

Harbor City Church and Homosexuality, part 1

Not Anti-Gay or Pro-Gay, but a Third Way

This article seeks to understand what the Bible says about homosexuality and how Jesus calls His church to respond to our gay friends, neighbors, and family members. Today the church has responded to the gay community in two wrong ways. Some churches are wrongly Anti-Gay and other churches are wrongly Pro-Gay. Our goals in looking at the bible are as follows:

1. We want to begin conversations, not end them. These discussions should strengthen relationships, not destroy them. There is a diversity of opinions on this issue. The right conversations lead to deeper understanding. This kind of understanding, even when we disagree in the end, will make us the best kind of San Diegans and Christians.
2. We want to promote gospel-centrality. Jesus came announcing good news. Jesus challenges both the church and society to follow Him. Any opinion this issue is wrong if it doesn't line up with Jesus and produce more love for God and love for our neighbors.
3. We want to help people look deeper into the Bible. While the Bible has been used as a weapon in culture wars, truly understanding it will call us to engage in loving, serving relationships with our city.

This issue is complicated because the Church has misunderstood and misapplied the Bible's teaching. Christians should admit this early in any conversation on this subject because it shows an honesty and humility that reduces defensiveness. Without this, most non-Christians (who assume Christians are Anti-Gay) won't trust Christians enough to even begin to listen. When we acknowledge the church's sins, walls come down because *they* know that *we* know that the church has been wrong in talking about homosexuality.

Some Christians have isolated verses in the Bible and used them as clubs to spiritually and emotionally abuse people who are gay. This is wrong. It is sin. The Bible says that God will judge the judgmental hypocrisy of so-called Christians *more severely* than He will judge non-Christians for any of their sins. Jesus' harshest words were against the religious leaders who abused people with the hypocrisy of pursuing truth without love (Matthew 23). The Bible says if we are not able to remove the plank in our own eye, how will we see to remove the speck of dust in our brother's eye? (Matthew 7:1-5). Acknowledging the church's sins step one in a healthy conversation.

THE TWO SIDES OF THE CONVERSATION

There are two groups at polar opposite ends of the spectrum on the issue of how to reconcile homosexuality with following Jesus.

At one end of the spectrum there are people who say that Jesus is "Pro-Gay." This group says that there is ***no need*** to reconcile same-sex attraction with following Jesus because there is nothing to reconcile. They say that homosexuality is not a sin. There is nothing wrong with homosexual relationships. Jesus would affirm gay marriage.

At the other end of the spectrum there are people who say that Jesus is "Anti-Gay." This group says there is ***no way*** to reconcile same-sex attraction with following Jesus because same-sex attraction and everything that comes from it is sin. They say homosexuality is a choice and gay people can repent and choose to live a heterosexual lifestyle in a man-woman marriage if they really wanted to honor God.

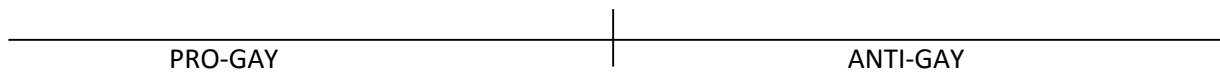
Both groups see themselves as "good" and the other side as "bad." These two groups polarize our culture, similar to the kind of unhealthy polarization that characterizes our country's political landscape. Republicans have nothing good to say about Democrats, and Democrats have nothing good to say about Republicans. "You're either on my side, or you're wrong (you're stupid at worst, sadly misguided and ignorant at best)."

Worse, both of these groups miss Jesus. The gospel calls both groups to turn and follow Jesus. Jesus is not Pro-Gay or Anti-Gay. The gospel calls for a third way, a middle way. This third way combines grace and truth. The gospel confronts both the sin and the sinful judgmentalism that

characterize these debates. From a broad-brush perspective, the Pro-Gay side is guilty of mishandling God's word by ignoring what God has said about sexuality. But the Anti-Gay side is guilty of mishandling God's word by ignoring what God has said about judging and hypocrisy. The Anti-Gay side is truth without love. The Pro-Gay side is love without truth. Jesus' third way is both.

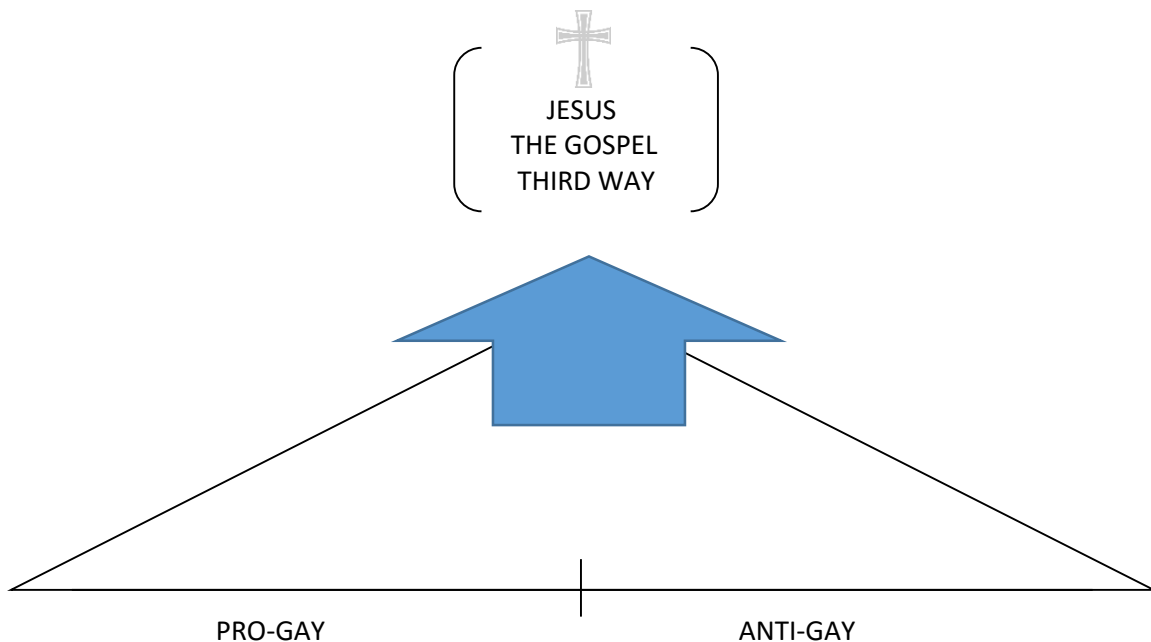
These two sides have made it helplessly uncomfortable to talk about this—especially for people who don't identify with either of these extreme groups. Even if you know what you believe, you have probably experienced that pressure to just keep quiet in a discussion because you're worried that the people you're talking with will misunderstand you and assume that you are the extreme version of your side. Gay people feel this way in conversations with Christians, and Christians feel the same way.

Visualizing the spectrum is helpful to understand Jesus' third way:



The Pro-Gay side sees anyone to the right of center as the same—everyone is equal to the most polarized members on the right. The Anti-Gay side does the same thing. They see anyone to the left of center as the same—no different from the most polarized members on the left. Most people are convinced that there are only two options.

But Jesus calls us to follow Him in a third way. It's the middle way of being gospel-centered:



Jesus is calling us to move beyond the polarizing rhetoric that comes from both sides of this discussion. He leads us into relationships and understanding and mutual respect, even if people don't agree. Tim Keller is a pastor in New York City who has modeled this third-way method of responding to disagreements. He has said, "Until you are able to present the others' view in its strongest and most positive light, it's neither safe nor wise to disagree with it." This is desperately needed, especially today where people spend most of their time trying to paint the "other side" in its worst and least favorable light.

As our church follows Jesus' third, gospel-centered way, be prepared to be misunderstood. In spite of our best efforts, people to the right of Jesus may hear this third way and think that we are Pro-Gay. People to the left of Jesus may hear this third way and think that we are Anti-Gay.

JESUS' THIRD WAY IN THE BIBLE

What does this third way, this gospel-centered approach to homosexuality look like? Where do we find it in the Bible? We're going to look at three different passages: (1) 1Corinthians 6:9-11 shows how this third way speaks to the church. (2) 1Timothy 1:5-16 shows how it applies to the apostle Paul's own personal life. (3) John 8:1-11 is a story from Jesus' own life applying this third way to an individual woman. Each passage shows that the gospel is neither Pro-Gay nor Anti-Gay. Each teaches both sides to turn and follow Jesus.

(1) 1Corinthians 6:9-11 Here the apostle Paul shows us how to correct people using the gospel's third-way:

1Corinthians 6:9-11 ⁹ 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, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul names and corrects many different sins. He corrects three categories of sexual sin and four categories of non-sexual sins. He doesn't single out homosexuality. His list also includes "sexual immorality" (which is any sex for single people outside of marriage) and "adultery" (which is any sex for married people outside of marriage). All three are outside of God's design for sex. Heterosexual pre-marital sex, co-habitation, and adultery are no better than homosexuality. The gospel corrects them all. Those who practice these need to turn to Jesus. This passage also confronts people who are greedy, who lie, cheat, or steal. Everyone is guilty of something in this list! Everyone falls short of God's perfect standard. This should produce humility in us when we correct someone else's homosexuality, because we are all the same before God's perfect standard.

This passage doesn't make the Bible Anti-Gay. It does correct the Pro-Gay group, but *verse 11 also corrects the Anti-Gay group*. Verse 11 demands two things that are missing from the Anti-Gay group: humility and understanding. The Anti-Gay church speaks like homosexuality is the unforgivable sin, it's the worst thing anyone could ever do, and people who are gay are so far gone that they are without hope. But that's not what the gospel says. Verse 11: "And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Every person has sinned. With Jesus, every person can be forgiven and accepted. This passage shows that Jesus' power is stronger than all sins. Jesus died so that all who believe in Him would be forgiven (washed), have their lives transformed from the inside out (sanctified), and be accepted by God as though they were as perfect as Jesus (justified). It's not that good people are in God's family, it's *forgiven* people who are in God's family.

1Corinthians 6 models both grace and truth together. It unites people together in humility and understanding. It shows that we all have the same need of a Savior. This is the third way of the gospel that calls both the Anti-Gay and Pro-Gay sides to follow Jesus.

(2) 1Timothy 1:5-15 Here the apostle Paul shows us how this gospel-centered, third way changes the way he compares himself to anyone whose does something that is corrected by God's law.

1Timothy 1:5-16 ⁵ The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, ⁷ desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions.

⁸ Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, ⁹ understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, ¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, ¹¹ in accordance with the gospel of the glory of

the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.¹² I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service,¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief,¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life.

In verse 5, Paul shows that the bible's correction is an expression of love. Correction is meant to bring healing and wholeness. The rest of this passage shows that correction doesn't simply express love, but correction also produces love in those it corrects. In verses 9-10 God's law corrects all kinds of sin, including hetero- and homo- sexual sins (just like 1Corinthians 6:9-11). Then in verses 13-15 Paul comes out with glorious gospel truth. He is honest about his own sin. Then he declares that if you lined people up based on the awfulness of their sins, *he himself would be in the front of that line! Paul saw that his own sins made him a worse sinner than any of the sins he corrects—sexual or otherwise.* Even when Paul was correcting the sins of others, he wasn't part of the Anti-Gay group. Instead he showed humility and understanding. He was quick to focus on his own sins. He made sure that those he corrected knew that he was worse than anyone else.

This is a healthy characteristic of Jesus' gospel third way. Paul is not Anti-Gay, making gay people feel "less than" or "worse than" others. But Paul is also not Pro-Gay. He does correct gay people in the way that all of us need to be corrected.

Verse 15 shows us again that Jesus didn't come to save good people. Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*. In fact, Paul says next that his own salvation should encourage EVERYONE. Verse 16 shows that Paul believed and taught that if Jesus can save *him*, then Jesus can save ANYONE. There is no sin that puts someone beyond the reach of God's love.

3) John 8:1-11 This is a powerful story from the life of Jesus that shows us His own example of the gospel-centered, third way in His own ministry.

John 8:1-11¹ But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.² Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them.

³ The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst⁴ they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.⁵ Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?"⁶ This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground.⁷ And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her."⁸ And once more he bent down and wrote on the ground.

⁹ But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

¹⁰ Jesus stood up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"¹¹ She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more."

No one in this situation expected Jesus to create a third, gospel-centered alternative. The religious leaders give Jesus two choices: Will you condemn the woman? or Will you condemn the Old Testament? "In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such a woman. So what do you say?"

Jesus' response is stunning. He doesn't play into their "this or that" view of the world. He doesn't concede that the question is: Are you Pro-Adultery or Anti-Adultery? He doesn't choose either side, but He establishes a third way beyond the two.

He defines his position by first confronting the Anti-Adultery group—the ones who want to stone the woman. Jesus first confronts them with their hypocrisy: "Let him who is without sin

among you be the first to throw a stone at her." They are in no place to condemn the woman because they themselves are guilty. Jesus may be implying that they are guilty of adultery themselves. He may be more generally confronting their hypocrisy, self-aggrandizement, and insatiable hunger for power and control. Jesus' answer isn't to be Anti-Adultery because their condemnation of the woman is not in line with God. They are not on God's side of this issue.

This makes Jesus sound Pro-Adultery... until we see His interaction with the woman in v10-11. There we see that Jesus doesn't side with the Pro-Adultery group either. His message to the woman *is* the third way of the gospel:

"Neither do I condemn you"	(I am not part of the Anti-Adultery group.)
"Go, and from now on sin no more"	(I am not part of the Pro-Adultery group either.)

Jesus came to reveal God to us. He came to show us what God is like... and His first words to this woman are, "Neither do I condemn you." *The one who has the authority to condemn says that He won't condemn.* The Anti-Adultery side needs to put these words in their mouth and in their heart.

But Jesus isn't done. "Go, and from now on sin no more." The Jesus who doesn't condemn doesn't side with the Pro-Adultery group either! Jesus invites the woman to change her ways and to follow Him. He invites her to trust Him and follow Him with her sexuality. He doesn't condemn her, but He does correct her. Jesus corrects both the woman's sexual activity and the religious leaders' response to her sexual activity. Jesus' response to this situation should serve as a model for Christians today responding to any behavior that should be corrected by the Bible. Jesus' response is a flesh and blood example of what Paul says to the church in Corinth and to Timothy.

Jesus' Ultimate Expression of this Third Way

The Bible is neither Anti-Gay nor Pro-Gay. Jesus' third way includes the truth of God's law and the grace that sees us all in the same place, and loves us as we are. Jesus reveals the perfect balance of God's grace and truth (John 1:14). The gospel is the perfect combination of speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). True love corrects. Loving truth accepts.

Jesus expresses this perfect combination of truth and love throughout His ministry, but its ultimate expression was in His work on the cross. On the cross, Jesus modeled perfect love: "No greater love has anyone than this: that someone lay down his life for his friends"(John 15:13). Jesus understands everything we've ever struggled with. This is expressed in Jesus' words from the cross: "Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do"(Luke 23:34). The cross opens up the forgiving love of God. On the cross, Jesus says to *us*, "Neither do I condemn you." This is true whether we are gay or straight.

On the cross, Jesus also modeled perfect truth: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed"(1Peter 2:23-24). Jesus identified with us as sinners by dying for our sins. The cross stops us in our tracks—we do not want to continue to live in ways that made our Savior die. The cross rightly understood is not the kind of correction that drives us away in shame. It's the kind of correction that draws us close to Jesus, and heals us of the wounds of our sin. This healing is powerful so that we become able to "go and sin no more." This is true whether we are gay or straight.

This isn't the last word on this subject, but it can lead Christians to have a different, gospel-centered perspective on homosexuality. It will lead to deeper, more meaningful conversations and relationships. This perspective will renew Christians to shift the conversation and bring others on both sides of this issue face to face with the love and truth of Jesus.