

A Church for Exiles: Responding to LGBTQ People

The Christian church on Earth has always had difficulty with exiles, those thought to be somehow outside the boundaries for receiving the grace of God. Before we get to LGBTQ people as represented in that category, let us consider some of the others.

- It started with the Gentiles, those uncircumcised persons outside God's chosen people, Israel. Jewish writing and popular belief cast Gentiles (non-Jews) as Idolatrous, have no share in the world to come, inherently sexually impure, unfit to be born, Gentile babies were "the issue of a beast."

ONE OF THE MOST RADICAL ACTS IN CHRISTIAN HISTORY WAS THE ADMISSION OF GENTILES TO THE FIRST CENTURY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

- Jesus's sermon in Nazareth illustrates the attitudes—see Luke chapter 4.
 - Peter's vision in Acts 10:13-15—"**And a voice came to him, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean.' And a voice spoke to him again the second time, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.'**"
 - Paul opens the gospel to Gentiles: Acts 13: 47-48: "**For the Lord gave us this command when he said, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.'**"^{1a1} **When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for his message; and all who were chosen for eternal life became believers.**
 - The first Baptist church in the world began in Amsterdam in 1609 with a group of exiles from England, forced out because they were seen as heretics. Anglican priest Daniel Featley wrote an anti-Baptist treatise in 1645 attacking the "Dippers" rampant in England. It included this attack, related to sexuality: "**They preach, and print, and practice their Heretical impieties openly; they hold their Conventicles weekly in our chief Cities, and Suburbs thereof, and there prophesie by turns; . . . they build one another in the faith of their Sect, to the ruin of their souls; they flock in great multitudes to their Jordans, and both the River, and are dipt after their manner with a kind of spell containing the heads of their erroneous tenets, and their engaging themselves in their schismatical Sexes enter into Covenants, and (if I may so speak) combination of separation. And as they defile our Rivers with their impure washings, and our Pulpits with their false prophecies and fanatical enthusiasms, so the presses sweat and groan under the load of their blasphemies.**"
 - In the US, Christian churches, primarily in the South used "biblical authority" to define the nature of the enslaved and "keep them in their place."
- I. In 1822, Richard Furman, pastor of FBC, Charleston, SC wrote a treatise stating: "**Had the holding of slaves been a moral evil, it cannot be supposed, that the inspired Apostles, who feared not the faces of men, and were ready to lay down their lives in the cause of their God, would have tolerated it, for a moment, in the Christian Church. . . . In proving this subject justifiable by Scriptural authority, its morality is also proved; for the Divine Law never sanctions immoral actions.**"
- Exiling the Divorced: "Baptists will never call a divorced pastor."

- LGBTQ people as Exiles from the Churches (Baptist)
 - 1) A Baptist missionary's use of Leviticus
 - 2) A Florida Church (and others) requires members to sign an opposition statement or be removed from the rolls.
 - 3) A Cruel Response

- In 1982, therapist John Fortunato wrote *Embracing the Exile*, noting:

“Disownment or rejection by family—often the norm for gay people—is different from family turmoil revolving around an adolescent’s adjustment at puberty, or a daughter who, at 22, is trying to cut the umbilical cord, or a son who is about to marry a woman his parents don’t like. It’s different because, unlike these other situations, it’s not how a son or daughter is *acting* that’s being rejected, it’s who they *are* constitutionally. They don’t have a choice about being gay, there isn’t anything inherently destructive in their sexual orientation, and yet, once found out, they are treated like lepers by the people who supposedly love them the most.”

Greystone Baptist Church
Sexuality, Gender & Faith — Congregational Case Studies
Marv Knox
September 13, 2023

Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, N.C.

Patience, Relationships & “Safety”

- Timeline: 1992-2007
- Tipping point: No specific tipping point, but three nudges ... (1) Pullen Memorial Baptist Church removed from Southern Baptist Convention; (2) a gay couple joined and became beloved members; and (3) church members produced a documentary, “Just As I Am”
- Process: Slow approach; gradual gravitation to consensus; affirmed by church vote
- Result: Codified as “policy” the church’s longstanding “practice” of inclusion. Received 10-12 negative votes, but the church did not lose members.

First Baptist Church, Greenville, S.C.

Consensus Without Code Words — Or a Vote

- Timeline: 2014-15
- Tipping point: During pastoral interim, lay members felt burdened to clarify FBC’s policy
- Process: Ignatian approach — weigh not only facts, but also feelings
- Result: Affirmed FBC “will not discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity” without using the divisive words “welcoming” and “affirming.” Twenty-three members “trickled out over the next year,” but the church reversed its downward membership spiral.

First Baptist Church, Huntsville, Ala.

Clarity Benefits Everybody

- Timeline: 2015-16
- Tipping point: U.S. Supreme Court’s Obergefell v. Hodges decision legalizing same-sex marriage
- Process: 26-week series of sermons, studies, discussions and policy development
- Result: FBC overwhelmingly adopted a “traditional” policy — welcoming LGBTQ members, but not qualifying them for leadership positions. The church lost five families.

Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

Process, Challenge & Recovery

- Timeline: 2015-16
- Tipping point: Gay member repeatedly received most deacon nominations; beloved young people came out
- Process: “Exhausting” 14-month series of studies, town-halls, proposal development and secret-ballot vote
- Result: Wilshire did not change its bylaws but interpreted them to mean “all membership rights and privileges apply to all members,” regardless of demographic issues. Initially, the church lost 300 of 1,500 active members, but it regained that many over the next two years, and it strengthened its voice for social justice in Dallas.

Woodland Baptist Church, San Antonio, Texas

Patient Migration Toward Consensus

- Timeline: The past decade; ongoing
- Tipping point: No specific tipping point, but incremental movement toward consensus
- Process: No official process, but ongoing discussion in Bible studies, sermons, hallways
- Result: Although the members have not voted, Woodland clearly follows an open and inclusive practice. A few members have left because the church is “liberal,” and more have come because they feel accepted. The church probably will approve a policy in order to clarify its position.