you please kind of love. For a parent to let go of a 2 year old child's hand in downtown New York City, because the child wants to cross the street on his own, is hardly the stuff of a loving parent. We would all be horrified at such a scene. And while we would have a million things to say about such a parent, the word loving would not come to mind. Love has standards, responsibilities.

To love anyone is not simply to pat them on the back, wish them well and say, "Have at it, live your life any kind of way." No, in order to love someone at the deepest levels there must be some responsibilities that both parties commit to in order to make their relationship work. While it's fashionable among some to have open marriages, we would all admit that these arrangements cannot possibly be loving.

To love God, and to love our homosexual neighbors means that we bestow honor, dignity, love and respect on them, but we do that in the context of a mutual calling to live in faithful love and fidelity to God. When a person is not committed to those same commitments which has God at the core, then love compels us to inspire them to live in faithful fidelity to God and His Word.

This was the model Jesus left us, a model that towed the tension between grace and truth, and acceptance and approval. John says that when he saw Jesus he saw a man full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Grace is God's unearned favor that he freely bestows on all.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was full of this grace, and it was exactly grace that propelled him to become a friend of sinners, eating with tax collectors, prostitutes and the marginalized of society. To see Jesus was to see a man who wreaked of grace.

But Jesus also wreaked of truth. In fact Jesus would say that he not only possessed truth, but that he was *the truth* (John 14:6). The grace of Jesus attracted the marginalized to him, but the truth of Jesus propelled him to challenge people, like the adulterous woman in John 8, to, "Go in peace and sin no more" (verse 11).

As Christians we are to steward the gospel well by maintaining the tension between grace and truth. And we are no more like Jesus when it is said of us that we are full of grace

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<sup>2</sup> Yes we do make a distinction between common grace (grace that the unsaved and saved experience), and particular grace (grace that the saved experience when they are drawn into relationship with God through His Son Jesus).

and truth. This is fundamental to engaging those in the homosexual community. The call to live lives that wreek of grace will make us attractive to those whom society (AND the church) have marginalized. But the same call to live lives that wreek of truth necessitates that we at some point say, "Sin no more".

This now leads us to what we believe the Scriptures say about those who live in the homosexual lifestyle? We believe that the Scriptures are the truth (John 17:17). And as such they outline for us what God requires of all of us. Specifically as it relates to those who live in the homosexual lifestyle we believe that the Word of God clearly teaches that homosexuality is a sin:

In Leviticus 18, a chapter which deals with such sexual sins as molestation and bestiality, homosexuality is prohibited by God,

"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" (verse 22).

Romans 1:26-27, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error".

Most telling is I Corinthians 6:9-11a:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you."

I say this passage in I Corinthians is most telling because Paul gives a list (not a comprehensive one) of sins. It's interesting to note two things about this list. One is the placement of the sin of homosexuality- it's right in the middle. But secondly, we should be careful to note the other sins.

Seldom do people debate that adultery is wrong, for example. Most people acknowledge this fact, that for one to engage in relations with a person who is not their spouse is wrong. Here Paul places homosexuality in the same line of sins as adultery, meaning that he acknowledges that homosexuality, like adultery is indeed sinful.

If we trace this back to Jesus we will be forced to reach a similar conclusion. Jesus tells the woman caught in adultery that she was to go in peace and sin no more. He, this man full of grace and truth, points out that her behavior (engaging in adultery) was wrong. Paul continues the theme in I Corinthians 6 by acknowledging that adultery is wrong, and placing homosexuality in the same list of sins. So we are forced to conclude that Jesus would say about homosexuality what Paul says of homosexuality and that is it is a sin.

We should not be quick to leave the passage in I Corinthians 6, though. Because Paul says in the first part of verse 11 that, “such were some of you”. Paul helps us to see that the church at Corinth was made up of people who had engaged in some of these specific sins. In fact, I don’t think it would be a stretch to say that Paul’s motivation for the list was his thinking of specific people in the church who had engaged in those specific acts. So in the church at Corinth were ex- adulterers, ex- drunks and ex- homosexuals (to name a few).

What a church? And this is what we desire at Fellowship Memphis. That people from all walks of life, with all kinds of sin struggles and issues will come to our church and experience the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. Yes homosexuals are welcome at our church, and it is our prayer that they would experience a community full of grace and truth, and that this community would play a significant role in their transformation.

Two things must be said, though. What do we mean by the statement that homosexuals are welcomed at Fellowship Memphis, and what is the outcome of those who are living in the homosexual lifestyle, but have now accepted Christ?

Are Homosexuals Really Welcome at Fellowship Memphis?

There are two kinds of people at Fellowship Memphis- attenders and members. Those who are attending are investigating our church, but have not officially locked arms with us through the covenant of membership. The membership covenant at Fellowship Memphis, among other things, assumes salvation, an agreement to a core set of beliefs (our doctrinal statement) and a commitment to pursue an intimate relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ, reflecting holiness.

This last point is key. The Bible requires that those who are members of the local church agree to exude lifestyles that are walking in close fellowship with God, and keeping short accounts when it comes to sin (I John 1). When a person who professes Christ and is a member of a local church is living in sin then we have a responsibility to speak and reflect grace and truth to this individual (Matthew 18), and if he or she remains unresponsive then we must engage in the unfortunate process of church discipline which will hopefully result in repentance and restoration (I Corinthians 5).

Because we regard homosexuality to be a sin, we cannot receive into our membership any person who is a practicing homosexual, who will not seek to bring both their behaviors and orientation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, leaning on the Spirit to experience victory and exemplifying the new man that Paul talks about in Ephesians 4:17-24. Homosexuals are allowed to attend our church. Our hope, again is that they will not only hear the truth of God’s Word, but experience a community full of grace as well, and that these two things will draw them to Christ.

While we don’t allow people who are resigned to sin to join our body (regardless of what sin it is), we do joyfully welcome into our body everyone who struggles with sin (that’s all of us!). So you can be one who struggles with homosexual thoughts, feelings and

even acts, but as long as you are willing to battle well, lean on the grace of God, and commit yourself to walking in repentance, we receive you as an integral part of our body.

What is the Outcome?

It should be noted that the goal of everyone is to be like Christ, to so live that he is glorified (I Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:23). This is important when engaging those in the homosexual lifestyle. The goal is to not make them heterosexual, but the goal is to make them like Christ! Whose to say that their struggle with homosexuality won't be a life long struggle, just like many heterosexuals will struggle all their lives to bring their appetites under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Additional Fellowship Memphis Resources on Homosexuality:  
*The Joseph Community*, message preached by Pastor Bryan Loritts.