

**Homosexuality and Faithfulness to God:  
A Statement of Hope and Concern by the Session of First Evangelical Church  
(Approved October 13, 2014)**

As elders we regard homosexuality as sinful,<sup>i</sup> though this is increasingly at variance with widening cultural acceptance of homosexuality as a good, viable expression of love. In this document we want to state our conviction clearly that homosexual practice *in itself* (whether monogamous or profligate) is incompatible with faithfulness to God and therefore opposes God's will for our lives. Our statement addresses in brief same-sex marriage, same-sex attraction, and First Evan's opportunities and limits ministering to gay<sup>ii</sup> people.

The distinguishing feature of Christians is love: love for our God, love for our brothers and sisters in faith, and love for our neighbors whom we are to love as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:37-40; John 15:12-17; 1 John 4:15-21). Love is not neutral. It takes the side of what is good for people, good as God defines it and directs us to it.<sup>iii</sup>

Our sinfulness does not negate God's love for us. At the heart of our gospel is the declaration that God demonstrated His love for us in Christ dying for us in our sinful condition (Rom. 5:8). This is love in its highest possible form, self-sacrifice for the ultimate good of the one who alienated himself from God.

### **Sexual Revolution and Holy Matrimony**

When we as elders state our conviction that homosexual practice is incompatible with faithfulness to God, we do not state this as a matter of preference but doctrine as set forth in Scripture: Genesis 19; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; Jude 7.<sup>iv</sup>

The normalization of homosexual identity and practice in our time is a sexual revolution. Homosexuality is not the only evidence of sexual malpractice in our day. But in our view the church that blesses same-sex civil unions and performs, celebrates, or recognizes as legitimate state-sanctioned same-sex marriages is practicing unfaithfulness to Jesus Christ.

Courts and legislatures capitalizing on cultural momentum to extend marital rights to same-sex partnerships contravene God's good purposes for marriage and government both. As elders of the church we are resolved to perform, celebrate, and recognize as legitimate marriage only the covenant union of one male and one female in lifelong marriage. We commend the terminology of *holy matrimony* to distinguish between same-sex marriage now asserted to be a civil right and marriage as defined by Scripture.<sup>v</sup>

### **Same-Sex Attraction and Homosexual Behavior**

When we as elders state our conviction that homosexual practice is incompatible with faithfulness to God, we recognize a difference between persons who experience same-sex

attraction but resist homosexual practice and those who do not resist but indulge same-sex desires. As homosexuality has become a more open topic Christian witness needs to faithfully navigate its nuances. Some Christian brothers and sisters are identifying themselves as “gay Christians.” In our view Christians should build their self-identity on Christ and His transformative work, not a sin pattern.

We don’t want our church to be a place that “breaks the bruised reed” by hurting those among us who struggle (cf. Isa. 42:3). We want to be a place where everyone can “find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). We commend to all compassion in our mutual bouts with sin’s allure, heeding the biblical call to faithfulness, purity, and self-control (Col. 3:5-17). We want to fulfill God’s desire that the church be a place where healing and transformation can occur in all areas of our lives as we learn to walk in the Spirit (Rom. 8:14).

Some who come to faith in Jesus from homosexual backgrounds will continue to experience same-sex attractions and must practice celibacy in order to heed the biblical call to faithfulness, purity, and self-control. A celibate person is able to participate fully in all aspects of church life. Others from homosexual backgrounds have entered holy matrimony. We do not consider heterosexual attraction a litmus test for God’s work of salvation in a believer’s life, but we affirm a heterosexual orientation is the only orientation consistent with the revealed will of God for human sexuality. The process of sanctification should change our attitudes toward and relationships with persons of both genders. We believe there is hope for those whose past orientations have been incompatible with God’s design for men and women, and that by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit at work in one’s life a process begins where God can and will change our hearts and desires and move us toward holy attitudes and relationships in accord with His revealed will.

We each receive the same grace from a merciful and faithful high priest who knows what it is to be human (Heb. 4:15). God’s grace returns us each and all to the gospel of Jesus and His transformative power. The gospel humanizes the one struggling with homosexual desires, that he or she is not “the other” separate from us but one of us, even if we do not experience similar temptations. Faithfulness to God requires strong Christian community for us all.

### **Church Hospitality and Openly Gay People**

When we as elders state our conviction that homosexual practice is incompatible with faithfulness to God, we do not state this as homophobia. To reject a particular lifestyle does not equate to hating the person in it. We do not fear encountering gay people in public or within our church facility. They too are made in the image and likeness of God and thereby possess human dignity. As our church reaches out in friendship to our wider community we expect to encounter and befriend gay individuals and couples, some of whom may decide to attend our church’s services or Sunday school classes or other events. Some in our church regularly encounter gay people in their own families, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

The church is a family, “the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). New people join our family every year, giving us the opportunity to “practice hospitality” (Rom. 12:13; the Greek word for *hospitality* means *love of strangers*), to “welcome” those who share our faith in Christ (Rom. 15:7), as well as those who do not (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:16).

We designate an “openly” gay person as anyone who presents him/herself in a same-sex civil union or marriage, or is otherwise actively practicing homosexuality with another. If openly gay people come into our midst but do not claim to be Christians then it is hoped they will give the gospel of Jesus careful consideration. We welcome them as we welcome any visitors and hold no expectations for them except to respect our culture as a place where people are drawing near to God. That respect for our culture and reverence for God precludes drawing undue attention to oneself in any action that overtly displays one’s homosexuality.

Openly gay people who come into our midst claiming to be Christians presents an issue that curtails our welcome because, as previously stated, we believe faithfulness to God prohibits the practice of homosexuality. For reference we turn to First Corinthians 5, a passage in which Paul confronts the Corinthian church for tolerating a man in their midst who was openly adulterous with his stepmother, a different kind of sexual malpractice but sexual malpractice nevertheless.<sup>vi</sup>

The Corinthian church was to “remove” (v. 2) the offending man until he evidenced repentance (v. 5). It is the prerogative of the church, particularly its elders, to judge such matters consequentially (vv. 12-13) but not to condemn any person. By the time Paul wrote Second Corinthians it appears the man sufficiently repented and Paul urged the Corinthians to receive him back: “You should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him” (2 Cor. 2:7-8).

Repentance is the hinge point in welcome and return. Paul told the Corinthians in his first letter to “not associate” with anyone whose sexual immorality was open, flagrant, and unrepentant (1 Cor. 5:11). But he was careful to specify the discipline of withheld fellowship is aimed at *people in the church*, meaning those who claim to know Jesus but betray their claim by identifying themselves with condemned practices.

As stated above, and consistent with First Corinthians 5:9-10, we hold no expectations over the sexually immoral who do not claim to belong to Jesus, other than the aforementioned respect for our church’s culture. But openly gay people who claim to be Christians can expect our elders to call them to repentance, to walk with them in process of repentance, and to welcome them in fully when repentance is evidenced in faithfulness, purity, and self-control. As elders it is part of our oversight to preserve our church from tolerating what God says not to tolerate.

## Conclusion

We thank God for the religious liberty that permits us the freedom of conscience to make the statement we articulate here. We recognize in taking the positions we do on homosexuality that we are increasingly out of step with majority American opinions and persuasions. The speed of this sexual revolution's advance gives us concern for the future, whether future generations of our church will possess the religious liberty to affirm unpopular doctrine without fear of government reprisal or other social stigmatizations.

In Martin Luther's famous words at Worms in 1521, our consciences are bound by the word of God. Here we stand, not defiant but sobered, not attempting to be discriminatory to anyone but deeply desiring to be faithful to the God who calls us to follow Him and expect opposition as we do (John 15:18). "There will be a cost for speaking the truth," Peter Leithart wrote, commenting on the Supreme Court's striking down the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, "a cost in reputation, opportunity, and funds if not in freedoms."<sup>vii</sup>

We have concerns but also great hope. God's freedom is never jeopardized. His word is not chained. He is still the God who does whatever He pleases and no one can oppose His will. We are troubled by the normalization of homosexuality in our time but heartened that nothing is a surprise to God. He holds history and gives His church opportunities in moments of cultural transition to grow in wisdom and courage, to be exemplars of gospel speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity (1 Tim. 4:12).

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<sup>i</sup> No sin manifests itself monolithically or stand-alone. See Ezekiel 16:49-50 on Sodom. The homosexuality that characterized that ancient city was enabled by high pride.

<sup>ii</sup> In the overall effort to normalize homosexuality, efforts are underway to deconstruct the word "homosexual" in the public consciousness, to favor "gay" or "LGBT" as sufficient nomenclature when referring to the homosexual community. We note this semantically for the future use of this paper. As of this writing "gay" and "homosexual" are still widely interchangeable, and while the term "homosexual" keeps before us what homosexuality irreducibly *is*, we recognize a day may come when referring to a gay person as "a homosexual" is considered as odious as any racial epithet. (See <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/july-august/sex-without-bodies.html> and [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/fashion/gays-lesbians-the-term-homosexual.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/23/fashion/gays-lesbians-the-term-homosexual.html?_r=0))

<sup>iii</sup> We concur with the tone and substance of one evangelical denomination's statement on homosexuality released in 1992: "We believe that heterosexuality is God's revealed will for humankind and that, since God is loving, a chaste and faithful expression of this orientation (whether in singleness or marriage) is the ideal to which God calls all people. We believe that a homosexual orientation is a result of the fall of humanity into a sinful condition that pervades every person. Whatever biological or familial roots of homosexuality may be discovered, we do not believe that these would sanction or excuse homosexual behavior, though they would deepen our compassion and patience for those who are struggling to be free from sexual temptations. We believe there is hope for the person with a homosexual orientation and that Jesus Christ offers a healing alternative in which the power of sin is broken and the person is freed to know and experience his or her true identity in Christ and in the fellowship of the church. We believe that this freedom is attained through a process which includes recognizing homosexual behavior as sin [and] renouncing the practice of homosexual behavior." (See <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/beliefs-about-homosexual-behavior-and-ministering-to-homosexual-persons>)

<sup>iv</sup> Any biblical text prohibiting sexual immorality/adultery has homosexuality also in view. When Jesus included sexual sins among his "what comes out of a person" list in Mark 7:20-23, no one then would have heard Him

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“saying nothing” about homosexuality. For scholarship on homosexuality in the Bible, see Joseph W. Smith III’s *Sex and Violence in the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), chapter 9, and Richard B. Hays’ *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), chapter 16.

<sup>v</sup> Please see our position paper “Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage” at <http://www.firstevan.org/assets/1649/marriagedivorceremarriagepaper.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> According to Leviticus 18:8 and 20:11 specifically, but none of the sexual prohibitions in Leviticus, including homosexuality, are walked back in the New Testament, rather “it is more like Leviticus everlasting,” in Douglas Wilson’s words (<http://dougwils.com/s7-engaging-the-culture/a-planet-full-of-sexual-pirates.html>).

<sup>vii</sup> Peter Leithart, “A Call to Martyrdom,” *First Things* blog, July 2, 2013, (<http://www.firstthings.com/blogs/leithart/2013/07/a-call-to-martyrdom/>)