

June 4, 2013

Dear Ken (and pastors),

I greatly appreciated your recent letter to the congregation regarding the gay issue. As I've mentioned, I think it took a great deal of courage for you to write and submit this paper to your peers and congregation. You presented your convictions and conscience with integrity and candor, as I have come to expect from you over the years. I was especially moved by the way you articulated the pastoral conundrum, of being faced not with abstract intellectual debates, but real flesh and blood individuals wrestling with intensely personal issues. The dilemmas you face are real, and daunting. I completely agree, as I believe everyone in our church agrees, that the Evangelical church has done a very poor job in how it has related to gay people in our society. How homosexuality has received such focus and scrutiny from many Evangelical leaders, while only a small percentage of the population actually wrestles with same-sex attraction. While at the same time so many Christians feel so little guilt about over-consumption and greed, while this affects a vastly greater percentage of us.

I think you've written a great paper that needed to be written, and I appreciate so much of what you wrote. That being said, there are a few areas where I struggled with your conclusions. Disagreeing with an author would not normally be a big issue for me, but because you've been such a huge part of my life, as a mentor, pastor, and friend—it has caused me not a small amount of internal anguish. So I thought it would be a good exercise to write and share with you where the paper left me scratching my head a bit.

In your paper, the two "sides" of the debate are framed as "Open and Affirming" and "Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin." The former is fairly well understood. The latter is characterized in the paper as an approach that necessitates exclusion of gay people: "You can't be baptized, or receive communion, or become a member, or serve in this or that capacity here" ... and "you can't be a member or serve in the community because you are morally unfit."

I wonder if this really captures the two "sides" represented in our church, because I wouldn't put myself in the "open and affirming" camp, but neither would I characterize my view as "love the sinner, hate the sin." In fact, I wouldn't have characterized our church as belonging to either of those camps, at least for the past dozen years that we've been in Ann Arbor. We intentionally articulated a "centered set" approach to church membership so that we wouldn't have to sin-sort or exclude people based on this issue. I think that "Welcoming but not Affirming" would be a better label for the latter position (also the title of the book on this topic by Stanley Grenz), and the approach our Vineyard took. Also, I don't think people taking the more traditional/conservative position on this issue are suggesting that people need to "hate" homosexual activity more. They would simply say that it "falls short" of God's intention for humans, and is therefore by definition "sin." Not necessarily a greater or lesser sin than any of the sins that we ourselves (including pastors) are beset by.

When I think about this debate, I think about the people in our church who are currently wrestling with this controversy. And I don't find the people on either side of this debate motivated by hate or a desire to exclude people. They are simply wrestling with the question of whether homosexual activity is permissible for Jesus followers, whether the male-female pairing is an important element of God's intent for marriage, not whether gay people should be turned out of the church. As mentioned above, since taking a "centered set" approach to church membership many years ago, we haven't even discussed the issue of homosexuality, let alone exclude someone for being gay.

Being a “centered-set” church, my understanding was that a person’s belief or behavior concerning this question was not a matter that had anything to do with whether they were included in the church. Regardless of their belief or behavior, if they were pursuing Jesus, “moving toward” Jesus, they were included. The question of whether or not homosexual activity was “sin” was really not relevant to being included or excluded. It might come up in future conversations with a pastor, as the relationship developed and trust/intimacy was built up. As you pointed out, as intimacy increases, so does accountability.

However, if “inclusion” is meant leadership at any and all levels of the church, including pastoral ordination (which is what your paper goes on to articulate), that is a different issue. While we were a “centered set” church, we have always maintained that there were requirements for leadership that included behavior and belief, and certain behaviors and beliefs disqualified individuals from leadership. Leadership was, to a good degree, a bounded set. For example, a member who was not a professing, baptized Christian, could not be a leader. A member who did not give financially could not be a leader. A member who was known to be sexually promiscuous could not be a leader. Our rationale was that putting someone in a position of leadership who, for example, was sexually promiscuous, would not send a good message to young people in the church. We never maintained that there were no behaviors or beliefs that would automatically exclude someone from the highest leadership, as there clearly are.

The inescapable question is whether or not homosexual activity is a sin. If it is a sin, then the follow-up question has to do with whether it is the sort of sin that should exclude someone from various positions of leadership. We know that all leaders are beset by sin. Some of them are more visible than others, and some pastors are more open than others about their besetting sins. Greed, gluttony, a hot temper, vanity, selfishness, lust, whatever it may be. Nobody would suggest that a church leader be free from sin. But the leaders should not be regularly engaging in generally acknowledged “serious” sin (murder, adultery, grand larceny, etc.). And a church would expect that the leader is *wrestling* with their sin. A leader might admit that they sometimes drink too much, but they couldn’t be regularly passing out at the local bar, and they would not suggest that there is nothing wrong with being a drunk. They would be encouraged to get help for their addiction, and might be asked to step down from leadership until it was under control. A leader might admit to looking at pornography on their computer, and take steps to limit their addiction. But they would not stay a leader if they openly and freely admit to frequenting strip clubs, with no intention of changing their behavior.

So the first question is whether or not homosexual activity is a sin. If it is not a sin, and we are simply applying the Biblical prohibitions wrongly, then there’s really no debate. There would be no grounds for excluding someone from leadership at all, or declining to bless/officiate their wedding on the basis of their sexuality. Or, perhaps it is unknown whether it really is a sin or not. It’s a debatable issue (per Romans 14-15), and therefore we shouldn’t exclude anyone for this reason. Your paper provides both an argument that the Bible’s homosexuality texts do not prohibit modern-day monogamous unions, as well as an argument that this is a disputable issue.

To be frank, one of the challenge for me, and maybe for others who have belonged to our church for a long time, is that this is quite the opposite of what you taught when you last preached on sexuality in the late 90’s. In fact, the Bible’s prohibitions on same-sex activity were so obvious then that it was a “slam dunk” issue, no question. While women’s ordination debate was going on, and conservatives were warning that it was the beginning of a slippery slope, you assured that we would never become “open and affirming”. And it is not as though the “liberal” arguments to the contrary were not well known.

They were simply dismissed as that—an attempt to find a way around the “difficult” passages in scripture in order to accommodate modern liberal sentiments.

But, it is certainly not a sin to change your mind! Especially if new experiences or reading have brought you to a new understanding on this issue. I myself haven’t found the arguments relating to the prohibitive texts to be very convincing. They appear to be motivated by a desire to make these difficult passages “fit” with a desired outcome, so they find ways that we don’t have to read them as prohibitive of modern day gay unions. As Jonathan Haidt observes, when we don’t want to believe something is true, we ask ourselves if we “have” to believe it—and there are always plenty of arguments for why we don’t. For me, Luke Timothy Johnson’s opinion is the most instructive, because he has every motivation in the world (including a gay daughter) to find a way to make the texts fit an “open and affirming” viewpoint. But he doesn’t, and as he puts it:

“I have little patience with efforts to make Scripture say something other than what it says, through appeals to linguistic or cultural subtleties. The exegetical situation is straightforward: we know what the text says.” (Article “Scripture & Experience”)

And regarding the Romans 14-15 application, I find myself in agreement with N.T. Wright’s article, “Communion and Koinonia: Pauline Reflections on Tolerance and Boundaries.” I don’t think that Paul would have considered any same-sex activity, consensual, monogamous, or otherwise, a “debatable issue.” I believe he would have handled it the same way he handled the situation of incest in one of his churches (which likewise is not dependent upon the relationship being consensual or monogamous). In fact, I’m not sure that I would even say it’s a “debatable issue” whether the Bible prohibits all forms of same-gender sexual activity, just as I would not argue that it’s debatable whether the Bible prohibits premarital sex (even though societal norms have changed and people are getting married much later, and we have contraceptives, etc.)

But my goal is not to convince you on the scriptural arguments one way or another. I would be very interesting in engaging that discussion separately, but that is more of a scholarly debate that is not really at the heart of what I wanted to discuss here. If you have become convinced of a new way to handle these texts in the life of the church, that is certainly your prerogative as a Christian and a pastor. We don’t necessarily need to agree on every issue of theology to be friends!

Instead, my final question and appeal has to do with whether or not what you have articulated is really a “third way” to approach this issue. If “Open and Affirming” is one way, and “Welcoming but not Affirming” is the other, then doesn’t it really all come down to what we mean by “affirming”?

In your paper, you argue that we should “accept” one another, rather than this insistence on “affirming” aspects of our lifestyles. I agree with that, but isn’t that what “centered set” churches do anyway, and what we have done for the past twelve years in Ann Arbor? Have we not accepted gay individuals? Can someone accept a gay person as a brother or sister in Christ and still believe that homosexuality is a sin? I don’t think this is an issue of whether we are going to accept gay people, because we settled that long ago—we will. Just like we accept all sinners. And there’s no question that people in the church can and will have a difference of opinion on this issue.

What people mean when they say a church is “affirming” is that the church will treat actively gay couples or individuals in exactly the same way it treats heterosexual couples or individuals, and that homosexual activity will not be treated as “sin.”

For example, the UCC churches define it as:

Open and Affirming is the designation for congregations in the United Church of Christ that have voted to unequivocally welcome gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered people into the life of the congregation to worship and learn, and in all ways to participate fully in the life and leadership of the congregation.

That would seem to be entirely consistent with your paper and position, if I understand it correctly. In fact, the UCC has requirements for what a church needs to do to be officially ONA (Open and Affirming), and your position would most certainly qualify as ONA. It “declares a specific WELCOME to persons who are "gay, lesbian, bisexual" (or persons of all "sexual orientations") into the full life and ministry of the church (e.g., membership, leadership, employment).”

That seems to boil down to some pretty straightforward questions when this gets played out in the church (these are just 5, there would be many more):

- 1) Would the church ordain an otherwise qualified pastor who is actively gay?
- 2) Can members who are actively gay be small-group leaders, youth leaders, etc?
- 3) Would a pastor of the church publicly "bless" a same-sex relationship or perform a gay wedding (if legal)?
- 4) If and when the church teaches middle and high-schoolers about sex, will it teach that God creates some people gay and others straight, and that they are morally equivalent?
- 5) If/when the pastor teaches about sex from the pulpit, will the church teach that same-sex activity isn't necessarily sinful?

A church cannot remain ambiguous or undefined for very long regarding these questions. As much as we may not like black/white binary thinking, the church is either going to go one way or the other on these questions. If the answer to all five of those questions is “yes,” then clearly the senior pastoral leadership has made up its mind and does not feel there is much debate as to whether same-sex activity is inherently sinful, regardless of what some people in the church may think. In what way would such a church not be open and affirming, other than simply rejecting the “affirming” title?

And certainly, if a pastor publicly officiates or blesses a same-sex union, he or she is indeed “affirming” it in every way an ordinary person would understand the word. I think it is splitting hairs to distinguish between “blessing” or “accepting” something in this case and “affirming” it. As though you could say to a couple in a public ceremony, “I bless your union,” “this is a good thing,” but not be understood as affirming that it is a good and proper arrangement they are entering into?

Or perhaps the situation is such that some pastors are of one mind on the issues, and the other pastors take a different view. That can certainly happen! But certainly the senior pastor will decide what is taught on this particular topic from the pulpit, as you would not have a sermon one week arguing that same-sex unions are just as blessed and accepted by God as heterosexual ones, then a month later have a sermon from a different pastor arguing that homosexual activity is sinful. Or have the situation where a non-celibate gay pastor is hired, but have some of the other pastors believe that his/her homosexual

activity is sinful. That would be even more painful that hiring a pastor who thought that women should not lead, while at the same time having women pastors. I'm guessing that would not happen.

Maybe none of those five questions above will be asked directly, or situations occur which will necessitate a pastoral decision. But I highly doubt it. Maybe we should just wait until these events occur and then deal with the repercussions should they happen. But as our church answers each question in exactly the same way an "open and affirming church" would, then people are rightly going to be confused about how we're pursuing a "third way." And I'm afraid that many people, unless they fully read and processed your 100-page paper, may feel like this was an intentional obfuscation in order to avoid our church (or you) being labeled "open and affirming," due to the consequences of such a label, deserved or not. Or that "third way" was more of a temporary transition on the way to "open and affirming."

If you are convinced that the scriptures do not prohibit monogamous, committed same-sex activity, and you are open to ordaining a non-celibate gay pastor, and officiating same-sex union ceremony, then sooner or later our church will be known as "open and affirming," regardless of what label you may want for it. Rather than suggesting we are taking a "third way," I would own the "open and affirming" label, even if you quibble with what it means to "affirm." People understand "affirm" to mean that we're going to do much more than just "tolerate" gay people, or just "welcome" them while believing that their same-sex activity is sinful. And it seems that's exactly where we're at.

In the end, people who are going to leave the church because it is open and affirming are going to leave anyway, and I don't think a "third way" articulation will slow that process by much. And many people could develop some mistrust if they come to believe that the "third way" was really "open and affirming" in disguise.

Lastly, if I am wrong (always a possibility!), and the biblical prohibitions do not apply to modern gay couples, and Jesus would not want us excluding them from pastoral leadership or refusing to perform gay weddings, then shouldn't we embrace "open and affirming" as a huge step forward? Wouldn't any critique of "open and affirming" be a step backward for the cause? Almost like openly critiquing aspects of the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's?

Please take these questions and critique as coming from someone who respects your integrity and honesty without question. I do not think there is any intention to mislead anyone about where you are at on this position, and I can understand the reluctance or hesitation to say too much too soon while people are processing this. I know and regularly affirm that you have not pursued this issue out of any sort of selfish motivation or hidden agenda. In fact, I know a little bit of how much it has cost you. I believe you are pursuing this with honesty and integrity, and I hope it's with that in mind that you receive my paper.

Love,

Don