



An Assessment of Andy Stanley's Unconditional Conference

by Alan Shlemon

In 2014, I attended Matthew Vines's conference on the Bible and homosexuality. His stated goal was to "promote inclusion of LGBTQ people by reforming church teaching." The organization he started, The Reformation Project, teaches that homosexual sex and same-sex marriage are biblically permissible, and its goal to mainstream this theology into the church is overt and clear.

Fast-forward to last month, when I attended the Unconditional Conference put on by Embracing the Journey (ETJ). Hosted by nationally known pastor Andy Stanley and held at his church, which boasts a weekly attendance of nearly 40,000 people, the event sought to create a *theologically neutral space* where parents and leaders could learn how to minister to youth who identify as LGBTQ. In other words, the stated intent was *not* to change anyone's theology.

Before I explain my concerns, I want to highlight some positive elements of the conference. For example, I appreciated the focus on leaning into relationships with friends and family who identify as LGBTQ. Too often, believers shy away from them or, worse, end their relationships by their callous and disrespectful behavior. I'm glad the speakers encouraged Christians to change course in this regard.

The conference also provided many practical dos and don'ts. For example, if your child tells you they experience same-sex attraction or are confused about their gender identity, don't freak out. Don't lecture them immediately. Don't assume they're engaging in homosexual sex or transitioning. Instead, thank them for being vulnerable. Invite them to share more of their story. Listen and reassure them that you love them.

These are true and important principles that I have taught in my speaking and writing for nearly two decades. I think the conference got these and several other points right.

Three Serious Concerns

Despite these good aspects, the conference was deeply problematic because of the false and somewhat hidden premise that permeated most of the teaching: Followers of Christ can participate in homosexual sex, same-sex marriage, or transgender "transitioning." That premise undergirds three serious concerns I have with the Unconditional Conference.

First, the Unconditional Conference claimed to be theological neutral but wasn't. Virtually every aspect of it operated on the unspoken premise that it's permissible for followers of Jesus to satisfy LGBTQ desires. The conference website says, "No matter what theological stance you hold, we invite you to listen, reflect, and learn as we approach this topic from the quieter middle space." ETJ cofounder and conference organizer Greg McDonald said, "We have no desire to change your theology."

Despite this claim, the hidden premise that permeated the conference was that walking with Jesus can include same-sex marriage as well as transgender "transitioning." Not only did no one say anything to the contrary, but virtually every speaker, facilitator, and volunteer spoke in a way that led one to believe those behaviors are permissible. For example, Greg and Lynn McDonald talked at length about their son who is "married" to another man. They showed family pictures of their son and explained how, although they made parental mistakes at first, they now have a positive relationship with him. They never said their son's "marriage" was not valid or that anything was suspect or sinful about his current expression of homosexuality.

Another example was David Gushee, who previously announced at Matthew Vines's conference in 2014 that he changed his position to a gay-affirming view. Around that same time, he published *Changing Our Mind*, a book that calls for the "inclusion of LGBT Christians" and advances a fresh interpretation of the Bible supporting his new view. At the Unconditional Conference, he assured the audience that "this conference is not about changing anyone's theology." Although he never made a biblical case for his pro-gay view, he made several vague references to dangerous and harmful theology. For example, he argued that Christians once advanced biblical arguments for slavery and antisemitism, but because of the harm it caused people, Christians returned to Scripture for a fresh consideration. The implication was that the interpretation that "homosexual sex is sin" also harms people and should be reconsidered. In fact, his book, which focuses on changing *your* mind to his theology, was sold at the conference.

Furthermore, two of the conference speakers, Justin Lee and Brian Nietzel, are both "married" to other men. Their teaching wasn't billed as a perspective from the other side on this issue. Rather, they were held up as authorities on the subject who could help parents better understand their own LGBTQ children. Since no one at the conference said or implied their "marriages" were not valid or that we shouldn't see them as models for LGBTQ kids, parents could reasonably conclude same-

sex marriage is an option for their children.

What the Unconditional Conference did was tantamount to a pro-life conference inviting—as one of their speakers—a Planned Parenthood employee who not only has had an abortion but also teaches as if it were a good, moral, and God-honoring decision. Attendees would reasonably conclude the "pro-life" conference believed abortion is an appropriate option.

What this abortion analogy also shows is that many pro-choice arguments sound persuasive because, like the Unconditional Conference, they are based on hidden (but faulty) premises. For example, pro-choice advocates claim, "Women should have the freedom to choose," or, "Women should have the right to control their own bodies." Notice how the fundamental question, "What is the unborn?" is not addressed. Worse, the pro-choice advocate simply *assumes* the unborn is *not* a human being and carries on making their case with that hidden premise.

The Unconditional Conference approached their topic in the same way. For two days, the speakers addressed how to minister to people who identify as LGBTQ but intentionally didn't address the fundamental question of whether homosexual sex or same-sex marriage is sin. Worse, they simply *assumed* they are not sin and carried on offering advice with that hidden premise.

One final example worth

mentioning is the parent panel discussion on "The Transgender Journey." Approximately 75% of the parents in the room either shared their story about their transgender child or spoke up in some way. I thought to myself, *surely among the parent attendees, there must be someone who thinks satisfying transgender ideation is inconsistent with their Christian convictions.* Surprisingly, not one person said something to lead me to believe they thought their child's social, hormonal, or surgical transition was problematic. Preferred pronouns were accepted and, according to one parent, failing to use them is tantamount to violence. There was no pushback to transgender ideation. They simply accepted the transgender experience and baptized it with Christian lingo by saying, "Jesus would love them." To be fair, parents *did* say they were emotionally distraught and struggled to understand their child's experience. But the counsel of the facilitators and other parents was merely to love their child and cope during the transition, not to uphold biblical principles and disciple their children accordingly.

Perhaps the best evidence that the conference was not theologically neutral was the response from leaders who advance pro-LGBTQ theology in the church. While at the conference, I asked one of them if the conference aligned with their goal. Their answer: "Yes." That made sense. After all, the Unconditional Conference is advancing *their* cause.

After the conference, one progressive Christian attendee posted the following summary: “Every speaker, video, book and breakout I saw fully affirmed LGBTQ+ folks! I saw pastors advocating for inclusion, parents welcoming their children’s same-sex partners into the family, trans folks sharing their transition stories, and queer people leading at literally every level.” This was not a theologically neutral conference. It’s precisely what LGBTQ leaders want to see in the evangelical church, where they believe there is a stronghold of biblical fidelity that resists normalizing homosexuality and transgenderism in the church. The conference *did* take a position but attempted to downplay it.

Second, the Unconditional Conference advanced a false dichotomy of possible responses to a child who identifies as LGBTQ. Most of the speakers described two different approaches to ministering to kids who identify as LGBTQ: the “traditionalist script” and the “new script.” The traditionalist script was characterized as unbiblical, unloving, and abusive. Andy Stanley said it has a limited vocabulary that includes only four words: “Homosexuality is a sin.” Parents who follow this script typically don’t listen to their kids when they “come out as gay.” Rather, they lecture their kids about the “clobber passages,” don’t talk about the love of Jesus, lack empathy, and push them to the brink of running away. The speakers provided numerous disturbing, real-life examples. In one case, a father kicked his lesbian daughter down the stairs. In another example, a gay son came to a hospital and asked the nurse if he could visit his dad, who was about to die. The father told the nurse, “Don’t let him in because I don’t have a son.” This was the conference’s characterization of the traditionalist script.

The new script advanced by the conference has a “larger vocabulary.” It doesn’t focus on the “clobber passages.” Rather, it encourages parents to love their child, lean into a healthy parent-child relationship, and invite their

child to walk with Christ. The way the speakers talked about the new script implied that Christian parents can support their child’s eventual same-sex marriage or “gender transition.”

This new script was made to sound natural, appealing, and biblical. No parent wants to turn their back on their child. They want to show love, especially when their child is experiencing emotional turmoil about their attractions or gender identity. The problem is that the new script fails to describe the details of what walking with Christ would look like for a child who experiences same-sex attraction or transgender ideation. Worse, this new script was falsely presented as the *only* alternative to the traditionalist script.

There is a third way (or third “script,” to use the conference’s lingo) that wasn’t addressed at the conference—love your child *and* don’t compromise what Scripture teaches. I’ve been advancing this approach for nearly two decades (though it’s not original to me). It *does* incorporate some elements of the new script. For example, parents should love their child, lean into their relationship with them, and show them how to walk with Jesus.

The third way, however, adds some other important biblical elements. Parents should encourage their child to put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Once their child is a follower of Christ, they need to be taught that to love Jesus means to obey his commands (John 14:15–21). The parents, therefore, should educate their child about those commands (including, but not limited to, those relevant to a person who identifies as LGBTQ). Since the Christian life includes temptation to sin in thought and deed, they should give examples of what sin and repentance look like. Parents should explain what sanctification is and model it in their own lives. They can show their child how to depend on others in the body of Christ for love, prayer, and accountability. They’ll need that support (as does every believer) because following Christ is not easy.

Jesus says, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). We must be willing to give up anything—even our life—if we want to walk with him. That’s tough, but parents can tell their child it’s worth it. Jesus is worth it. Finally, parents should routinely remind their child that God loves them and model that love in how they parent.

Is this third way easy? No. In fact, it can be very messy. It’s consistent with what Scripture says, though. Believers follow this approach all the time. The stories of these families aren’t told at conferences because the attention is always on parents who follow the traditionalist script or the new script. Meanwhile, though, Christian parents around the globe are quietly following the third approach. They’re loving their kids *and* being faithful to biblical sexual ethics.

Perhaps the Unconditional Conference has inadvertently adopted the culture’s false definition of love. Love doesn’t accept everything a person believes or does. It doesn’t condone sinful behavior. Rather, you can still love someone even if you disagree with what they do. Parents have followed that principle since parenting began. In fact, parents typically call out their child’s bad behavior *because they love them*. God, after all, disciplines those he loves (Heb. 12:4–7). Parents should do the same.

Third, the Unconditional Conference wrongly presumed you can divorce theology from how you minister. After listening to a presentation offering practical advice on how to minister to LGBTQ youth, I asked the speaker a question: “How would your advice be different if I were ministering to a teen with same-sex attraction, but I held the view that homosexual sex is sin?” Surprisingly, he said, “Nothing would change.” On his assessment, the theological question of whether homosexual sex is sin would not affect how you minister to a person who experiences same-sex attraction.

In hindsight, his answer makes sense considering his view. The conference speakers repeatedly said this is a theologically *neutral* conference. Andy Stanley, in his sermon the following Sunday, said this was not a Bible or theology conference but rather a *pastoring* conference. Even if that's true, how you minister to someone is dependent on your theology, and your theology should be dependent on what the Bible teaches.

For example, conference speakers repeatedly told attendees they should love others, which includes their children. Presumably, they got that practical advice from their theology, which they got from the Bible.

It turns out the Bible teaches many other doctrines that are relevant to how to minister to people who identify as LGBTQ. Specifically, the Bible advances a *positive* case defining sex and marriage and a *negative* case as to which sexual activity is prohibited (see "Agree to Disagree?" below for details). How can these verses not affect your theology and, consequently, your practical advice as you minister to LGBTQ youth? The conference speakers want to tell parents to love their kids. Fair enough, but what happens if your son wants to date a man? What if your daughter wants to marry a woman? What if your child wants to take cross-sex hormones and/or surgically "transition?" How you advise and counsel your child will depend on your theology.

As stated earlier, though the conference was touted to be theologically neutral, it wasn't. Still, they operated on the mistaken premise that you can provide practical ministry advice without considering the biblical texts on these topics. Either the organizers are ignorant of how theology affects ministry, or they're being dishonest about their neutrality because they want to quietly advance pro-gay or pro-trans theology. I can't know their intent, but either way, I can't trust the Unconditional Conference.

Agree to Disagree?

Given my three concerns with this conference, many people ask if sexual behavior (homosexual sex, same-sex marriage, and transgender "transitioning") is an agree-to-disagree topic. After all, the conference presumes to take a theologically neutral approach. In other words, we can disagree on theology but agree it doesn't matter for the purposes of the conference. I don't think sexual ethics is an agree-to-disagree topic because I don't think the Bible treats it that way. The Scriptures emphasize three points that support this conclusion.

One, Scripture is *univocal* in its *positive* case for sex and marriage in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Genesis account of creation teaches that God made man and woman and decreed that the man leave his parents, cleave to his wife, and the two become one flesh (Gen. 1:27–28, 2:24). In the New Testament, Jesus quotes these two passages (Matt. 19:4–6) because he believes they are still authoritative. When it comes to sex and marriage, Jesus says it's about one man, with one woman, becoming one flesh, for one lifetime. The only pair of people described in Scripture capable of creating a one-flesh union

consists of a man and a woman. The Bible doesn't leave room for differing viewpoints. Its teaching on sex and marriage alone disqualifies homosexual sex and same-sex marriage even before considering the prohibition texts.

Two, Scripture is *univocal* in its *negative* case. It prohibits homosexual sex (and, consequently, that behavior in same-sex marriage). Both the Old and New Testaments teach that homosexual behavior is sin. Although there are numerous passages that address homosexuality, five common ones are Leviticus 18:22, 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, and 1 Timothy 1:8–10. It's important to note that these five passages categorically condemn any type of homosexual sex, not just abusive, coercive, or exploitive kinds as many pro-gay theology advocates argue. Regarding people who take on the identity of the opposite sex through their dress or behavior, Scripture refers to their sin as an "abomination" (Deut. 22:5) and says they "will not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6:9–11). The Bible's definitive voice prohibiting homosexual sex and transgender "transitioning" doesn't leave room for disagreement. In fact, it says people

who practice such things are in spiritual peril.

Three, Scripture warns that those who engage in ongoing sexual sin will not inherit the kingdom of God.

One of the conference speakers did not think homosexual sex is a salvation issue. When answering a question about the lack of agreement in the church about same-sex relationships, he said, "This is not a core or salvation issue." That might explain why they claimed to offer a theologically neutral conference. Scripture, however, warns that people who engage in sexual sin endanger their eternal destiny. For example, in Ephesians 5:3–5, Paul warns believers that "there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality" among them. The phrase "sexual immorality" is translated from the Greek word *porneia*, a term that first-century Jews and Christians understood to refer to the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18 (bestiality, incest, homosexual sex, adultery). Paul concludes his thought by saying no person engaging in those sexually immoral acts "has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God."

In 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, Paul begins with a similar warning: "Or do you not know that the unrighteous

will not inherit the kingdom of God?” Paul then lists people who won’t inherit God’s kingdom, including “fornicators” and “homosexuals.” Two things to note. First, “fornicators” is also translated from *porneia*, which includes homosexual behavior as one of the sins of Leviticus 18. Second, the word “homosexuals” is from the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, which literally means “men who bed males,” a reference to homosexual sex. Therefore, this passage includes two references to homosexual behavior along with the warning that people who practice such behaviors will not inherit the kingdom of God. I would be remiss not to remind people that the very next verse (1 Cor. 6:11) says, “Such were some of you...” The good news of the gospel is that there is freedom from the guilt of homosexual sin, and those who repent can inherit the kingdom of God. That offer of hope, however, stands in contrast to the person who forgoes repentance and engages in ongoing sexual sin.

Therefore, the Bible does not treat homosexual sex or marriage as an agree-to-disagree issue. It’s univocal in its definition of sex and marriage. It’s also univocal in its prohibition of homosexual sex. Finally, it warns people who engage in such behavior that they will not inherit the kingdom of God. These are serious matters. To simply agree to disagree would be to disregard the eternal destiny of the people whom God is eager to save.

Not only are people who engage in ongoing unrepentant sexual sin in jeopardy, but those who give them false hope are in danger as well. Listen to this stern warning from Jesus: “I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality” (Rev. 2:20). Again, “acts of immorality” is translated from *porneia*, a reference to the prohibited sexual acts of Leviticus 18, one of which is homosexual sex. Jesus not only believes the *porneia*

behaviors are sin (Rev. 2:14), but he castigates those who lead people astray to engage in those acts. The Unconditional Conference is giving people who satisfy LGBTQ desires a false hope and leading them astray. The consequences are grave. If Jesus doesn’t think this is an agree-to-disagree issue, neither should we.

Andy Stanley

I take no joy in this assessment. I realize what I’m saying is serious. My prayer is that Andy Stanley and Embracing the Journey recognize they’re mistaken and pursue an approach to reach the LGBTQ community that is consistent with the gospel and biblical sexual ethics. Sadly, from Andy Stanley’s response so far, I don’t think he admits there’s a problem.

In his sermon following the conference, he acknowledged that he knew about the same-sex married speakers before they spoke, knew what they would teach, and knew the philosophy of Embracing the Journey. Still, he proceeded to move forward with the conference, even though he said, “Biblical marriage is between a man and a woman.” It’s mystifying how he reconciles his statement about marriage with inviting a conference into his church that has same-sex “married” men teach, that incorporates speakers who advance pro-LGBTQ theology, and that recommends books and websites that provide a vigorous defense of that theology.

This leads me to believe Andy Stanley is either naïve or crafty. Either way, he’s dangerous. He’s naïve if he thinks he can host the Unconditional Conference and it will not corrupt the church’s teaching on sexual ethics. Or he’s crafty and is using this conference to change the theology of his church and possibly other churches. Either way, he’s dangerous.

If I wanted to quietly mainstream pro-gay theology and transgender ideology into the evangelical church,

I would create this conference. It’s the perfect vehicle. The speakers never exegeted a single Bible verse nor explained the Bible’s teaching on sex and marriage but nevertheless advanced pro-gay and pro-trans theology to the believers in attendance. They sold parents a false security that their kids will be right with God even if they marry someone of the same sex or “transition” their bodies, but they never provided a biblical case for that view.

For those intent on reforming the church to adopt pro-gay and pro-trans theology, it was a win. That’s why the leaders of LGBTQ organizations in attendance were thrilled. The conference succeeded by hiding the key premise, creating a false dichotomy, twisting the definition of love, and leveraging the emotions of parents. Combine that with the biblical illiteracy that is commonly present in the church, and the truth didn’t stand a chance.

There’s hope, though. If we expose the hidden premise, offer a third way, adopt the biblical notion of love, and base our theology on Scripture, we can hold the line. In his final epistle before being executed, Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy, and charged him to “retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13–14). That might sound easier than it is, but it’s worth it to stand firm, and we’re called to do it.

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