

Becoming an “Open and Affirming” Church

by Craig Nelson

Since the Church has been commissioned by Jesus to love people and to reach out to others, how can Believers respond to these commands in a post-Christian, post-modern world? Does the answer lie in becoming an “Open and Affirming” church?

Many churches that are “Open and Affirming” see themselves as a place that, “where ever one is on their journey of faith, they are welcome”. They see themselves as a church where people can face tomorrow in the power of God’s love by becoming a diverse and inclusive congregation – multiracial, multigenerational, multicultural – offering a warm non-threatening environment to all. They believe that by being “Open and Affirming” they show a willingness to offer membership to everyone who could profit from belonging because they are willing to tackle the tough issues of the day with moral passion and genuine tolerance.

Churches that are not “Open and Affirming” have, in their view, adopted a sectarian mentality that insulates themselves from the culture and causes the burning of bridges that connect the church with the unchurched.

On the surface that seems reasonable. The kingdom of God does include all of God's children. Jesus did come to seek out the least, the last, and the lost. Jesus did associate with the prostitute, tax collector, and the leper. He accepted the individual for who they are, yet not condoning what they do. However, the real meaning behind “Open and Affirming” is becoming a church that accepts not only the individual, but specifically, their sexual behavior and lifestyle.

No one should ever discriminate against anyone because of their age, beliefs, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation. A true “Open and Affirming” church is one that should openly welcome all people and affirm their individual dignity and legal rights. More importantly, Christians are to treat one another as brothers and sisters first and foremost. All Believers are one family united by Jesus’ shed blood. (Gal 3:28-29)

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

Based upon the authority of the Old and New Testaments it is very clear that normal sexual behavior is that which functions according to its design. The Biblical record shows that sexual union was established exclusively within the context of male-female relationship and formalized in the ordinance of marriage. The natural order of Creation dictates procreation. Genesis clearly states that God created man as male and female, to be joined together as a reflection of God’s love and relationship to His bride, the Church universal. Because God’s character and nature is love He would never create someone opposed to the design of His natural order and then say it is wrong to be like that.

In the New Testament, the oneness of male and female in marriage pictures the relationship between Christ and His Church and every Believer is to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. If you examine historical Christian tradition beginning from the first century and on through the ages you will see that the moral teaching tradition of the Christian church has declared any other behavior to be contrary to the will of God.

“BE YE TRANSFORMED”

God gives anyone who humbly surrenders their life totally to Jesus Christ, the Creator and Lord of the Universe, the ability to be changed if they desire to be changed. The ultimate challenge for every Believer is to live a holy life by allowing the Spirit of God to give them a new nature and transform them *"into His likeness with ever-increasing glory."* (2 Cor 3:18 NIV) If we openly welcome people to become a Disciple of the risen Lord and do not teach them that through Jesus they have the power and ability to be changed from the inside out, and that they do not have to remain just as they have always been; living according to

the old fallen nature, we negate the work of the Cross and fall far short of being truly "Open and Affirming" and fulfilling God's good, acceptable and perfect will. (Rom 12:2)

I was there the first day Exodus International (www.exodusinternational.com) began. Exodus is a ministry who's mission is primarily to offer the life transforming message of God's love and forgiveness to the Gay, Lesbian and Transgender communities. I know of thousands who have been totally transformed from homosexuality to wholeness by the power of God's love.

I do have great difficulty with those who would say that the proof of a transformed homosexual is that they are now a "heterosexual". I would argue that God did not create man to be heterosexual (defined as sexually attracted, or oriented, to persons of the opposite sex) or homosexual. I believe He created us "asexual" in the way we are to behave towards one another. Much of human "sexuality" is environmental and learned behavior.

Many "straight" people assume that the natural order is for a man to be sexually attracted to a woman and visa versa. For the Christian I don't see any proof of that in scripture. Quite to the contrary. I see Paul acknowledging that there are those who can live celibate lives. And Christians are to treat one another as brothers and sisters first and foremost. We are one family united by Jesus' shed blood. Gal 3:28-29 says *"There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, MALE OR FEMALE. For you are all Christians--you are one in Christ Jesus."* NLT

What Paul calls "natural" desire in Rom 1:26,27 makes sense in a procreative sense, but not in a "sexual" sense. I strongly believe that there are just as many heterosexuals who need to have their sexuality transformed and sanctified as there are homosexuals.

If we are to be a spring of healing and fulfill the commandments of Scripture then we must openly offer and affirm to those who desire to be set free, whether it be from their homosexuality, or heterosexuality, the way that is found only in Jesus. The ultimate challenge for every Christian is to allow the Holy Spirit to transform them *"into His likeness with ever-increasing glory."* (2 Cor 3:18 NIV)

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

What keeps mankind from becoming all that God wants every person to be is pride, for that is the root of all evil. Pride is what caused Lucifer to be cast out of Heaven and Adam and Eve to be cast out of the Garden. The ultimate reason God destroyed Sodom was because of their pride. (Ezek 16:49-50) And it is what will keep a man or woman, whether gay or straight, from entering eternal life by consciously rejecting God's great gift, Jesus. When you totally fall in love with Jesus you are empowered to *"put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within"...* *"Have nothing to do with sexual sin, impurity, lust, and shameful desires" ... "get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language"...* [strip] *"off your old evil nature and all its wicked deeds". In its place you have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, [male or female] circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us."* (Col 3:5-11 NLT)

I would say to every believer that becoming truly "Open and Affirming" is to walk in holiness and fulfill God's law through the ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness by loving one another. Let us allow Jesus to be the healer through us by looking at others as Jesus sees them, lost sheep in need of a Shepherd. Without condoning their behavior, let God "work out" the sins and failures of others. And when we do, we will see the lives of everyone we touch healed and transformed into the image and likeness of Christ.

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