

In Response to the Supreme Court Ruling--Vol. 9, No. 27

July 2, 2015

This was not how I expected to begin my tenure as the executive director of the Churches of God General Conference. These are strange, difficult and exciting times in which we live!

I, like many of you, was saddened by the Supreme Court's ruling on same sex marriage last Friday. I am saddened but not surprised. I'm grieved but not anxious because I know we serve a sovereign Lord who is still on the throne and who will make all things new at the time he deems right. This is not a time for fear or panic.

It is a time to grieve. Psalm 119:136 says "Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed." While I know some have responded with anger or fear, my primary response has been one of grief, sorrow and disappointment. Many of us see this as a loss and it's appropriate to grieve.

It is a time to repent. It's moments like this that I sense the Spirit holding up a mirror to my own life. Perhaps it's easy to see the sin of others and proclaim verses like Isaiah 5:20 "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil...", but I find myself asking how have I done the same thing with my own sin? Would Jesus speak to me the words of Matthew 23:27-28: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness." I'm fully aware that my own brokenness gives me a strong propensity to proclaim my own evil as good. Moments like these present an opportunity to invite the Spirit to reveal to us those areas of sin in our own lives that we've come to ignore, accept, excuse or even justify.

It is a time to take a deep breath. In moments like these, fear and panic seem to rule. I would encourage you (and the folks you lead and influence) to not give in to fear and panic. Jesus is still on the throne and he's not surprised or shocked by last week's ruling. Yes, we are now clearly in the minority in our culture in relationship to the issue of same-sex marriage. It's another reminder that we no longer enjoy "home field advantage", but it's not cause for panic. I've been reminding pastors who have called in over the past few days (most who are concerned that they will soon be arrested for standing by their convictions) of the following:

1. This has already been in place in many states where we have churches. I'm not aware of any of our churches or pastors being overrun by masses of same-sex couples seeking to be married. I'm not aware of any of our pastors being targeted, arrested or sued for refusing to marry same-sex couples.
2. Many pastors have refused to marry heterosexual couples for a wide array of reasons (myself included). We have not been sued, threatened, etc. While there may be significant reason for concern here given the changing legal tides and sensibilities in our country (I'm not naïve), I'm not sure our first response should be fear of arrest.
3. We've encouraged our churches to take the appropriate steps necessary to spell out our convictions in their by-laws as we understand this is a helpful step in providing a defense in such instances (these are available at www.cggc.org if you need them).

It's a time to embody grace and truth. John 1:14 tells us that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus was full of grace and truth and moments like this demand that we

respond full of grace and full of truth (and grace paves the way for truth). For many of us, grace might be best demonstrated by becoming slow to speak and quick to listen/understand/show compassion.

I recently received the following email in response to this very issue:

I am curious about your reference in the June/July issue of the Church Advocate.

You said “We’re going to see a whole host of issues, challenges and question arise from the cultural shifts in relation to LGBTQ issues that will require us to respond with faithful yet helpful words and deeds.”

Does this statement mean that the Churches of God now approve of the LGBT lifestyle?

My Response: I guess the short answer is "I certainly hope not." That's not where I'm at theologically, that's not where most of our churches are theologically and more importantly, I don't see that in scripture either (which is where I/CGGC draw our theology).

Here's the slightly longer answer. I want us to respond to this issue with faithful words - faithful to Christ and his Word. In doing this, we take a very different road from what the PCUSA, ELCA or Episcopal Church USA have chosen... Homosexuality and all forms of sexual brokenness (adultery, fornication, pornography, incest, sexual abuse, lust, etc.) fall far short of God's created design for sexuality and his best for his creation. All forms of sexual brokenness are sin. I certainly don't want to see us go the route that some have chosen to go and try to "baptize" what God has deemed sinful.

I also want us to respond with helpful words and deeds. I guess my greatest concern here is that I don't often see us (folks within the CGGC and our evangelical brothers and sisters) expressing a desire to understand and minister to those whose sin and struggles look very different than our own). It's as if we try to hide behind the truth (we don't support gay marriage and therefore don't demonstrate much grace around this issue). I have personally made flippant and uncaring remarks around the issue of same sex attraction that have caused incredible (and unnecessary) pain to folks who are dealing with this issue in their own personal journeys. I don't think this behavior reflects the heart of Jesus. I've had to repent of such behavior. Our words and deeds should reflect the heart of Jesus in a way that demonstrates grace and compassion.

If our only response to this current issue is to adopt constitutional amendments that protect our churches when we refuse to marry two homosexuals who desire to be married, then I think we've failed to fully represent the Gospel to our culture (and please understand, I believe it's appropriate for our churches to take such steps as we're entering uncharted legal waters in our culture). Jesus came in truth and grace.... I fear that too often we land firmly on the truth side in this discussion without much demonstration of grace. We already have folks in our congregations who struggle with same sex attraction (often in isolation because we've created environments where it wouldn't be safe to ask for help with this particular issue); how do we do a better job of demonstrating truth and grace to friends who find themselves struggling with this area of sin and brokenness? Our world is filled with folks who identify as LGBTQ who have the perception or understanding that they're beyond the reach of our Father's love because their sin is particularly offensive - to the point of being unforgivable (and if we're honest, sometimes the way we've acted as Christians have helped shape this perception).

So that's what I mean when I say faithful yet helpful words and deeds. That our churches would be places where we welcome those who are far from God, regardless of their sin, and that in humility we would seek to serve, love and demonstrate God's grace to all people, proclaiming the truth of God's word and trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us all to repentance and faith in Christ's work on the cross!

It's a time to stay on mission. Winning the debate around same sex marriage is not the mission that Jesus left for us! Many will be tempted to make this the new mission... to win the war of the sanctity of

marriage. In doing so, they may win a battle but lose the war. The folks on the other side of this debate are not the enemy (Ephesians 6:12)! Let's keep on mission, seeking first the kingdom, demonstrating and proclaiming the Gospel, making disciples and understanding that societal change only happens through the transformation of the hearts of humankind.

Take heart brothers and sisters, God has placed us here for such a time as this! I pray that he provides you all the grace and wisdom necessary to speak faithfully to this issue in a way that leads us to a deeper love for God and a genuine love for our neighbor as well. I pray that we would respond with grace and truth, truth and grace!

I want to make you aware of a conference that I believe will be of help to us as we seek to address these difficult issues: Equip Austin: The Gospel and Same-Sex Marriage - Equipping the Church for a Post-Marriage Culture (<https://erlc.com/equipaustin>). This is an event hosted by the Austin Stone Church and The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. It will be held on Wednesday, July 29th, 2015 from 7:00 pm. to 10:30 pm. EDT. **There will be a FREE live stream/simulcast.** I would encourage each of you to take advantage of this time of equipping. I've encouraged the General Conference Ad Council and Regional Directors to take advantage of this timely training and I would encourage you to do the same. We will be sending out more details/information as they come available.

On a closing note, I want to put several items in front of you that have been an encouragement to me this past week in thinking through these issues. While much of the vitriol throughout social media just results in two sides shouting past one another, these have each stood out as offering something more helpful.

Mark Galli, senior managing editor of Christianity Today: *Six Things To Do after the Supreme Court Decision on Gay Marriage* (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/june-web-only/6-things-to-do-after-supreme-court-gay-marriage-decision.html?>)

Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research: *Same-Sex Marriage is now the Law of the (U.S.) Land: What Now for Christians?* (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/june/same-sex-marriage-is-legal-what-now.html>)

Carey Nieuwhof, pastor of [Connexus Church](#) north of Toronto Canada offers *Some Advice on Same-Sex Marriage for US Church Leaders From a Canadian* (<http://careynieuwhof.com/2015/06/some-advice-on-same-sex-marriage-for-us-church-leaders-from-a-canadian/>)

**Christ's Peace,
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