

“LOVING THE SINNER, HATING THE SIN”:
AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICAN MEGACHURCH RHETORIC
OF HOMOSEXUALITY

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Introduction

Recently the issue of homosexuality has come to represent a majorly divisive factor within American Christianity as more and more churches are defining their boundaries, or lack thereof, at homosexuality: many congregations believe that practicing homosexuality is not an acceptable aspect of one's life that will allow passage into God's Kingdom or salvation. Within megachurches, Protestant churches having at least 2,000 attendees per week, homosexuality often presents itself as a divisive and controversial issue. Megachurches tend to be situated on the more conservative and evangelical end of the spectrum of Protestant Christianity and, therefore, many of their congregations have expressed disapproval of homosexuality; they preach doctrines providing content for rhetoric following the guidelines of sexual purity as follows from divine law within their congregations. These doctrines include the biblical literalist approach to abiding by divine law, the presence of sin in today's world, and the conscious choice to continue living a life in sin. It is through the combination of these doctrines, one choosing to act in a sinful manner going against the divine law accepted when one takes a literal approach to the Bible, which allows megachurches to arrive at the conclusion that the "homosexual lifestyle" constitutes a sin worthy of condemnation. However, megachurches are also using rhetoric of love and acceptance regardless of sexuality. They preach their doors are open to all and everyone is welcome into the church, because everyone is welcome in God's eyes. When megachurches combine the three doctrines of conscious choice, biblical literalism, and sin a sufficient argument against homosexuality is formed. However, it is the addition of the second rhetorical stream of love that causes an inconsistency in their theology. It is clear that this all-encompassing rhetoric of love and acceptance is faulty as terms and conditions exist that one must follow in order to receive this absolute love; homosexuals must repent and abstain from their natural desire to love

in order to be accepted in to Heaven, without this repentance homosexual individuals are condemned.

However, pastors exhibit reluctance in directly mentioning homosexuality: they will find numerous replacements for explicitly discussing this issue; they will discuss sin, sexual impurity, sexual perversion, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10¹ generally, sexual brokenness, but rarely will they ever explicitly mention the term homosexuality. Even with this lack of direct mention, these individual doctrines are clear in the theology presented and from this affirmation one can draw out the rhetoric of condemnation. Megachurches define sin as a separation from God, a distance between individuals and the righteous path God intends humans to follow. If megachurches do not explicitly say that homosexuality is a sin, they will discuss the sin of sexual impurity and perversion intended to convey the same meaning as homosexuality but without the strong controversy. They usually weave around the subject by proclaiming the only good way to have sex is in the confines of marriage between a man and a woman, anything else is considered sin. Megachurches preach that all humans must repent for all of their sin if there is to be any redemption and entrance into Heaven. Therefore, those practicing homosexuality or fighting same-sex attraction must acknowledge the sin and begin repentance in order to be accepted into the Kingdom of God. The contradiction comes when homosexuals do not repent for their “sin” but choose to live acting in their love. The churches are forced to accept their own belief that homosexuals not repenting will be condemned to Hell, therefore, going against their firm belief in love, hope, encouragement, and acceptance. Therefore, my thesis argues that the first stream of rhetoric, which combines the three doctrines, as the willful violation of divine law by

¹ 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, New International Version, “(9) Or do you now know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men (10) nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

homosexuals, in partnership with the rhetoric of an all-encompassing love, represents a fundamental inconsistency within megachurch theology concerning homosexuality.

Methods for Identifying the First Stream of Rhetoric

This first rhetoric of exclusion is a subtle undercurrent flowing beneath the rhetoric of love and acceptance. It can be identified through the investigations of three doctrines: biblical literalism, choice, and sin. Megachurches rarely preach, write, or broadcast their beliefs on homosexuality explicitly which makes the search for evidence supporting this argument an exhausting and challenging one. Therefore, my initial step was to identify a group of megachurches. I chose Saddleback Church, a 20,000 member congregation in Saddleback Valley, California pastored by Rick Warren, Lakewood Church, a 45,000 member congregation in Houston, Texas pastored by Joel Osteen, Willow Creek Church, a 20,000 member congregation in South Barrington, Illinois pastored by Bill Hybels, and New Life Church, a 10,000 member congregation in Colorado Springs, Colorado pastored by Brady Boyd. These churches are four of the largest and most influential megachurches in the country. They all have extremely charismatic leaders, and are quintessential megachurches with very traditional and representative theologies. Within the context of these megachurches I was able to form a logic-based method for identifying key evidence supporting these doctrines and rhetoric. I examined sermons from pastors, writings from pastors, official websites and blog sites, small groups, and interviews with pastors. These tools provided sufficient evidence as megachurches' congregations are so extensive, they cannot count on spreading their congregational beliefs simply by word of mouth: they must broadcast their message out to the thousands of members through other means making this evidence more accessible to study and identify. Examining

writings of the pastors, podcasts, small groups, including restorative ministries (ministries focused on transforming congregants out of a life of sin), and official websites reveals both the opinions held by the church and its pastors. Due to the pastor's immense leading role within the church and their representation of thousands of people, listening to the messages in their sermons allows for another platform to express the beliefs of the church. In order to conclusively state that these churches adopted the stream of rhetoric that upholds a sufficient argument against homosexuality, I looked for a literal interpretation of biblical passages, doctrines concerning the nature of sin in human life, and the human choice to live a life of sin or repent and be accepted into the Kingdom of God.

Specifically, in reference to the presence of a biblical literalist approach I examined belief statements of the church which usually contain a sentence to a paragraph on the importance of the Bible as well as its infallible representation of a text written by God without human error. I also examined the abundance of biblical passages on the website as a further indication of reliance on the Bible. Most of the church websites were scattered with passages whether they were found as references after belief statements or passages to study in order to receive guidance on daily activities. Biblical passages were mentioned not only on the websites, but often were referenced continuously in sermons. I extensively examined sermons of each pastor as well as sermons from associate pastors, visiting pastors, and other individuals who were given the opportunity to preach. As each sermon is no less than forty minutes long, this task was a challenging and time consuming one. However, it yielded some of the best results. Each of the sermons would either preach directly on a section of the Bible and its application to daily life, or they would use biblical verses in order to emphasize points made in their sermons. Sermons were also essential for gathering evidence on sin, repentance, and salvation.

While many of these sermons required hours of listening only to identify a few sentences of relevant material, this relevant material usually provided direct evidence of these two rhetorical streams. Certain pastors, such as Joel Osteen, strayed away from mentioning sin in their preaching but others, such as Bill Hybels and Brady Boyd, delivered sermon series discussing sin and its meaning in our lives. Other pastors would merely mention the idea of sin, and striving to rid sin from our daily lives. At the most the pastors would mention the sin of sexual impurity and the requirement of repentance in order to enter Heaven, at the least they would mention sin generally, through pride, greed, lust, vanity, and the necessity to purify oneself from these contaminants in order to embody a more divine life. If sin was not focused on in the sermons, the websites provided useful information as their beliefs must be projected through some media in order to draw in new members. Belief and value statements of the church usually include some reference to sin and salvation, especially within the evangelical notion of bringing the Word of God to the people so they may be saved. Exploring these means of evidence, websites, podcasts, sermons, informational pamphlets, speakers, and writings all proved extremely fruitful for this argument. While pastors are reluctant to state clearly that continuous homosexual acts with no effort of repentance leads one away from God and towards condemnation, there are certain forms of evidence that, when put together, clearly lead one toward this belief. However, it is important to first discuss the importance of studying megachurches rather than another Christian body of faith.

Background on Megachurches

Megachurches represent a valuable and interesting organizational form on which to study the issue of homosexuality. Originating in the United States but expanding into the world,

megachurches are defined as a Protestant church with over 2,000 members, usually conservative and focused on evangelicalism. This form of American evangelicalism “in particular shaped not by ‘central ecclesiastical institutions and high culture’ but instead ‘by a democratic populist orientation’ that produced a distinctive form of democratic Christianity.”² This form of democratic Christianity is important as it has been the “religious movement in the United States most dramatically shaped by the common people.”³ This entire movement created by the “common people” is an important aspect to recognize as it reflects the power of the people involved in this movement. Megachurches fall under this category of evangelicalism but have come into their own with regard to their worship services and messages.

Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Church, created a seeker-sensitive model for megachurch worship. This model aimed to “appeal to those individuals previously turned off by organized religion, trying to connect with people who have abandoned or have remained outside of a traditional faith. They downplay denominational affiliation and traditional religious services.”⁴ “Seeker-sensitive services replaced choirs with rock bands and sermon notes with flashy videos and PowerPoints, successfully attracting thousands of followers.”⁵ This seeker-sensitive model and similar thinking evangelists “cobbled together the most influential and marketable characteristics of their religious predecessors to craft a new faith experience for hundreds of thousands of Americans under the banner of the ‘megachurch’”⁶ This “consumer-oriented”⁷ church service and its utopian aims represent the most attractive element of

² Jill Stevenson, *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 10.

³ *Sensational Devotion*, 10

⁴ Marc von der Ruhr and Joseph Daniels, “Subsidizing Religious Participation Through Groups: A Model of the ‘Megachurch’ Strategy for Growth.” *Review of Religious Research* 53, no. 4 (January 2012): 471-491.

⁵ *Sensational Devotion*, 65

⁶ Charity Carney, “Lakewood Church and the Roots of the Megachurch Movement in the South.” *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 60-78.

⁷ *Sensational Devotion*, 65

megachurch tradition. Using this model, megachurches are among “the most successful churches today in attracting and retaining members.”⁸ Not only do the rock bands, multimedia, flashy videos, and amenities attract thousands of attendees, the message delivered by the pastors is one that brings people into the congregation. The messages are,

Generally delivered in a low-key conversational style, by a friendly, happy casually dressed pastor (usually but not exclusively men). They almost always center on practical issues – how to raise kids, what to do when you are afraid, how to keep your integrity at work, and so on. The Bible usually functions as a source of wisdom and truth for everyday life and circumstances.⁹

These simple messages are usually uplifting and positive, making church a place where individuals come to be reminded of the love, redemption, hope, and encouragement from God. These messages are so well received that millions of people flock to these establishments weekly. This massive influx of people, which has been shown to be growing over time, makes megachurches an incredibly influential population group. This influential group is important when examining the world through a religious and political lens as homosexuality has come to represent one of the most divisive factors among religious organizations overlapping into their political decisions.

While it seems that many denominations and congregations are dividing themselves over the issue of homosexuality, churches usually either choosing to side with a “for or against” opinion, megachurches seem to be resting somewhere in the middle. Megachurches are clear in their mainly conservative and evangelical beliefs, but from the casual observer’s point of view it looks as though the congregations may be moving towards a more lenient stance on the subject. Headlines such as “Pastor Joel Osteen to Oprah: Homosexuality is Sin – But Gay People Will

⁸ *Subsidizing Religious*, 478.

⁹ Aaron James, "Rehabilitating Willow Creek: Megachurches, De Certeau, and the Tactics of Navigating Consumer Culture." *Christian Scholar's Review* 43, no. 1 (Fall2013): 24.

Get into Heaven,” “Joel Osteen: God ‘Absolutely’ Accepts Homosexuals,” “Rick Warren Uncertain if Homosexual Behavior is Sinful, Says ‘Gays’ Go to Heaven,” “Willow Creek Church is Not Anti-Gay” may give the impression that megachurches are turning over a new leaf regarding homosexuality and becoming more open. Pastors are preaching gospels of love for all people claiming that God wants to seek out those who are lost, everyone is important to God, and the church is a place where everyone is welcome regardless of sexuality. Megachurches do attempt to redirect people’s attention and cover up their steadfast belief that those practicing homosexuality with no intention of repentance will not be allowed into the Kingdom of Heaven; they cover this belief up with blanket statements of love and acceptance. However, this reveals a major inconsistency within megachurch theology when faced with homosexuals who do not choose to repent for their sexual sins. How can megachurches preach a gospel of love and acceptance by God and believe that homosexuals will be condemned to Hell if they do not repent for who they love? In order to sufficiently reveal this inconsistency, it is necessary to address both streams of rhetoric and the beliefs that must accompany them.

The First Stream of Rhetoric

In order to satisfy the first stream of rhetoric, one must abide by divine law which is taken directly out of biblical passages. Abiding by this divine law requires a biblical literalist view of the Bible. A characteristic of megachurches is the steadfast belief that the Bible is divine law free of human error and cultural context: the words in the Bible can be abstracted and directly applied to current life situations. Those who abide by a biblical literalist theology pin point specific passages that address the issue of homosexuality. These passages consist of selected verses from Leviticus, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy. The Leviticus passage,

Leviticus 18:22, describes the portion of the Levitical code stating, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.”¹⁰ Romans 1:27 states, “In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.”¹¹ 1 Timothy 9-10 states, “(9) We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels... (10) for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.”¹² Biblical literalists use each of these passages as clearly stated evidence against homosexuality.

The second element within the rhetoric condemning continued acts of homosexuality is the doctrine of sin; one must define homosexuality as a sin in order to condemn the act. Sin is commonly defined as the element in human life which separates humans from God or an act which violates God’s divine law. If one abides by the divine law set forth in the Bible from a literalist perspective, one pulls out the passages that address homosexuality and defines homosexual acts as a sin. The third element of this stream of rhetoric is that of choice. In order for this stream to come together to represent a coherent argument against homosexuality, one must willfully choose to live in a life of sin. The argument for homosexuality as a natural instinct for certain humans, and therefore not a sin, falls through when compared with the natural instinct towards pride, lust, greed, and other sins. One must choose to act on one’s instincts and attractions; it is that willful action that leads one to sin. Therefore, when one believes in a doctrine of biblical literalism, sin, and choosing one’s own actions, believing that sin is a willful violation of God’s divine law, a sufficient argument for the exclusion of homosexuality from the

¹⁰ Leviticus 18:22 NIV

¹¹ Romans 1:27 NIV

¹² 1 Timothy 9-10 (NIV)

Kingdom of God is created. However, this argument loses its sufficiency when the churches preach an overarching doctrine of love and acceptance. In order to prove this insufficiency and incompatibility it is necessary to look directly at the evidence provided by each church.

Saddleback Church

Saddleback Church, led by Rick Warren, was selected as a case study for this project as it is a well-known church with over 200 ministries and considered one of the largest megachurches in the United States. Saddleback Church began when Rick and his wife Kay Warren moved to Southern California in 1979 looking to connect with the population of religious or spiritually inclined individuals who did not attend church regularly.¹³ He began small with group meetings in his own home and one year later expanded to open his first church in the Saddleback Valley. His congregation expanded rapidly as Saddleback Church now welcomes nearly 20,000 attendees every weekend and one in nine community members call Saddleback Church their home church.¹⁴ The immense power in numbers behind this church and the pastor's ability to draw in thousands of people a week make Saddleback an interesting and important case study.

Saddleback embodies very traditional beliefs concerning the Bible and sexual purity. They, as a congregation, believe the Bible was written "under the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the supreme source of truth for Christian beliefs and living. Because it is inspired by God, it is truth without any mixture of error."¹⁵ Therefore, what was written in the Bible is the authority under which members and attendees of the church live their lives. Passages and ideas in the Bible that contain high importance in the church contain information concerning sin and salvation. These passages are identified as high importance as they make up more the

¹³ "Saddleback Church" <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/history/>

¹⁴ "Saddleback Church" <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/history/>

¹⁵ "Saddleback Church" <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>

majority of church-wide beliefs broadcasted on the church website. Statements about sin and salvation such as, “Although man has tremendous potential for good, he is marred by an attitude of disobedience toward God called ‘sin.’ This attitude separates man from God”¹⁶ and “Salvation is a gift from God to man. Man can never make up for his sin by self-improvement or good works – only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God’s offer of forgiveness can man be saved from sin’s penalty”¹⁷ are followed by biblical passage references that reiterate these statements almost word for word. These references indicate the church not only acknowledges their belief in the absolute truth of the Bible’s words but shows examples of how they use this interpretation to create their beliefs on such ideas as sin and salvation. It is not only important to acknowledge Saddleback’s use of specific verses and their notion of the infallible Bible but also to address their beliefs concerning sin and impurity that stem from this notion.

Saddleback believes strongly in the idea of sin and impurity; the belief that there are unnatural feelings, attractions, and actions in the world that, when acted upon, distance oneself from God. Saddleback preaches that,

Man was created to exist forever. He will either exist eternally separated from God by sin or in union with God through forgiveness and salvation. To be eternally separated from God is hell. To be eternally in union with him is eternal life. Heaven and hell are places of eternal existence.¹⁸

The idea of this sin as separation from God is discussed and preached in relation to impurity, specifically sexual impurity. The impulse for impurity is natural among humans as “the struggle that we encounter with immoral sexual thoughts and/or practices stems from the very fact that we are sinful by nature.”¹⁹ While impurity comes naturally to all humans as false attractions and impulses do, sexual immorality can be confessed and actions can be changed leading one to a

¹⁶ “Saddleback Church” <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>

¹⁷ “Saddleback Church” <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>

¹⁸ “Saddleback Church” <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>

¹⁹ “Saddleback Church” <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>

more pure and God-filled life.²⁰ Specifically, one of the impure temptations mentioned is homosexuality. The website quotes 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in The Living Bible stating, “Don’t you know that those doing such things have no share in the Kingdom of God? Don’t food yourselves. Those who live immoral lives, who are idol worshippers, adulterers, or homosexuals – will have no share in His kingdom. Neither will thieves or greedy people, drunkards, slanderers, or robbers.” Using this passage as a piece of evidence concerning the immoral and, therefore, impure lives of homosexuals combined with their clear exclusion from the Kingdom of God forms two-thirds of the doctrines making up a sufficient argument against homosexuality. However, while we can gain insight from the presence of this passage on the church’s website, this passage alone is not enough to draw a proper conclusion about the way Saddleback views the issue of homosexuality. The next step is to examine the preaching and opinions of the pastor, Rick Warren. Due to the large number of members, Warren attempts to represent all opinions found in his church and is reluctant to take a very opinionated stance.

Given this lack of stance, Warren does succeed in getting his opinions across when it comes to the issue of homosexuality. While he does not preach on the subject as he finds it takes away from his central message of bringing people closer to God, homosexuality is an extremely prevalent issue at hand in society; therefore, Warren divulges his opinion when asked in a usually non-religious context, e.g. interviews. In a recent interview with Piers Morgan on CNN Warren reclaims his views on traditional marriage by saying that, “historically, around the world, the vast majority of people would say marriage means one man and one woman in a commitment.”²¹ Therefore, marriage should stay as a one man, one woman covenant not redefined to include all people. However, in response to questions concerning homosexual

²⁰ “Saddleback Church” <http://www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/whatwebelieve/>

²¹ Anugrah Kumar, “Rick Warren on Redefining Marriage: I Fear God's Disapproval More Than Man's.” *The Christian Post*. N.p. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2014

individuals, Warren took a more accepting view. Warren states that he has many gay friends, works with many gay organizations, helps fight AIDS and claims that it is not a sin to love somebody.²² While he may love homosexual individuals, he still believes their actions constitute sin. These actions constitute sin for Warren because they represent a choice; a choice to act against God's will. Warren states, "I do not believe attraction is a sin. But I do believe some actions are a sin...the Bible clearly states I am absolutely in control of my actions."²³ This leads Warren to develop his opinions on whether or not homosexuality is a choice. When Warren was asked how he responds to the question of choice within homosexuality, he stated, "the jury is still out on that. It wouldn't bother me if there was a gay gene found because here's what we know about life: I have all kinds of natural feelings in my life, and it doesn't necessarily mean that I should act on every feeling."²⁴ However, Warren still acknowledges his lack of knowledge on the subject and believes that homosexuals who accept Jesus are going to Heaven. While Warren exudes the attitude of acceptance it is very clear that his acceptance stops short. He seems to take stances that he believes will keep everyone happy, a possible symptom of being a leader of so many, rather than stating an opinion that draws sharp boundaries.

While Saddleback Church is reluctant to directly state that unrepentant homosexuals will not be accepted into Heaven, it remains clear from the evidence above that one can logically draw that conclusion from their beliefs. However, the church and Warren do attempt to cover these beliefs with their rhetoric of love: Warren's discussion of his involvement in gay organizations, his friends and family members who are gay, and his claim that it is not a sin to

²² Heather Clark, "Rick Warren Uncertain if Homosexual Behavior is Sinful, Says 'Gays' Go to Heaven." *Christian News Network*. N.p. 2012. Web. Jan 9. 2014.

²³ HuffPost Gay Voice, "Chelsea Clinton Talks Gay Marriage With Pastor Rick Warren On 'Rock Center'" *The Huffington Post*. 2012. Web. Jan 9. 2014

²⁴ Heather Clark, "Rick Warren Uncertain if Homosexual Behavior is Sinful, Says 'Gays' Go to Heaven." *Christian News Network*. N.p. 2012. Web. Jan 9. 2014.

love somebody. These statements, while on the surface seem kind and open, are in direct conflict with the belief that those who do not repent will be excluded from Heaven. Similarly to Warren, Joel Osteen, of Lakewood Church, is reluctant to spend time preaching or discussing the issue of homosexuality.

Lakewood Church

Joel Osteen, fondly known as “The Smiling Preacher,” oversees and leads a congregation of over 45,000 followers. Lakewood Church is one of America’s largest megachurches settled in Houston, Texas. Lakewood, like Willow Creek, adopts a “seeker-sensitive” model for their church which allows them to reach out to those who have turned away from traditional churches in the past through a constructed utopia.

Lakewood Church began in 1959 lead by Joel Osteen’s father, John. John Osteen lead one of the largest church congregations in America with a television broadcast that was seen by millions in over 100 different countries²⁵ John cultivated his church’s image to be one with a “caring atmosphere, quality leadership, and community outreach”²⁶ This cultivation led to immense success while Joel Osteen remained in the background as the television producer of John Osteen’s worship and teaching program. However, John’s passing in 1999 allowed Osteen to take center stage as senior pastor and continue teaching John’s inspirational message.

Osteen’s widespread and rapid success can be partially attributed to his core message and prosperity gospel saying, “our God is a good God who desires to bless those who are obedient and faithful to Him through Jesus Christ.”²⁷ Osteen shares this message with his congregation by embodying his message of hope and encouragement so others can strive to fulfill God’s desires

²⁵ “Lakewood Church” <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/new-here/Our-History.aspx>

²⁶ “Lakewood Church” <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/new-here/Our-History.aspx>

²⁷ “Lakewood Church” <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/new-here/What-We-Believe.aspx>

for them. He and his congregation speak out in their statement of faith in favor of a belief centered on the Bible as “inspired by God, without error and the authority on which we base our faith, conduct and doctrine.”²⁸ This belief statement shows a sentiment of biblical literalism as the congregation states the Bible is without flaws or error and gives no indication of an interpretive strategy. Not only does the congregation view their lives through the words in the Bible, their method of worship and conducting day to day activities consists of turning to the scriptures for answers. References to biblical passages are scattered throughout the Lakewood official website as downloadable pamphlets majorly consist of biblical passages,²⁹ most blog entries from the Osteen’s center around a scriptural passage, and sermons from his fellow leaders such as John Gray and Nick Nilson both discuss the importance of the Scripture, using the Bible as a guide and reading passages during the sermon.³⁰ Osteen and his congregation use the Bible as a tool to learn how to enact God’s will in this life. One of the ways Osteen uses the Bible is as a guide for acknowledging sin.

Even with Osteen’s positive attitude toward life and God’s bountiful gifts, sin cannot be completely dismissed. Osteen believes, “sin means to miss the mark.”³¹ to not be in touch with what God wants for you in your life. Due to Osteen’s lack of interest in discussing sin in his work the majority of information from him is pulled from interviews which have a tendency to be very direct when it comes to the topic of sin. One of the most repeated sentiments Osteen expresses in interviews is his belief that one cannot “categorize sin.”³² This is especially

²⁸ “Lakewood Church” <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/new-here/What-We-Believe.aspx>

²⁹ “Lakewood Church,” <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/Downloads.aspx>

³⁰ “Nick Nilson Sunday, May 29, 2011 3x7” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYaxaBeGSWc>

³¹ “Piers Morgan Tonight.” *CNN Official Interview: Joel Osteen ‘Homosexuality is a Sin.’* <
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCpRNfBzys>>

³² “Piers Morgan Tonight.” *CNN Official Interview: Joel Osteen ‘Homosexuality is a Sin.’* <
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCpRNfBzys>>

important when discussing the issue of homosexuality, an issue Osteen claims he is solely confronted with in interviews. While Osteen explicitly states “Scripture says that being gay is a sin”³³ he argues against any kind of hierarchy when it comes to sin. He says, “The Bible said a sin is pride, a sin is selfish ambition. We tend to pick out these certain things.”³⁴ Osteen highlights keeping all sin on an equal level while addressing that homosexuality does fit in with the category of sin. When asked why homosexuals are considered sinners Osteen responds claiming, “It’s strictly back to what the scripture says. I mean, I can’t grab one part and say God wants you to be blessed and live an abundant life and not grab the other part and say ‘You know what? Live that kind of life.’ It comes back to the Scripture. I’m not the judge.”³⁵ Osteen is not the judge, but God is, and God’s final word, through Scripture, is absolute. Osteen distances himself in order to convey that he is not discriminating, not hating, not bashing homosexuals; He is simply following God’s commanding words. In interviews, Osteen emphasizes this anti-hate, pro-love through his appreciation for gay individuals.

Osteen furthers his pro-love stance as he claims, “I don’t dislike anybody. Gays are some of the nicest, kindest, most loving people in the world” followed by “it doesn’t matter who likes you or who doesn’t like you, all that matters is God likes you. He accepts you, he approves of you.”³⁶ When asked if this statement included homosexuals Osteen responded, “Absolutely. I believe that God has breathed his life into every single person. We’re all on a journey. Nobody’s

³³ “Piers Morgan Tonight.” *CNN Official Interview: Joel Osteen ‘Homosexuality is a Sin.’* <
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCpRNfBzys>>

³⁴ “Piers Morgan Tonight.” *CNN Official Interview: Joel Osteen ‘Homosexuality is a Sin.’* <
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCpRNfBzys>>

³⁵ “Piers Morgan Tonight.” *CNN Official Interview: Joel Osteen ‘Homosexuality is a Sin.’* <
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCpRNfBzys>>

³⁶ “Joel Osteen Finally Comes Out on ‘Gay’ Issue.” *WND: America’s Independent News Network*. N.p. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2014

perfect.”³⁷ Osteen is very clear about his opinions and the opinions with which he leads his church; he believes that homosexuals should not be discriminated against, bashed, hated but should be loved and accepted like any other member of his church and follower of Jesus; however, a homosexual acting on their natural loving instincts is a sin. But, as the church so proudly proclaims, all sin can be forgiven if repented.

“God gives us the grace to change,”³⁸ Osteen proudly proclaims in an interview. Osteen acknowledges his ignorance once more in response to the possibility of homosexuals changing to repent, “I don’t know that I understand it all. I believe it’s a process... We’ve seen people break addictions and do other things as well.” When confronted with the “born gay” argument claiming being gay is “much harder than your average addiction”³⁹ Osteen responds,

It is. It’s a difficult issue. I don’t understand all the answers I just come back to what I read in the Scripture. I can’t ignore that. I don’t know that I understand it all. But I come back to this, we are for people. We have gay people that come to our church and sit there.⁴⁰

Osteen realizes that repenting for being gay is different and more challenging than repenting for other sins such as pride and lust. However, he does not sway from his belief that homosexuality can be changed and needs to be changed in order for individuals to be pure in God’s eyes. In his sermon, “The Rain is Coming,” Osteen discusses how addiction will not always last; the Kingdom of Heaven is coming down to cleanse everyone from their sins. This sermon is a discussion of change through the mighty power of God. While Osteen does not explicitly mention homosexuality in this sermon he addresses sins such as addiction, pride, negativity.

³⁷ “Joel Osteen Finally Comes Out on ‘Gay’ Issue.” *WND: America’s Independent News Network*. N.p. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2014

³⁸ “Joel Osteen Finally Comes Out on ‘Gay’ Issue.” *WND: America’s Independent News Network*. N.p. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2014

³⁹ “Joel Osteen Finally Comes Out on ‘Gay’ Issue.” *WND: America’s Independent News Network*. N.p. 2013. Web. 8 Jan. 2014

⁴⁰ “Piers Morgan Tonight.” *CNN Official Interview: Joel Osteen ‘Homosexuality is a Sin.’* <
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgCpRNfBzys>>

Osteen treats these three sins in the exact same way as homosexuality and lumps them together in other writings and interviews. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that the church views healing of addiction, pride and negativity in the same way they view the healing of homosexuality; the necessary ability to change through the faith placed in God.

Osteen's teachings reflect the theology upheld by the Lakewood congregation. They ascribe to a theology of blanket acceptance that children of God cannot discriminate against or hate anyone; the most important thing is to understand God's message of hope, encouragement, goodness, and mercy. Humans are natural sinners but, "there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus⁴¹ ... God no longer remembers your sin anymore."⁴² However, underneath this blanket acceptance and goodness, there is an undercurrent of condemnation; a loophole that takes one out of Heaven. Homosexuality is a sin as written in the divine law of the Scriptures; sin is a separation from God and must be repented against in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. If sin is not repented against the distance from God remains and one is not free from condemnation. Therefore, if one does not repent against one's homosexual nature but continues living a life in continual and purposeful sin, one is condemned due to one's homosexuality. This notion completely contradicts Lakewood's core theology of encouragement, acceptance, and love. The third church, Willow Creek, carries these same inconsistencies within its theology but discusses homosexuality as a church in a more upfront manner.

Willow Creek Church

Willow Creek Church, led by Pastor Bill Hybels, is centered in South Barrington, Illinois but extends to six campuses located across the country. Willow Creek is a nondenominational

⁴¹ Romans 8:1, NIV

⁴² "Lakewood Church" <http://www.lakewoodchurch.com/Pages/new-here/What-We-Believe.aspx>

church consisting of over 20,000 members in each campus location. Hybels started his church in 1975 in order to create a congregation that would follow the teachings and examples laid out in Acts 2.⁴³ Important verses written in Acts 2 involve the day of Pentecost, in which crowds began speaking in tongues. More importantly Acts 2 (NIV) states that,

(38) Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (39) For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself”... (46) Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, (47) praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.⁴⁴

These verses lay out the type of church Bill Hybels aimed to create: the goals he has in mind when he preaches to his congregation to call them together in this manner. Included in these passages are the elements of repentance, the promise for generations to come, and the notion of salvation. These three elements are key doctrines for creating and sustaining Willow Creek Church and are reflected in the church’s beliefs and values.

The core belief of Willow Creek is founded on the conviction that, “People matter to God; therefore they matter to us.”⁴⁵ Typical of evangelical megachurches Willow Creek proclaims their religious goals by claiming they “[exist] to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ This evangelical claim, as well as the core statement of Willow Creek, indicates their more conservative beliefs which are then accentuated by their core beliefs set forth on their website. Their beliefs aim to convey their “theological positions on key aspects of faith” as well as their focus on “biblical theology...derived directly from Scripture.”⁴⁷

⁴³ “Willow Creek Community Church,” <http://www.willowcreek.org/>

⁴⁴ Acts 2, NIV

⁴⁵ “Willow Creek Community Church,” <http://www.willowcreek.org/>

⁴⁶ “Willow Creek Community Church,” <http://www.willowcreek.org/>

⁴⁷ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

Willow Creek believes the Bible remains “entirely originated with God”⁴⁸ and the Scriptures are “infallible and inerrant; they are the unique, full, and final authority on all matters of faith and practice.”⁴⁹ Equally as important as the Scriptures, Willow Creek holds strong beliefs concerning salvation and repentance. The church believes the “central purpose of God’s revelation in Scripture is to call people into fellowship with Him.”⁵⁰ Humans were originally created with the intention to be in relationship with God. However, humans turned their own ways which resulted in “alienation from him and the innate inability to please God.”⁵¹ Since then all humans are in need of God’s salvation which can be obtained by “repentance and faith.”⁵² Willow Creek does not hesitate to address the issues of sin, salvation, repentance, and condemnation on the surface level of their beliefs. Not only do they address the separation between God and humans resulting in sin, but the role of the Holy Spirit to “[enlighten] the minds of sinners to their need to be saved.”⁵³ The beliefs also outline the consequences for those who do not repent of their sin. The church states that those who reject God will “suffer eternal condemnation apart from Him”⁵⁴ while “believers will be received into eternal communion with God and will be rewarded for works done in this life.”⁵⁵ While many of the other megachurches require deeper digging and pointed questions asked by interviewers to uncover the church’s belief on sin, Willow Creek lays out their beliefs in a very straightforward manner in a main page on their website as well as in the sermons. While these beliefs provide insight into the base level of the church’s teachings they do not specifically mention homosexuality or the church’s

⁴⁸ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁴⁹ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁵⁰ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁵¹ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁵² “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁵³ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁵⁴ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

⁵⁵ “Willow Creek Church” <http://www.willowcreek.org/aboutwillow/what-willow-believes>

response to such issues. However a thorough examination into other sections of the website, sermons, blogs, interviews and speeches reveals Willow Creek's specific set of beliefs concerning this hot button issue.

Sexual purity remains very important to Willow Creek believers: an entire section of the website is dedicated to the importance of leading a sexually pure and moral life. Sexual purity is described as the God-designed "physical intimacy within the context of marriage in order to enhance a couple's emotional, relational, and spiritual bond."⁵⁶ Furthermore Willow Creek defines marriage through Genesis 2:24 saying, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one."⁵⁷ This traditional view of marriage, as well as the definition of sexual purity, leads to the definition of sexual impurity and immorality as anything outside of these two definitions. Willow Creek reveals God's desires for sexual purity through 1 Thessalonians 4:3 which states "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality."⁵⁸ The church attempts to make very clear the importance of maintaining sexual purity; "there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality,"⁵⁹ "sexual immorality is corrosive to the community,"⁶⁰ if we remove ourselves from these boundaries of sexual purity we "think we're liberated but we're on the path to lots of hurt."⁶¹ Clearly the idea of sexual purity comes from the idea of a holy marriage between a man and a woman. This obviously excludes homosexuals from achieving this state of sexual purity even with marriage laws. However, Hybels points out that his congregation "[challenges] homosexuals and heterosexuals to live out the sexual ethics taught in the Scriptures which

⁵⁶ "Willow Creek Church" <http://www.willowcreek.org/marriage>

⁵⁷ Genesis 2:24, NIV

⁵⁸ 1 Thessalonians 4:3, NIV

⁵⁹ "Willow Creek Church" <http://media.willowcreek.org/>

⁶⁰ "Willow Creek Church," *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁶¹ "Willow Creek Church" *Wiser in Sexuality* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

encourages full sexual expression between a man and a woman in the context of marriage and prescribes sexual abstinence and purity for everyone else.”⁶² “Everyone else” represents everyone not in a heterosexual marriage union: single heterosexual individuals and homosexuals. Therefore, due to homosexual marriage as a contradiction of God’s divine law, homosexuals are expected to remain abstinent for life. Homosexuality falls under the label of sexual impurity, therefore, homosexuality, when acted upon, is a sin. However, as expressed in the other churches as well, sin can be forgiven: homosexuals can be welcomed into Heaven through repentance.

The church points out that “While many couples have chosen to honor God by abstaining from sexual intimacy before marriage, many have not.” This is admittance that not all individuals are sexually pure, but have no fear “because of God’s grace, it is never too late to restore purity.”⁶³ “There is no sin that is bigger than God’s mercy and grace.”⁶⁴ All those who have sinned against God, in this argument I am concerned with homosexuals, have the ability to right their wrongs, address their sin, and receive salvation. “The grace of God leads to repentance,”⁶⁵ therefore, accepting God’s redeeming grace allows one to repent for one’s sin. Willow Creek abides by a doctrine of sin, biblical literalism, and choice creating their sufficient argument against homosexuality. However, through the exploration of their theology, it is clear that Willow Creek lays blanket statements of loving and including everyone. Recently the church has been focusing on a sermon series called “Stronger” in which Hybels and other pastors have been preaching on the ways to be stronger in faith, body, spirit, and love. The “Stronger in Love” sermon focused on Hybels’s interpretation of the Luke 15 parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Hybels’s interpretation of these passages centered on God’s desire to bring all

⁶²Wcavideo, “Bill Hybels Addresses Speaker Change at The Global Leadership Summit.” 2011.

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFhSfr13Y6o>>

⁶³ “Willow Creek Community Church,” <http://www.willowcreek.org/>

⁶⁴ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁶⁵ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

people to him: “all people matter to the Father.” Hybels identified the most important themes in these passages as the inclusivity of God’s love and desire to be united with his creation. Hybels chose to highlight characteristics of individuals that make humans different followed by the teaching that if all those people matter to God, they should matter to the followers as well. Under the category of those who are different, Hybels included types of individuals congregants sometimes cannot stand or those who congregants were taught to discriminate against. Included in this category were people who are poor, rich, black, white, annoying, “welfare queens,” people of different religions. Hybels rattled off this list three times in his sermon. While he quickly mentioned “gay and straight” individuals in the second list he omits this categorization in the other two lists. Including differences in sexual orientation in the second list but omitting the difference in the lists before and afterwards could suggest a rhetorical slip by Hybels. It remains clear that Hybels does not believe homosexuality is a difference overlooked by God since he considers homosexuality a sin. Therefore, mentioning the issue in one categorization out of three is significant as this highlights this tension between these rhetorical statements: it is inconsistent to preach homosexuality as a condemnable sin covered by a message that God’s doors are open to all those who are different. Finally, the fourth church, New Life, expresses their beliefs on homosexuality and sexual impurity similarly to Willow Creek: they discuss sin and salvation more often in sermons than Lakewood and Saddleback Church.

New Life Church

New Life Church, located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, is a non-denominational evangelical megachurch with over 10,000 members. New Life was founded in 1984 by Ted Haggard who remained senior pastor of the church until 2006 when Brady Boyd took over.

Before Boyd took over leadership, he graduated from Louisiana Tech with a degree in Journalism and pastored Gateway Church in Southlake, Texas for seven years.

New Life Church's website lacks some of the markers of the other churches such as explicit beliefs on sin, salvation, and homosexuality. Brady Boyd does not have interviews in which he mentions homosexuality specifically nor does he mention homosexuality in his sermons. This lack of homosexual commentary could be attributed to the Ted Haggard sex scandal that took place just before Brady Boyd took over as senior pastor. However, Boyd does not hesitate to mention homosexuality in his blog writings. Specifically, Boyd recently wrote a blog post titled "What I Learned from a Coffee Meeting with Three Gay Men." In this blog Boyd stated "I have not budged a bit on my theology regarding biblical marriage being solely between a man and a woman. I have not wavered in my belief that acting on homosexual tendencies remains an outright sin."⁶⁶ However, this statement followed sentiments of "bridge building" and calling this meeting "the best meeting of my week. Challenging, thought-provoking, enlightening."⁶⁷ Boyd welcomed the gay men by "affirming [his] commitment to help stand up for everyone in our city—both gay and straight—who is being targeted for insults and outright violence."⁶⁸ This is characteristic of New Life Church's attitude toward homosexuality. Boyd refers to his church as a hospital welcoming in all those who are broken and in need of healing, no matter the type. It is clear that Boyd and his congregation believe sexual immorality and impurity represent types of brokenness in need of healing.

⁶⁶ <http://newlifeblogs.com/bradyboyd/2014/01/17/what-i-learned-from-a-coffee-meeting-with-three-gay-men/#comments>

⁶⁷ <http://newlifeblogs.com/bradyboyd/2014/01/17/what-i-learned-from-a-coffee-meeting-with-three-gay-men/#comments>

⁶⁸ <http://newlifeblogs.com/bradyboyd/2014/01/17/what-i-learned-from-a-coffee-meeting-with-three-gay-men/#comments>

Over the past few Sundays Boyd has been preaching on 1 Corinthians 5, 6, 7, and 8. Surprisingly, the most revealing Sunday was not the Sunday on which 1 Corinthians 6 was to be taught but rather 1 Corinthians 5. This chapter mentions how unrepentant sinners living in a believing congregation should cause more pain and grief to the believing congregation than an unrepentant sinner who is not a member of a believing community. Boyd uses this opportunity to address sexuality, sexual impurity, and sexual perversion. Boyd claims that “Jesus offers us something as families, as married couples, as what the world considers normal and right,⁶⁹ clearly stating that married couples are the definition of “normal and right.” Boyd goes on to preach that “perverse, unrepentant sin, especially among believers should grieve us.”⁷⁰ For Boyd and the congregation, “the Bible is very clear. There are sexual boundaries that sex is between a man and a woman after marriage.”⁷¹ Therefore, anything outside of a heterosexual marriage union is considered sexual perversion and a sin. Throughout Boyd’s entire sermon he emphasized the unrepentant nature of this serious sinner. Boyd preaches that individuals who are struggling with issues have a home in the church as they “welcome every single person into the church.”⁷² However, this warm welcome comes with restrictions. Boyd preaches that individuals wrestling with their issues are more than welcome because he or she needs to try to repent, but if one lives in sin continuously you should be handed over to Satan.⁷³ Boyd instructs those of his congregation to avoid associating with anyone who “calls themselves a brother but who is sexually immoral.”⁷⁴ However, he combines statements of condemnation with statements saying, “we want to help everyone, we are not an exclusive organization... When we discover someone

⁶⁹ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁷⁰ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁷¹ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁷² “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁷³ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁷⁴ “Willow Creek Church,” *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

else's weakness we should grieve not gloat. And if given the opportunity we should restore them."⁷⁵ Not only does this point out the restrictions placed on the welcoming, loving, and accepting statements made by New Life, but it shows the language of restoration used in this context. New Life Church proudly proclaims their Restoration Ministries on their website and displays the ministry heavily in their weekly announcements and in their guest welcoming packages furthering evidence towards a healing approach to sin.⁷⁶

This evidence makes it clear that New Life is a congregation that believes homosexuality is a sin, sin represents separation from the Kingdom of God, and sin must be repented for in order to receive God's divine love and enter Heaven. However, this rhetoric is covered up with the lack of direct mention of homosexuality, and an overflowing notion of welcoming every individual into the metaphorical hospital of New Life; the open door policy is direct while the notion of curing an ailment remains in the background. While New Life Church lacks strong evidence on their church's website, an interesting piece of evidence in and of itself with regards to the Ted Haggard scandal, the blogs, sermons, and evidence observed while I attended a service provided more than enough evidence to conclude that New Life preaches these two streams of rhetoric. All of the four megachurches presented here preach these two streams of rhetoric and all four megachurches are caught in a bind as these streams are fundamentally incompatible.

⁷⁵ "Willow Creek Church," *Sex in the Church* <http://media.willowcreek.org>

⁷⁶ When I attended a New Life Church service the Restoration Ministries was mentioned in the verbal opening announcements as well as the digital video informing the congregation of important ways to get involved. After the church service I made my way over to the Visitors Center and observed five tables scattered with pamphlets, including a pamphlet for Restoration Ministries, and was handed a visitor's package. The visitor's package contained another advertisement for the Restoration Ministries as well as a variety of other New Life magazines, information pamphlets, and Brady Boyd's book "Sons and Daughters."

Critique of the Incompatible Rhetoric

The data from these megachurches provides significant evidence of these two rhetorical streams. Each church follows the Bible literally believing in an absolute abidance of God's divine law. Under divine law, one must repent for all of one's sins accrued during life in order to receive passage into Heaven and without which one is condemned. The element of choice comes not from the natural instincts of sin but the choice one has over one's actions; the desire to sin comes naturally to humans but, through the grace of God, one can overcome those desires and repent for past sins. These doctrines, when applied through the lens of homosexual sin, create a logical and sufficient argument against homosexuality: if one abides by the divine law set forth in the scriptures, including the presence of sin, homosexuality becomes a willful violation of this divine law, therefore, a sin to be repented. This rhetoric alone provides a solid argument against homosexuality and, if simply this first stream of rhetoric existed it would form a coherent theology for these megachurches. However, this rhetoric does not stand alone.

The second stream of rhetoric, the blanket statements of love and acceptance, exists clearly in each of these megachurches. Whether the pastor claims to love everyone, says homosexuals absolutely enter Heaven, the church is like a hospital with open doors, or any other statement of love for everyone, these statements are extremely present in each church's theology. Once again, if this rhetoric of love stood alone, without the presence of the first rhetorical arguments, it would provide a sufficient theological statement: our doors are open to anyone and everyone; just as God loves everyone so shall we. However, due to the presence of both streams of rhetoric in these theologies the combination forms an inconsistency and incoherence. There exists a fundamental dilemma when these two rhetorical streams attempt to combine. Claiming that homosexuality is a willful violation of God's divine law and continued practice of such an

act without attempting to repent will force one into condemnation is in direct conflict with preaching love and acceptance, that all are welcome in the congregation as well as in Heaven. It reveals an undercurrent, an asterisk, next to the church's blanket statements of love. The theology claims the church loves everyone, homosexuals can receive passage into Heaven, God loves everyone and desires to claim them, our doors are open to all *except* those who do not repent for their sins: those living a homosexual lifestyle. The argument that all are welcome no matter where you are in life, who you are, what your beliefs are, or any other qualifier, except those who continually practice their natural love represents an inconsistent and faulty argument. It is not simply an unwelcome attitude towards homosexuals or a violent condemnation to Hell but rather a subtle undercurrent doctrine that restricts those in loving homosexual relationships from entering Heaven.

This dilemma within megachurch theology can be seen clearly when looking at Christians in a committed homosexual relationship. If one puts gender aside and examines the relationship according to scripture of a holy union, this relationship abides very closely to these values: each Christian individual is committed to one other Christian individual in a loving, faithful relationship. However, the irony here is that when a homosexual couple abides closer to biblical values of marriage, monogamy, Christianity, faithfulness, love, the individuals are considered to live in deeper sin. According to these rhetorical statements it is a worse sin to participate in a monogamous, Christian, faithful and loving homosexual relationship than for a homosexual to live outside the Christian faith, without a significant other, and continue to enjoy homosexual acts outside the binds of marriage. It is this irony that reveals the extent to which these rhetorical teachings are incompatible: the fact that abiding closer to the second rhetoric causes one to fall deeper into the condemnation addressed through the first rhetoric.

Why is this Research Significant?

It is important to study this inconsistent incompatibility of this theology as it highlights the necessity to critically think about the theology presented to homosexual congregants drawn in by the uplifting and loving rhetoric of megachurches. Without examining the components of each preached doctrine and the streams of rhetoric contained within doctrines, one may find oneself in a bind abiding by the surface level theology but failing to see the underlying condemnation of one's natural instinct to love. It is, therefore, necessary to critically examine all aspects of an accepted theology in order to view how the doctrines and rhetoric come together to support or contradict each other. When these aspects of theology contradict each other they form a fundamental incoherence which cannot be easily overlooked, especially when preached to thousands and millions of followers a week. Each of these megachurches exhibits this incoherence in theology revealing the necessity for critical thinking by those who wish to attend these churches. These religious promises of salvation through God's grace often come with terms and conditions not explicitly stated in their doctrines or theology. For this case study, these terms and conditions include the necessary rejection of one's being as they must see their natural desire to love as sin. The common phrase "Love the sinner, hate the sin" forces homosexuals to recognize their natural identity as sin and, therefore, hate themselves. These terms and conditions, leading to a personal hatred, remain disguised by the blanket love and acceptance rhetoric by the churches. Therefore, I offer up a cautionary statement towards homosexual individuals seeking these churches as a home as well as the necessity of critical thinking concerning all rhetorical streams in a church's theology.

Conclusion

Saddleback preaches sin as eternal separation from God and eternal separation from God is Hell. Under the category of sin, Warren explicitly mentions homosexuality. Therefore, homosexuals not repenting will be condemned to Hell, eternal separation from God. Lakewood explicitly states homosexuality is a sin through interviews with Joel Osteen, the website claims that those who do not give their sins over to Jesus are condemned, and the only way to salvation is to repent and accept a Christian life. Willow Creek preaches rejecting God through unrepentant sin will lead to condemnation, sexual immorality is a sin, and anything outside of heterosexual marriage union is a sin. Therefore, unrepentant homosexuals will be condemned to Hell. Finally, New Life Church claims that living in continuous sin is worthy of condemnation and acting on homosexual tendencies is a sin. Therefore, acting on homosexual tendencies without repenting will lead to condemnation. All four of these churches blanket these notions of condemnation with messages of love and acceptance; whether it be through the claim that homosexuals go to Heaven, homosexuals are wonderful people deserving of love, loving someone does not represent sin, God wishes to bring everyone into His Kingdom, God loves everyone and so should we, our church is a hospital with open doors for everyone, or any of the other varieties of preached love. This second stream of rhetorical statements of love and openness causes an inconsistency with the first stream of condemnation rhetoric leading to a fundamental dilemma within megachurch theology that cannot be reconciled.

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