



How Should We Respond?

*An exhortation to the church
on loving the homosexual*

By Joe Dallas

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

THRIVING VALUES™

Lord Jesus, I offer myself for this time. Use me in any way necessary to respond to what is happening to what is around me.

Corrie ten Boom

The first time I was asked to address a congregation on the subject of homosexuality, the hosting pastor ushered me into his study before the service began. Then he offered this warning:

“Some of my people will think you’re too liberal, because you say we need more compassion for homosexuals, but some will also think you’re too conservative, because you think homosexuality is a sin. Some of the teenagers here can’t stand homosexuals, but some of the parents here have homosexual teenagers, so be aware of both groups. And by the way, we just got word that some AIDS activists are going to show up and heckle you.”

He paused for emphasis, then cautioned me: “So when you speak, be sure you don’t offend anyone!”

That says it all. Taking a position on this issue guarantees tensions and immeasurable controversy. Controversy is never pleasant and always uncomfortable. Yet it has never been avoidable when Christians face the crises of their time.

Will we also respond to the crises of our time?

As Christians, many of you are willing to respond. But the real question is “*How* will we respond?” The answer to that lies in seeing that the challenge before us transcends the challenge to stand against ungodliness. The eminent challenge is being Christ-like in an ungodly world. John, in his gospel, spoke of Jesus in this way as being “full of grace and truth.” These two phenomenal qualities of Christ’s life may appear contradictory, but are really at their best when they coexist. On the one hand, He was full of grace—full of love, mercy, gentleness and compassion. And on the other, He never compromised the truth.

Ideally, if someone wanted to know how God felt and thought about homosexuality and homosexual people, one would only have to look at the response of the Christian community to say, “Ah-ha. *That’s* how God feels about these people and *that’s* what God thinks about homosexuality.” Our mandate, then is to be *His* visible expression on earth of both His heart and His mind toward homosexual people and homosexuality itself. Our challenge is to be full of grace balanced with truth.

The church has always had the challenge of responding to the issues of its time. And when the church has failed at times in responding in a way that accurately

represented God, God has traditionally done two things:

1. *He called His people to repent.*
2. *He called His people to recommit.*

You can see this in the Old Testament when Israel would fall into idolatry or neglect the poor or become forgetful of God's goodness. He would call the prophets and have them call Israel to repentance and recommitment. We can also see evidence of this in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, God gently—and at times, not so gently—rebukes the churches and calls them to repent in whatever area they were erring and to recommit. So, to effectively respond to the issue of homosexuality, it would be via repentance and recommitment. I believe that God is calling the church to repent and recommit in three areas.

Repenting of our own immorality

Before we can effectively go into our culture and address its sins, God calls us to look at our *own* sins, repent of whatever immorality exists within our *own* walls and recommit to biblical standards of holiness.

You remember Samson—very buff, authoritative—not a man to be messed with. Evidently, his strength lay not just in his muscularity, but in his adherence to his vow of moral separation. Part of his vow of separation to God, of course, included a vow not to get his hair cut. You notice in Scripture that as long as Samson remained true to his vow of separation, he retained his authority and his strength. But once that vow was compromised, Samson's strength was gone.

Clearly, obedience brings with it a certain moral authority. Think, then, of the impact obedient Christians could have on an immoral country. We live in an age in which statistics show that millions of people call themselves born-again believers. We have mega-churches, Christian television programs, radio programs, books and more.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?

Jesus, Matthew 5:13

We have a very visible presence of the body of Christ in a free democratic republic with the potential for so much influence. Yet, why then do we still see the abortion industry thriving, teenage murderers, spousal abuse, pornography and the like?

There are probably many theological, social and psychological reasons. But maybe we should consider one that's often overlooked. It may well be that the immorality and moral weakness *within* the body of Christ has caused us to abdicate our moral authority to speak to the issue of our times. Perhaps we, having been compromised, have—like Samson—relinquished our position of authority and, thus, our influence in a fallen culture.

When we have a divorce rate in the body of Christ that has increased significantly over the past decades, when the use of pornography among Christian men is virtually epidemic, and when we have scandals in our own leadership that rival whatever we have seen in Washington, we have surely abdicated our moral authority to speak to the issues of our time.

Regain moral authority by repentance and obedience

Is the answer, then, to simply withdraw and be silent? Oh, no. It's to reform. It's to do exactly what Jesus did. Jesus didn't say, "Don't go out and try to remove that speck from your brother's eye." He did say that before you do it, have a look at the log in your own. And Paul echoed the same sentiments when, in Romans, he asked, "You who say you should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who say you should not steal, do you steal?" It is because of this type of deceit that Paul said, "For this reason the name of God is blasphemed among the unbelievers." Today, God is calling the church to repent of her own immorality in order to speak with fresh authority to the moral issues of our time and return to biblical standards of holiness.

You can gauge our trust in each other by our prayer requests, can't you? Aren't we safe? Listen to the average Christian prayer meeting: "My aunt needs to be saved." "I need a new job." "Kids have the flu." Those are very legitimate and very important. Yet, when is the last time we heard someone say, "I am two steps away from having an affair with my secretary." "I brought up some stuff on the Internet that's very enticing. I feel compelled to go back to it." "I stepped into an adult bookstore and I loved it." "I have homosexual fantasies." That's rare, but it shouldn't be.

Of course, we're saddened and disappointed when a Christian leader or father or wife or Sunday school teacher falls into immorality. We expect more out of each other—and we *should*. But we've got to ask ourselves a couple of questions:

“While those people were considering the sins, did they feel safe enough to tell us that they were tempted?” Did they feel they could ask us for help?” If the church is not considered a safe harbor for people tempted by sin, perhaps we share some responsibility when they fall.

Re-establish honesty, vulnerability and accountability

After all, sexual sin doesn’t happen in a vacuum. People don’t wake up and say, “Gee, I think I’ll get a little fornication in before lunch today.” There’s a period of temptation, consideration and titillation. “Looks good, think I will—maybe I won’t. Gee, wow.” Think of how much tragedy we could avert if we created in our churches an environment in which people felt safe to say, “I’m tempted toward something devastating and I’m asking for help. Pray with me. Hold me accountable. Be with me in this struggle so that I don’t yield to it.”

I used to wait tables. If you’ve ever waited tables in a restaurant, you know that as part of your job you have to take drink orders and go into the bar to get the order filled. I would go into the bar and fill the orders. I saw in the bar what you see in every bar—the regulars. These are the people who came there every day about the same time—the “drinking buddies.” At first I thought, *How depressing. Nothing better to do than sit around and drink alcohol all day.* But after a while, I saw something in them that I began to really envy. It was their easy camaraderie with each other. They could just swing through those doors, look at each other and say, “Thank God—it’s just you. With you, I can be honest. With you, I can say where I’m at. With you, I can complain. With you, I can show my ugly side.” And I wondered, “Why couldn’t the body of Christ be more like a bar.”

It would be wonderful if we walked into our churches through the sanctuary door and could honestly say, “Oh, thank God—it’s just you. With you, I can be myself. Here, of all places, I can be vulnerable. I can be authentic.” Not so we can have our sin legitimized, but so we can be truly accountable. What is hidden cannot be dealt with. So we would do well to take heed of what James 5:16 says about confessing our faults one to another and praying for one another that we might be healed. All of the healing, I believe, for sexual sin exists within the body of Christ, if the body of Christ only knew it.

Perhaps the
real problem
is Christians
are hesitant
to admit
that sexual
struggles
exist.

Addressing hostility toward homosexuals

Second, the church must repent of hostility toward homosexual people. I believe God is calling us to recommit to bold love. You remember Jonah who had an extraordinary calling to deal with a group of people he didn't want to deal with at all? In fact, he so wanted out of that calling, he went through extraordinary lengths to get out of it. And God went through even more extraordinary lengths to bring him back into the calling. This fine prophet found himself barfed up on the beach, and he thought, *Okay, I'll go!*

But even then, he preached what must go on record as being the world's worst evangelistic sermon. "Destruction's coming. Destruction's coming. Destruction's coming. Goodnight." No altar call. No visitor card. No follow-up. Just, "You're going to burn. I've done my part." In fact, we read in Jonah's book that he went and got himself a front row seat to watch the barbecue. Then, lo and behold—from the king on down—Ninevah repented! Jonah went ballistic. He said, "I don't believe this, God! You called me to come out here and tell these people that they're going to burn. I did my part, and You did not do Yours. You called them to repentance." You see, Jonah cared more to see the destruction of people than he cared to see them redeemed.

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'
Jesus, Matthew 9:12-13

How many Christians today are afflicted with the Jonah syndrome? To hear some of us talk, you'd think it's more important to politically defeat homosexuals than it is to see them won into the kingdom of God. And that ought not to be! An unfortunate tendency cropped up in the body of Christ in the mid-1970s when we started to enter into dialogue on the homosexual issue. It seemed then that it was not enough to simply condemn the sin of homosexuality. That was good. But it

seemed we also needed to resort to lurid exaggerations and stereotypes to fully gross people out about homosexuality and homosexuals themselves in order to underscore our point.

If verbal irresponsibility was common in the '70's, it reached a nearly hysterical pitch in the early 1980s when something beyond anybody's imagination happened. In the gay community, we started hearing horrifying rumors. Some guy out in Florida—healthy, strong—came down with a low-grade fever, couldn't shake it. Finally, he checked into the hospital just to get it taken care of, and he died. We heard about someone else up in the New York area with the same symptoms. He

was young, healthy—never had a health problem in his life—except along with a fever he developed some sort of crazy skin condition. He was wasting away to a skeleton, and now his lover wasn't feeling well. Then, a couple of guys up in San Francisco ... down in Hollywood. Nobody was talking about it at the time. It wasn't in the media. It wasn't in the public consciousness. It didn't have a name yet. All we knew was that young, healthy gay men were dying. We didn't know if it was something in the drugs people were taking, if it was passed sexually, if it was genocide. We were utterly disoriented. And we were so scared, so very scared.

I've often thought since then that if ever there was an opportunity for the body of Christ to move in evangelistically with power, it would have been at the beginning of what's now known as the AIDS epidemic. Thousands of vulnerable young men had to grapple with issues they didn't think they'd have to grapple with for at least another 50 years. What an opportunity there might have been for the church to move in and say, "We're so sorry. But know this: There is a God who loves you. We can tell you how you can be reconciled to Him. Can we comfort you? Can we offer you assistance? Can we be there for you?"

While I am sure there are *some* Christians who did that, all too often the most vocal believers are taken to speak for *all* believers. And at that time, unfortunately, too many stood behind the pulpit and said, "Ah-ha! The judgment of God has fallen on the sodomites and they deserve it!" And that is the message many in the homosexual community will never forget.

Bold love serves without compromising

In taking a stand publicly against homosexuality, a person does not have to become homophobic, bigoted or cruel. We are *mandated* to stand against it. Yet, *how* we oppose it is as important as opposing it. So Christians must repent of whatever hostility exists towards homosexual people and recommit ourselves to bold love. Bold love is not necessarily love without anger. There is a time for anger. And if we can look at the state of affairs today and not feel angry, there is something wrong in our perception. But James put it so well, "...for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God." (James 1:20). There is a difference: Anger corrects and hostility destroys.

Bold love seeks to serve without compromising. The remarkable thing we read about Jesus is that the common people gladly listened to Him. *God* in the flesh walked among humanity, and humanity responded to Him in a way that suggested He was utterly approachable. *God* incarnate could be approached by prostitutes, tax collectors and the lowest of the law. The dregs of His society felt

comfortable coming to *Him*. That tells me He had that incredible capacity of never compromising truth. You never hear Him legitimizing sin. He never failed to call a spade a spade, whether He was telling an adulterous woman, “Don’t do it anymore. I don’t condemn you, but I want you to stop,” or whether He was rebuking the self-righteous Pharisees. And yet, He was able to serve people and relate to them.

There was a pastor who developed a real burden for AIDS patients. On his own, this middle-aged, former member of the Moral Majority (so we’re talking conservative) just felt a desire to do something for persons with AIDS. He started going to hospitals and visiting AIDS patients—many of them young homosexual men who were dying. And he went in to talk to them, to get to know them, read to them, pray with them and preach if they would allow it. If not, he would just be there as a man who cared about them.

Pretty soon the local gay radio station found out what he was doing. They called him up and said, “Hey, pastor, we hear you’re out there ministering to AIDS patients. Where do you stand on homosexuality?” He said, “Oh, I believe it’s sin.”

They said, “Well, we don’t like that, but we like you. Would you be willing to come on our radio show?” And so, soon after that, this middle-aged conservative pastor found himself across the microphone from a gay radio host doing a show, talking about his ministry to AIDS patients. When the show ended, he gave out the name of his church and the location.

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Soon, gay people started showing up at his church—not necessarily to repent. Sometimes in pairs. Just coming to hear what this man had to say who had been so loving and gentle and open on the radio program. And the congregation got nervous. They said, “Pastor, the homosexuals are coming! They’re coming down the aisles by twos! What are we going to do?” He said, “Well, I guess they can take a seat next to the idolaters and the gossips and the fornicators and the whoremongers. Make room.”

Then he said from the pulpit, “When I teach on sexual ethics, I will teach that anything short of heterosexual, monogamous marriage is wrong. If you are openly homosexual and practicing that sin and unrepentant, you cannot hold a position in this church. I cannot legitimize your relationship in that sense. I will not spare when I am teaching the Word of God, but if you’re lesbian or gay and you came here, we’re

so glad to have you. Welcome. We want you to hear the Gospel, and we want to be your friend.” It was a testimony of bold love—service without compromise.

We’ve all heard it said, “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” It’s becoming, in fact, a cliché. But, you know, if we use words as strong as *love* and *hate*, the burden of proof is on us to show evidence of those strong emotions. If we’re going to say we hate something, we need evidence. If we’re going to say we *love*, we need evidence of that. Even as we oppose sin, we ought to be the first to love and care for people. If nothing else, surely we can serve them by listening to them. If you have a homosexual loved one, relative, friend or co-worker, you can do them a powerful service by asking them, “What is life like for you? I want to know you. I want to hear about your experience. I want you to know I’m interested in you, not as an object of conversion, but as someone I care about.”

Jesus responded to the need of the individual. I would suggest a reason that we have perhaps been weaker than we ought to have been in ministering to homosexuals is that we have assumed that all of them are cut out of the same cloth—having the same need, needing the same response. Essentially I think we will find we are dealing with three types of homosexual people: **militant, moderate and repentant.**

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oppose sin,
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Defend without attacking

Most militant homosexuals have a rigid agenda to normalize homosexuality combined with intolerance for opposing viewpoints. But if you think about it, *everybody’s* got an agenda. That’s no crime. *I* have an agenda. *Christians* have a collective agenda. The sad part is what happens when those who hold an agenda show *intolerance* for anyone with opposing viewpoints. Yet it’s true that no matter how gentle, considerate, sensitive and caring we are, we cannot escape the offense of truth. Truth is divisive.

But the temptation, of course, when we are attacked by gay militants is to respond in one extreme or the other. On the one hand, you get pushed so far, you finally want to say, “Okay, you want to see homophobia, I’ll show you homophobia!” Of course, we’ve lost when we hit that extreme because we become just what they say we are. On the other hand, we have many people who are dancing pirouettes to avoid saying anything offensive about anybody. Godly warfare calls us to defend what is right *without* attacking.

I had the pleasure of speaking at a Promise Keepers conference a few years back. Gay militant groups were converging on the conference because they had heard that Promise Keepers had spoken out against homosexuality. They said, “We’re going to interfere with your meeting, and you’re going to deal with us.” It so happened that year, some of the guys from the Denver Broncos were coming down to help with security. Well, we were secure. They stood around the outside of the stadium with arms locked. They were quiet but impressive. These men were basically forming a boundary saying, “This is as far as it goes. You may come here. You may exercise your right to speech, but you will not disrupt what we’re doing.”

As the evening wore on, some of the guys thought maybe the demonstrators were getting hungry. A few of them broke ranks, went into the speaker’s room, got some coffee and juice and cookies. Quite a sight—these guys hulking out into a bunch of gay demonstrators saying, “No, you’re not going to disrupt our conference, but do you want some cookies while you’re out there?” That’s godly warfare—defending without attacking.

Of course we should continue to pray for militant homosexuals and attempt to reach out to them in love, even while we stand in opposition to an activist social and political agenda. As Jesus teaches us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44)

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Moderate homosexuals are representative of most homosexual people. I think we have more in common with these homosexuals than differences. We share many of the same dreams, many of the same likes and dislikes and worry about many of the same things. To the moderates, we must be ambassadors as Jesus was to the Samaritan woman. When He approached that sexual sinner, He didn’t care to dialogue too extensively about her sex life. When the subject came up, in fact, He said, “Well, why don’t you get your husband?” And she said, “Well, you know, I’m kind of between husbands now.” He said, “Yeah, I’ll buy that. What, you’re on number five and you’re not even married to him? Okay, let’s get to the real point. I want you to know who I am. I have something for you. Drink the water I give you. You will never thirst again.”

Some Christians appear to be obsessed with seeing people convert from homosexuality to heterosexuality. Don’t they realize that heterosexuals can go to hell just as easily as homosexuals? The issue is: Where do they stand? Are they dead in sin or alive in Christ? If they’re dead in sin, it hardly matters *what* the sin, they are dead in sin. The Gospel must be the priority of the homosexual—just as it must be for us all.

The church must be a place of redemption

Repentant homosexuals who abandon homosexuality are not just abandoning the sexual sin, they are abandoning a whole network of support and identity. Having made the right decision, they come to the church with virtually nothing. Yet, many in the church find it so hard to relate to the particular sin of homosexuality that they fail to relate to the individual. Almost 20 years ago I recognized that I had been kidding myself into believing that I could somehow marry Christianity with homosexuality. After a series of relationships that never grew, and promiscuity and error and deceit—both deceiving and being deceived—God graciously brought me to repentance. And I returned to the church as many repentant homosexuals do—frightened and vulnerable and very, very alone.

It is understandable that people would have revulsion toward unnatural behavior. I don't call that phobia. I call that a natural response to unnatural behavior. But, we must walk in the truth that we were *all* doomed until we received grace from Christ. Paul, before he became St. Paul the apostle, was Saul of Tarsus—a murderer. A man so deluded, he thought he was doing God a *favor* dragging Christians off to have them imprisoned and killed. The kind of a guy who watched the first martyr be killed and said, "Here, I'll hold your coats. Go for it." When the disciples found out he had been born again and wanted to join the church, they were understandingly leery. Thank God there was a Barnabas in the bunch who said, "I can see past where you've been. I see you."

As a counselor, I've seen people come from many backgrounds and many situations. Some of them have lovers. Some of them have been celibate. Some of them have just dealt with fantasies and temptations. Some are from abusive homes. But one thing all of them have in common is that they wished to God that they could tell somebody in their church what they were going through. Alcoholics get a token if they go a week, a month, six months and a year sober. Where are the people in the church who are celebrating the decision of the homosexual who has said yes to God and no to that sin?

It's tragic that the church on the one hand says, "We are terrified by the gay rights movement and want to stop the legitimization of homosexuality." Yet, on the other hand, it is so hesitant to offer ministry to those who would come out of that behavior. It makes no sense.

We must remember that at our best, none of us has more to offer than filthy rags.

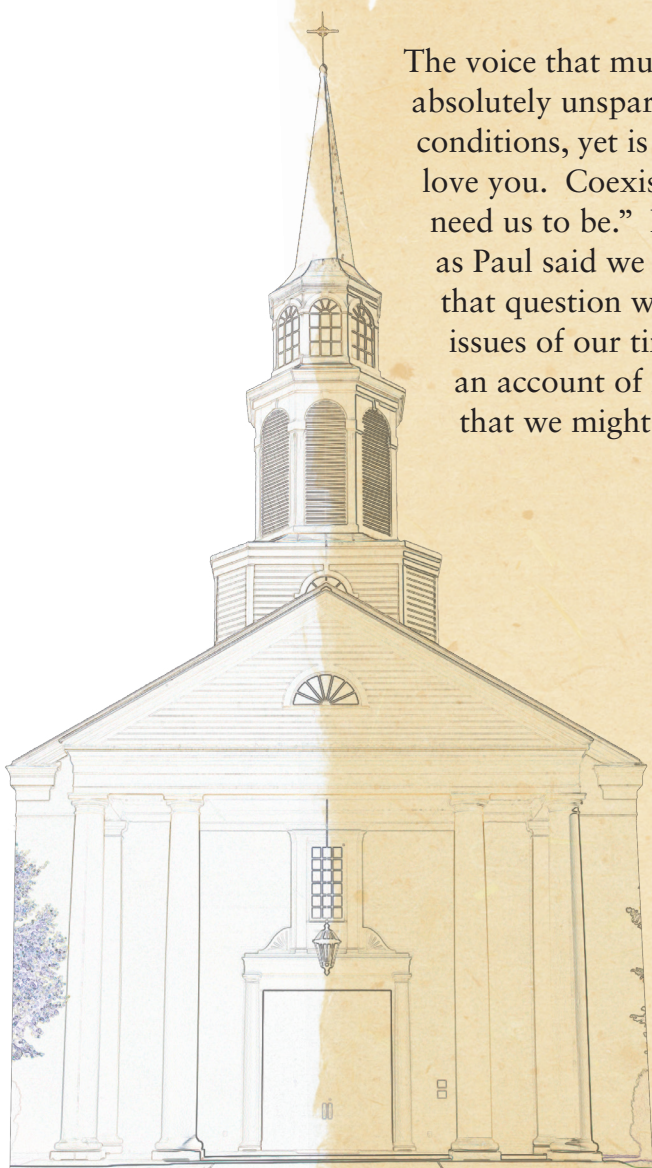
Walk alongside the homosexuals with love

We've learned on the abortion issue that it's not enough just to tell pregnant women what *not* to do. We've learned that we have to walk alongside women and say, "Not only will we tell you not to murder the child, but we will help you do what is right." So now we have Christian-sponsored homes where women can live and carry a child to full term. We have pregnancy counseling centers for women who are pregnant, to tell them their options and provide support. We have support groups for women who have had an abortion and are grieving that decision. In the same way, we must also recognize that it will not be enough just to tell the homosexuals that they are wrong. We must be willing to say, "Come into our churches, and we will help you do what is right."

The voice that must go out from the Christian community is one that is absolutely unsparing in truth and will not compromise under the worst conditions, yet is equally unsparing in love, saying, "Hate us and we will love you. Coexist with us and we will love you. We will be to you what you need us to be." For we will *all* stand before the judgment seat of Christ, just as Paul said we would, and we'll be asked what we did in this life. Surely that question will include how we responded to the responsibilities and the issues of our time. May God help us on that day when we are asked to give an account of how we responded to the difficult issue of homosexuality so that we might hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

A Prayer for the Church

Father, we come to You, confessing our insufficiency and our inadequacy to meet the challenges of this time. Anoint us. Break our hearts for the people You love. Give us holy boldness that will never back down. Give us gentleness that will never give up on these people. Give us Your love and make us all You want us to be as we try our best to simply represent You in this life. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.



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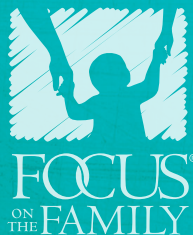
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