

HOW GOD HAS CALLED EVERGREEN BAPTIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES TO LOVE LGBTQ CHRISTIANS AND SEEKERS OF CHRIST

March 30, 2014

In the summer of 2013, Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles began a church-wide process to seek God's guidance to discern how should we love followers and seekers of Jesus who identify themselves as LGBTQ ("Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer). Evergreen-LA attempted to address two questions: 1. Why have we not applied the most essential truths of our Christian faith to LGBTQ Christians and seekers who want to know more about Jesus; and 2. What would Evergreen-LA look like if we did love LGBTQ Christians and seekers as we do straight Christians and seekers?

This process involved hearing from our pastors through a sermon series on listening together in love and unity. The sermon series also addressed sin, holiness, the church, and love as they relate to LGBTQ issues. Evergreen-LA sought to hear God's voice through our congregation, including LGBTQ Christians already within our Faith Village, about their thoughts of the issues raised by the sermons. The congregation also submitted their thoughts in writing so the board and pastoral staff could learn what God was speaking through them.

In the fall of 2013, Evergreen-LA held a series of classes to analyze the biblical passages on homosexuality. At the same time, the Board was charged with discerning what God has spoken to Evergreen-LA and with proposing steps to carry out God's purposes on loving LGBTQ Christians and seekers. The Board then engaged in a process of reviewing the written input by the congregation, and listening to each other to discern what God was showing Evergreen-LA about these issues.

From this church-wide discernment process of listening to God, the Board has made findings and has decided on the first steps as to how Evergreen-LA will love LGBTQ Christians and seekers. These findings and first steps are set forth in Part 1 of this document.

In addition, the ministry staff has prepared their reflections on LGBTQ issues and Evergreen-LA. The ministry staff's statement is set forth in Part 2 of this document.

Evergreen-LA recognizes that this document represents the first steps of being obedient to God's calling for this church. We anticipate that the Lord will continue over time to reveal more of God's will to this church as to how to love LGBTQ Christians and seekers.

PART I – THE DIACONATE BOARD’S FINDINGS AND EVERGREEN-LA’S FIRST STEPS TO LOVE LGBTQ CHRISTIANS AND SEEKERS

Evergreen-LA’s mission has been guided by God’s desire to reconcile all of creation. We affirm that our mission is to train heroic apprentices of Jesus, people who clearly embrace and embody biblical reconciliation and missional living. We seek to be and to bring Christ’s hope, humility, and hospitality to the world.- In a spirit of humility and gratitude for the grace of God, we endeavor to be a Faith Village that is a place of hope, healing, and hospitality for all who desire to follow Christ.

Evergreen-LA recognizes that there are individuals who identify themselves as Christians or seekers who want to know more about Jesus and who also identify themselves as LGBTQ. Historically and currently, many churches have not welcomed or have neglected LGBTQ Christians or seekers. These churches believe that homosexual orientation and behavior are sins. Some churches have been openly hostile to them. The result is that LGBTQ Christians and seekers have difficulty finding any community of believers who will walk with them in their journey of faith.

We believe that all of us are called to honor God in every area of our lives, including our sexuality. Regardless of what one considers to be his or her sexual orientation, our primary identity should be in Christ. We are increasingly aware that Christians seeking to be faithful to scripture differ on how the Bible addresses homosexuality. *Prayerful and respectful reflection is the privilege and responsibility of every believer.*

Senior Pastor Ken Fong and our ministry staff have reflected deeply on the issue of homosexuality and the Christian faith in an effort to be biblically faithful, pastorally sensitive, and reflective of the heart of God. Their reflections on LGBTQ issues and Evergreen-LA are stated in Part II of this document.

Based on our mission and values, Evergreen-LA does not believe that differences on the issue of homosexuality need be a dividing wall between the church and LGBTQ Christians and seekers. Rather, Evergreen-LA is called to be **a bridge of reconciliation**, where Christians on all sides can stand together in unconditional love, mutual respect, a shared gratitude for the grace of God, and a common desire to follow Christ together. Evergreen-LA affirms that all people are equally precious to God, gay or straight; and that LGBTQ persons should not be excluded from the church.

The church came to this conviction through engaging in a church-wide discernment process over nine months starting in the summer of 2013. What emerged through this process was a growing sense of a calling from God for the church to become a place of safety and support for LGBTQ Christians and seekers who want to know more about Jesus.

Thus, to embody our conviction that every person is beloved by God and that Christians are to be known by their love for one another, Evergreen-LA seeks to walk together with LGBTQ Christians and seekers, in shared humility and mutual submission to Jesus Christ. Evergreen-LA seeks to be a hospitable place where LGBTQ Christians and seekers are supported in their faith,

and where their gifts and talents can be offered to enrich the church's life and mission. Our primary concern is to love each person the Holy Spirit sends to our church in a spirit of humility and hospitality with the hope that Jesus will transform us all into what he wants us to be as we follow him together.

To become such a community, Evergreen-LA will pursue the following first steps:

1. **The Resumption of the Standing "Biblical-Reconciliation Committee"** This committee's purpose will be to identify and to find ways to support Christians and seekers of Jesus, who have not historically been welcomed or have been neglected by the Christian Church. This committee would be comprised of a Diaconate Board member (chair), a pastoral staff member, and several members or regular attendees of the congregation. They would work on specific issues identified by the Board or by the committee. It would be empowered to make recommendations to the Board concerning how Evergreen-LA could be more of a place of Biblical inclusion and reconciliation. They would continue the listening process for the church and would continue receiving input from our members. This standing committee would serve under the direction of the Board and would work closely with the pastoral staff.

This standing committee would provide organizational support for the Open Door LGBTQ Support Group, which is described more fully below. While this committee will initially address the needs of LGBTQ Christians and seekers, it will eventually address the needs and concerns of other communities of believers and seekers who have not felt loved and have been neglected by the Christian church.

2. **Ongoing Education and Spiritual Formation** Evergreen-LA recognizes that it has more to discover about God's heart and purposes, including how Evergreen-LA is being called to love LGBTQ Christians and seekers. Seeking greater knowledge and transformation, we will continue the education of our congregation through scriptural studies, our dialogue about and with LGBTQ Christians and seekers, and the study of issues relating to social justice.

3. **An "Open Door" LGBTQ Support Group** This new group will be open to LGBTQ Christians and seekers, their families and allies, and members of our pastoral staff. Its purpose is to create a safe place at Evergreen-LA to reflect upon the unique challenges and needs which are faced by LGBTQ Christians and seekers, and their families; and to explore ways to contribute to the overall life and mission of the congregation and the larger community as well.

Evergreen-LA recognizes and embraces the conviction that the Lord will reveal more to us as a congregation over time and as we take these first steps into following what we believe God has revealed to us at this point in time. Rather than try to answer every question, we believe God is leading us to begin by forming relationships of love with LGBTQ Christians and seekers who are led by God's Spirit to our Faith Village. We eagerly anticipate the journey of faith and mutual discovery that comes with this unknown terrain. In this context of relationships and shared mission, we trust God to guide us along the way.

PART II – THE MINISTRY STAFF’S REFLECTIONS ON LGBTQ ISSUES AND EVERGREEN BAPTIST CHURCH OF LOS ANGELES

“The simplicity on this side of complexity was easy; but the simplicity on the other side of complexity took real thought and effort.” –Albert Einstein

“Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.” –Proverbs 3:13-14

There are times when a simple answer—like “yes” or “no,” or “b, not d,” is all that is needed. But there are times when a simple response may actually be a *simplistic one*, i.e., naïve, crude, one-dimensional. As Einstein observed, these kind of “easy” answers rarely come about through a careful analysis of all or most of the pertinent aspects of a situation. In fact, when we are only looking for simple answers, we have little interest in rolling up our sleeves and burrowing down into the complexities to bring to light priceless nuggets of wisdom. There often truly is a stunning simplicity on the other side of complexity, but it cannot be discovered without “real thought and effort.”

The key challenge, for our church, is to move through the complexity, toward a meaningful, authentic and Biblical simplicity, while extending grace to all our Faith Village in this unfolding conversation and journey.

When it comes to Christians who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer (LGBTQ) and the Evangelical¹ Church, the simple answers for many evangelicals are that 1) being LGBTQ is always a sinful choice; 2) as with all sin, this one must be confessed and there must be true and lasting repentance; 3) repentance in this case ideally would mean that the Spirit would remake the LGBTQ person into a heterosexual; and 4) if this doesn’t happen, then the LGBTQ person would embrace being celibate for the rest of her or his life. The clear consequence for failing to become straight or at least to embrace lifelong celibacy² is to be condemned and even shunned by one’s family, friends and/or Christian circles. The only way for the LGBTQ Christian to maintain these relationships is to stay closeted around them, which can be stressful and exhausting. This can lead to things like excruciating isolation, debilitating depression, unhealthy ‘splitting’ of their sexuality from their personhood, even suicide.

Where do these prevailing answers come from? The Bible. These mainly come as interpretations and applications of six passages in both Testaments that mention homosexuality³ and from portions that speak of sin and, more specifically, sexual sins, and of how Bible-believing

¹ “Evangelical” has come to mean many different things, including “right wing conservative.” The meaning intended here is that we believe the historic Apostles’ Creed, we hold a high view of the authority of the Bible, and we believe that salvation comes through a personal, if not mystical, relationship with the risen Christ.

² These answers don’t apply as easily to those represented by the third through fifth letters in the LGBTQ acronym, but this difficulty is rarely acknowledged or addressed.

³ *Gen. 19; Lev. 18:22, 20:13; Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1Tim. 1:10*

people are supposed to confess and repent of them.⁴ What more needs to be said or studied? “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Case closed. End of discussion. “It’s a sin, so deal with it in the way that’s prescribed in God’s Word.”

For a growing number of otherwise fairly conservative Christians, these customary answers sound much too simplistic and have become problematic for them. Many now know and care about someone who is LGBTQ. Or some have come to admit that they identify as LGBTQ, even though they are unquestionably committed followers of Jesus. And then there is the current development where the majority of Millennials, i.e., Generation Y (roughly born between early 1980s and early 2000s) prefer to steer clear of Christians and churches that strike them as overly simplistic, ignorant, intolerant and/or unloving⁵ towards LGBTQ people. Roughly 65% of Millennials support same-sex marriage.

Granted, there are evangelicals who know and love LGBTQ people who haven’t felt the need to dig any deeper into the Scriptures to see if God might have provided other approaches to dealing with those who identify as LGBTQ. Some are fond of saying “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” and sincerely believe that the most loving thing is to confront an LGBTQ person with what they see as the sin of their sexual identity and/or behavior. However well intended this simple-to-say approach might be, Jesus never said or sanctioned it. What he did say and demonstrate was more like “*Love the sinner and hate your own sin. And when you’ve sufficiently dealt with your own sin, then maybe you’ve been sufficiently humbled to come alongside your fellow struggling sinner and help her or him in nonjudgmental ways.*”⁶ This is a stellar example of the remarkable Christ-centered simplicity that can be uncovered on the other side of the complex issues that we are willing to engage on our journey to become ***a more grateful and mutually submitting church*** that doesn’t require Christians who identify as LGBTQ to lie or to leave.

Since 2007 the members of my Ministry Staff team and I have been intently searching for the timeless, simple truths that might show all of us—both straight and gay—our blind spots that could teach us how to live together in reconciled relationships, even if none of us ever feels 100% comfortable, 100% of the time. Here are **four simple and profound biblical truths** that we’ve discovered on the far side of the complexity of this pressing issue:

⁴ e.g., *Psa 119:133; Jn 1:29, 8:34; Rom 6:11, 23; 1Cor 6:13, 18; 10:8; Gal 6:1; Eph 5:3; 1Th 4:3; 1Jn 1:8-9, 5:18*

⁵ “In our research, the perception that Christians are ‘against’ gays and lesbians—not only objecting to their lifestyles but also harboring irrational fear and unmerited scorn toward them—has reached critical mass. The gay issue has become the ‘big one,’ the negative image most likely to be intertwined with Christianity’s reputation. It is also the dimension that most clearly demonstrates the un-Christian faith to young people today, surfacing a spate of negative perceptions: judgmental, bigoted, sheltered, right-wingers, hypocritical, insincere, and uncaring.” David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why It Matters*. Baker Books, 2012. (p 92).

⁶ Luke 6⁴¹ “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? ⁴² How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

- 1) **ALL ARE SINNERS.** All of us are equally sinful before God. Each of us is a sinner, and all of our sexuality has been tragically tainted by sin.
 - *“There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Rom 3:22b-23*

- 2) **ALL CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO HOLINESS.** The choice to follow Christ is the conscious choice to pursue holiness as an obvious lifestyle. This expectation applies to all Christians, straight or gay. However, this side of heaven, we’re all works-in-progress so our church will never consist of perfect people.
 - *“Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.” Heb 12:14*
 - *“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people.” Eph 5:3*
 - *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Rom 12:1*
 - *Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds. Matt 13:24-30*

- 3) **ALL ARE INCLUDED IN THE BODY OF CHRIST.** The Church belongs to God, not us. God’s unmerited grace and unswerving mercy are the only reasons why any of us can belong to this or any church. Jesus has already destroyed whatever walls divide us so we can be the new humanity that he’s invited to live together within his expansive embrace. Even so, we must practice mutual submission out of reverence for Christ in order to resolve real—and at times even serious—lingering differences.
 - *It is by grace that we are all saved. Eph 2:4-10*
 - *Jesus destroyed whatever divides us so that his Spirit can form us into a new family that would never exist but for Christ. Eph 2:14-18*
 - *In Christ we are all being built together to be a dwelling place where God lives by his Spirit. Eph 2:19-2*
 - *Being rooted and established in Christ’s love, he has given us the power together with every other believer to grasp all the dimensions of his love. Eph 3:16-21*
 - *“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God...Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Eph 5:1-2, 21*

- 4) **ALL ARE EXPECTED TO LOVE OTHERS UNCONDITIONALLY.** What defines us as true followers of Jesus is that we love God with all of our passion, prayer, and intelligence and that we love all our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. According to the example and stories of Jesus, this love should be uncomfortable (for both parties) and unexpected.
 - *“‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.’” Matt 22:36-40*
 - *Parable of the Good Samaritan (unexpected, uncomfortable neighbor-love). Luke 10:25-37*

As the Ministry Staff of EBCLA, we believe that God has given us this biblical framework to guide us on our journey to become a church that loves and includes those Christians and seekers who identify as being LGBTQ. Using these four timeless, clear and essential doctrines of our faith, we will now address some of the complexities involved with our becoming a better church, one that's more obviously trying to follow Jesus.

Ever since Pentecost countless Christians have struggled and even died to clarify and live out these four simple but profound truths of the Christian faith. ***So why don't we apply these evenly to people who identify as LGBTQ, especially ones who are our brothers and sisters in Christ?*** Are they the worst sinners? Does Jesus want them to be perfect before they can join and serve in our church? And when they do, aren't we supposed to invite them to join us in the struggle to have Jesus be our Lord, not just our Savior? Does the Bible excuse us from loving them—or anyone else—because some feel uncomfortable around them? Does Jesus hate them as long as they identify as LGBTQ or does he love them unconditionally?

- Because of passages like *Romans 1:18-27* (c.f., and the six other passages listed in Footnote #3), the Christian Church historically and traditionally has held that the Bible views homosexuality as sin. ***As ministry staff members of EBCLA who view the Scriptures as authoritative, we start by affirming this position, but unlike some other evangelicals, we feel compelled—by Christ's clear command for us to love unconditionally every single one of our neighbors as ourselves—to explore the unmistakable complexities.*** For example, as perpetual students of God's Word, we will seriously weigh a variety of other Christian scholars' interpretations of the relevant and applicable passages in the Bible (Footnote #11). And as in any other case where some read the Bible from a position of privilege while others do not, we know that we absolutely need committed Christians who identify as LGBTQ to partner with us in this effort.
- Admittedly, some argue today that such biblical statements must be understood in the context in which other Old and New Testament commands have later been reinterpreted (e.g., cleanliness laws, divorce and remarriage, having female leaders and ordaining women, modes of baptism, and the acquiring of wealth, to cite just a few), while others believe these prohibitions to be universal and timeless. ***Both sides are wrestling with two central issues of how to interpret and apply the Bible: To discern what reflects the unchanging, core truth of the Bible, and what reflects changing cultural mindsets.*** This is a crucial debate that demands patience, humility and grace on all sides, so that we might all allow one another to learn and grow as Christ intends for us all to learn and grow.
- As sincere followers of Jesus we are all called to wrestle personally with whether anything about us is not pleasing to God. In other words, to judge ourselves. But Jesus and Paul explicitly command us that ***we aren't to sit in judgment of one another.*** *“Do not judge, or you too will be judged.”*⁷ And, *“You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere person, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? Or do you show contempt for the*

⁷ *Matthew 7:1*

riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"⁸ And of course there's *James 4:12*, "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?"⁹ **Knowing that our universal sinful tendency is to ignore these prohibitions against judging others, we are looking to be the kind of church that embraces all sinners the way Jesus still does and trusts his unparalleled kindness and mercy to convict us all of what he deems sinful in our lives and to lead us to repentance.**¹⁰ So when it comes to loving those Christians and seekers who identify as LGBTQ, our foremost aim is to live out Paul's exhortation in *Romans 14:13*, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's [or sister's] way."

- **What would it look like if all of us—even those who believe that homosexuality is a sin—stopped judging those who identify as LGBTQ?**
 - We need to acknowledge that simply saying that homosexuality is sin¹¹ is a source of intolerable pain for many who identify as LGBTQ and those close to them. The scrutiny that typically follows this belief makes them feel unfairly singled out and judged. This should greatly concern all of us, for they are valued and vital members of Christ's body, too.¹² We should feel their pain, especially if they believe that we are causing it. For those who have this conviction, for reasons spelled out in the previous section, they should refrain from harshly or constantly judging their LGBTQ brothers and sisters in Christ, leaving that to the same Spirit that brings us all to conviction of sin.
 - We also need to acknowledge that it is just as wrong to judge those who start with the belief that the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin. They too are cherished members of this diverse Faith Village. So long as they refrain from passing judgment on those who identify as LGBTQ, they too should be treated as respected and valued members of Christ's Body. They are still willing to be part of this Faith Village and to be part of building a bridge of reconciliation with their LGBTQ Christian brothers and sisters.
 - We believe that coming together as members of God's household in the face of some very real, still unresolved tensions will enable us to know and love each other better and also to practice mutual submission out of reverence for Christ, fully aware of the current power differences between straight and LGBTQ members. We believe that the resolution to these differences is still ahead of us, but will only be discovered together, as the Body of Christ, and not apart.

⁸ *Romans 2:1-4*

⁹ *John 5:22* "Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son..."

¹⁰ The Sermon on the Mount, *Matt 5:21-28* and Jesus' prohibition against judging others, *Matt 7:1-5*. There's a reason God warned Adam and Eve not to think that they could handle the knowledge of good and evil. Cf. *Hebrews 12:12-13*

¹¹ We are also aware that there a small but quietly growing number of Christians who have studied the same biblical texts and have concluded that those passages are not condemning of LGBTQ people by themselves and also not condemning of those who are striving to live in ways that honor God as best they can, with who they are. Aware of how complex this all is, we are just beginning to look at their research. Cf. Matthew Vines' *God and the Gay Christian*, Convergent Books, 2014.

¹² *1 Cor 12:12-27* "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

- **We know that some who are dealing with this issue will come to us for help.**
 - We will pray with and for anyone who is struggling with any aspect of their sexuality. We will emphasize their innate, unchanging worth to Jesus and gently offer the Good Shepherd's guidance and care.
 - We will encourage all unmarried persons to refrain from behaviors that conflict with their pursuit of greater holiness. Since heterosexual Christian singles are still able to date within these chaste boundaries, could LGBTQ Christian singles? This exposes the built-in problem of saying that homosexual *behaviors* are sinful, but not homosexual *orientation*.¹³
 - We will emphasize the choice to follow Christ.¹⁴ Some may believe that following Christ means embracing a lifetime of celibacy, and we will do our best to insure that they will not grow old alone. However, others may believe that following Christ means hoping to find a partner to wed for life. Our denomination's regional policy does not permit us to perform same-sex weddings. Even so, there will now only be increasing numbers of legally married same-sex couples in California, some with children that they love and want to raise in the faith. Based on the four essential biblical truths that are guiding us through these uncharted waters, we cannot see turning anyone away from God's household. While we cannot perform same-sex weddings, how can we not include these married couples and their children since we've already learned to include divorced and/or remarried couples and their children? Isn't this part of how God's Spirit continues to prod us to include an ever-expanding number of other imperfect, struggling people who at times make tragic choices? God doesn't seem to transform most LGBTQ people—even those who've prayed for God to do this for years—into heterosexuals, so how might we encourage those who are doing their best to live God-honoring lives with the 'cards' that they've been dealt? No different than any other Christian, they are hoping that God will mercifully understand and appreciate that they're trying their best to lead God-honoring lives.

Believing that homosexuality is a sin sounds like a simple truth. Until you come to identify as LGBTQ. Or when you discover that someone you know and love identifies as being LGBTQ. That's hopefully when you will truly appreciate being part of a church that's willing to search with you for the overarching simple truths that the Lord will reveal on the other side of all the complexities. *God's Spirit has led us to start by being a church that submits more completely to Jesus Christ as our Savior, Lord, and only Judge of all, and focuses on emulating his life-changing and life-giving mercy, justice, and love.*

¹³ Even if one makes the argument that most LGBTQ people were born with these orientations (and thus should not be condemned for something they didn't choose), what kind of guidance could we give those who are sincere Christians in regards to how they might live? Is their only option always to suppress their orientations? Could Paul's concession to single heterosexual Christians to get married rather than burn with passion (*1Cor 7:8-9*) apply to them, too? Are there ways for them also to "*honor God with their bodies*" (*1Cor 6:18-20*)? **Loving our LGBTQ brothers and sisters as much as we love ourselves means that we can't ignore or minimize these important questions.**

¹⁴Regarding causality: <http://www.sexualidentityinstitute.org/dr-mark-yarhouse>. Christian clinical psychologist Mark Yarhouse has literally read all of the research on why some people identify as LGBTQ and he is agnostic as to cause. Needing further serious study is Matt 19:10-12, where Jesus says "some are eunuchs because they were born that way."