

A Commentary on Andy Stanley and North Point Church's Unconditional Conference of September 29-30, 2023

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PART 1:

A Summary of Andy Stanley's Message on October 1

Following the controversial "Unconditional Conference" sponsored by North Point Community Church on September 29-30, 2023, Pastor Andy Stanley commented in his sermon on October 1 on a critical article written by Dr. Albert Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in which Dr. Mohler accused Stanley of departing from true biblical Christianity. In response, Stanley stated that he had never subscribed to Dr. Mohler's version of Christianity to begin with. In fact, he declared, Dr. Mohler's version of Christianity is why many people – especially younger people – are leaving Christianity unnecessarily because they can't find Jesus amidst "all the other stuff, theology, and complexity that gets added to the message." Stanley remarked that that version of Christianity draws "lines" whereas Jesus drew "circles".

Back in 2011, North Point's Community Church's Care Network started getting more phone calls from parents whose kids had confessed to having homosexual feelings and tendencies. These parents were saying that their children had been raised in church, had made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and they needed help dealing with the situation. In 2014, two people who oversaw the middle school and high school ministry at North Point told Stanley that more and more middle school students were "coming out" to their small group leaders about their same-sex attraction. (They had already seen this begin to happen in the high school small groups). Leaders asked Stanley to put together some training material because they didn't feel equipped to handle this problem. North Point followed up, put some material together, and presented the training.

North Point now has Parent Connect groups (which meet once a month) for these three purposes: (1) To help parents love their child well; (2) to help their parents turn their child toward Jesus; and (3) to help parents discover what God wants to do in their own hearts. Once a quarter they meet where they have a panel or a speaker or an individual who tells their

story. Parents and kids attend, which I think is great. I can't imagine the pain and struggle that these parents and kids experience.

When the son of one couple, Greg and Lynn McDonald, came out and admitted to having same-sex attraction, it took them completely by surprise. The McDonalds are conservative, Bible-believing Christians, and their son and daughter were raised in church and grew up going to Christian school. They said they felt like they had to choose between their faith and their child.

Lynn said she became "Bible Mama," thinking that if she just feed her son enough Bible verses, certainly he would eventually realize he wasn't gay, or this is wrong, or that he needed to change. Eventually he stopped engaging in conversation with his parents. Stanley stated that they completely alienated their son – that they did it all wrong but had good motives. He stated, "God began to do a work in their heart, and they quit trying to change him, and they discovered new ways to love him. And then they began to rebuild the relationship."

In 2013 the McDonalds told the church that they wanted to help the younger generation so that they

didn't need to feel like they needed to leave the church. They started a national ministry called "Embracing the Journey." Then last year they said they wanted to conduct a conference on the subject, and Stanley agreed. He said that this conference was for parents who were facing a unique situation and needed unique content. He made it clear that the purpose wasn't to equip parents to convince their gay children that they weren't gay or shouldn't be gay. Their parents had already tried that. Furthermore, it wasn't to equip parents to debate the issue with their kids. Rather, it was to equip parents to connect with their kids and have influence to keep their kids connected to their faith.

One of the speakers invited to the conference was David Gushee, a prominent intellectual, who in a book he wrote traced his own pilgrimage to LGBTQ advocacy. Two other featured speakers were Brian Nietzel and Justin Lee, both gay and each married to another man. Stanley said they were invited to speak because their journeys of growing up in church and maintaining their faith and commitment to follow Christ all throughout high school and college were so powerful that these were stories parents of gay children needed to hear. Stanley said that Nietzel and Lee know that Stanley doesn't line up with them on everything theologically or how they interpret certain passages of scripture, but that they are effective "bridgebuilders."

Furthermore, Stanley said that the conference wasn't for Stanley or most of the people in the church. He explained that "Our decision as a group of local churches is to decide how to respond to their decision. And we decided 28 years ago that we draw "circles," we don't draw "lines." If someone desires to follow Jesus, regardless of their starting point, regardless of their past, regardless of their current circumstance, our message is, 'Come and see and come sit with me.' We aren't condoning sin. We are restoring relationships, and we are literally saving lives."

Toward the end of his message, Stanley said, "I can imagine many people sitting in the church saying, 'Ok, but reassure me, what do we believe? What does our church believe?'" The better question maybe is, What

do we teach your children about these issues? As it relates to sexuality, here's what we teach: We teach what I refer to as a New Testament sexual ethic. Whether a student is straight or gay, while they are struggling to figure it out while they are following Jesus, here is what it looks like sexually if you are following Jesus – and the reason He has called you to live this way is because He loves you. (1) Honor God with your body because the Holy Spirit lives in you, and your body is how people know what you believe and where you stand, and your behavior through your body is to exemplify the goodness of God and the grace of God and the love of God, and you always honor other people's body; (2) Don't be mastered by anything – not by porn or sexual addiction, don't be mastered by another person, don't be mastered by your infatuation, don't be mastered by your lust, don't be mastered by anything. You have a master, and he's the King. And he loves you and created you and knows what's best for you; and (3) Don't sexualize a relationship outside of marriage."

Then Stanley continued: "We teach about marriage the same way that Jesus and the apostles did. So Biblical marriage is between a man and a woman. We've never shied away from that. Now here is what may surprise all the straight people. The gay attenders at our churches aren't shocked that we talk that way. They expect that and grew up like that and hoped for that and prayed for that." Stanley said he has sat in small groups of gay men (35 to 65 years of age) and watched them weep because they would never have a family. They are convinced that marriage is not an option for them and commit to living chaste lives. For many who put their faith in Christ, some do it their whole life, but for many that is not sustainable, so they choose a same-sex marriage. Not because they're convinced it's Biblical. They marry for the same reasons many of us do: for love, companionship, and family."

In conclusion, Stanley stated all of us feel shame about things we have done, and things we haven't done, but that he "bet we've never carried shame about who we are. This is a category all unto itself."

PART 2:

Some Thoughts on Andy Stanley's Message and the Unconditional Conference

Let me first say that I find no delight in writing the following, but I was asked if I would give a summary of Pastor Andy Stanley's message on October 1 and provide some commentary. Until the recent past, I had attended North Point Community Church for many years, and I think that Stanley taught effectively on many issues related to being a follower of Christ. But I believe he has now departed from what Scripture teaches about sexuality.

Stanley stated at the beginning of the message that the focus of an article that Dr. Albert Mohler had written a few weeks back addressed the Unconditional Conference, which was advertised as being for parents of LGBTQ children and for ministry leaders that North Point was set to host on Sep 29-30. In his article, Dr. Mohler accused Stanley of departing from Dr. Mohler's version of Biblical Christianity, to which Stanley said he has never subscribed to his version of Biblical Christianity to begin with. According to Stanley, Dr. Mohler's version of Biblical Christianity is the problem, and it is why people are leaving Christianity unnecessarily because they can't find Jesus amidst all "the other stuff, theology, and complexity" that gets added to the message. He described that version of Christianity as drawing "lines" whereas Jesus drew "circles".

In one of Dr. Mohler's commentaries after the conference, he stated that Jesus drew many lines between belief and unbelief. Jesus drew lines between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. Jesus drew lines between those who believed in him and those who did not. Jesus also drew lines between the sheep and the goats with eternal significance. So, in fact, there is no way to avoid drawing lines. The question is, Where do we faithfully draw the lines? Simply saying that it is conservative evangelicals who draw lines while Jesus draws circles is not good enough. That's just not accurate, and it's not fair."

On the website for the conference that took place, one of the statements read: "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." This certainly doesn't align with what Jesus ever did. Jesus never took the quieter middle ground. Jesus was radical, and he didn't equivocate regarding sin. And as Dr. Mohler correctly

observed, "This conference is not really "quiet," nor is it "middle space." It was structured such that most evangelicals would quickly recognize it as a stark departure from historic normative Biblical Christianity."

If you say that we need to change theology or avoid addressing certain aspects of it in order to avoid getting in the way of ministering to people, and that we need to soften the edges of the gospel a bit and make accommodations so as to make Christian theology more attractive and pleasant, you are essentially saying that God didn't get it exactly right in His Word and that Christ isn't sufficient. Either we believe all of God's Word is authoritative or we don't. We either believe Christ is sufficient for us to live in obedience without changing the Gospel or else we don't. God calls us to preach the truth and then leave it to the Holy Spirit to work as He will. John 14:15 says "If you love me, you will obey what I command."

In the January issue of WORLD magazine, Southern Baptist Seminary professor Denny Burk critiqued a video in which Stanley contended that churches must adapt and learn how to include gay people in the life of the church. And in an article from a few weeks ago, Dr. Mohler reported that Stanley recently said, "If your theology gets in the way of ministry, like if there's somebody you can't minister to because of your theology, then you have the wrong theology."

In response to this, John Stonestreet observed in an August 7 Breakpoint commentary, "It looks like Andy is attempting to ignore part of God's word – remove the obstacle of certain portions of theology that are getting in the way of ministering in order to not turn people away from Christianity and to be more compassionate than Jesus, which is impossible." Maria Bear, the co-host of Breakpoint with John Stonestreet,

says she has watched so many friends of hers, most of them not same-sex attracted, fall away because they feel that Orthodox Christianity is just too cruel to people in those communities. She says, "It seems to me that that is the view that Andy has taken. It appears that he's implying that we need to have a third way because it is too cruel to talk about Biblical orthodoxy when it comes to sexuality." In order to do this, as John Stonestreet said, Stanley is "unhitching theology from pastoral practice and care."

Christopher Yuan, the author of *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel*, left behind homosexuality along with using and dealing illicit drugs after coming to faith in Christ in a jail cell. He writes that his parents never enabled him in his sexual sin or gay identity, and that evangelical drift "always begins with this desire to be compassionate and loving. That's not a bad thing. The issue comes when we're busier listening to the marginalized and not letting their stories be filtered through the lens of Scripture."

When North Point Community Church says they preach that marriage is between a man and a woman, and then asks men who engage in same-sex behavior and are married to other men to be a part of a conference such as their Unconditional Conference, they have undermined their stance that Biblical marriage is between a man and a woman and have stripped themselves of the authority to teach God's Word. They have exposed their double-speak and have shown that they do not faithfully adhere to God's truth as given to us through His Word. This would be like parents of teenagers teaching their kids that premarital sex is sinful behavior but then saying, "But we've invited a health professional to teach you about birth control just in case it becomes unsustainable to control your sexual urges." By doing this they would be sending their teenagers a mixed message which would at least confuse them, and at worst become a stumbling block for them, deceiving them of what obedience to God looks like and leading them down a road of pain, regret, and destruction if this behavior was acted upon.

Zach Lambert, a pastor at a church called Restore in Austin, Texas and someone who has embraced the LGBTQ agenda, attended the conference and posted this on 'X' (formerly Twitter): "It was not a bait-and-switch (i.e., it wasn't a space that claimed to be safe and supportive of LGBTQ folks but was actually about

telling them they needed to leave behind their sexual orientation and gender identity to fully follow Jesus). It was safe, supporting, and affirmative. They explicitly communicated that they weren't trying to change anyone's theology, and they didn't. Every speaker, video, book, and breakout I saw fully affirmed LGBTQ folks." More evidence that what North Point taught in this conference was not in accordance with God's precepts given to us through His Word.

When Stanley declared that for some with same-sex attraction it wasn't sustainable to remain celibate, this is what immediately went through my mind: "Really? Why am I not, as a single heterosexual, given that same latitude and excuse? Because by that logic, if single heterosexuals become lonely enough and get to the point where they feel that abstaining from sexual behavior is unsustainable, they can decide to engage in sex outside of marriage. Or, if they can't find a mate who wants to get married, they can live together, since otherwise it would be unsustainable emotionally for them to do otherwise."

Now, I have never struggled with same-sex attraction, and I sincerely feel compassion for people who do. But I do completely understand loneliness. It can be extremely painful. But as Christians we know what God prescribes regarding sexual behavior. I would think that, as someone who is pastoring a Christian church, Stanley would have made explicit the fact that he always counsels against engaging in homosexual behavior, and that he counsels people to follow Christ and to seek power through the Holy Spirit to lead a celibate life for as long as they struggle with same-sex attraction. For some, this orientation does not change, no matter how much they pray. Similarly, for some people, they will remain single, no matter how much they pray for that to change. I don't see any difference.

At the end of the message Stanley said, "All of us feel shame about things we have done, and things we haven't done, but I bet we've never carried shame about who we are." According to him, this is a category all unto itself. First, we must remember and emphasize repeatedly with those who experience same-sex attraction that their identity is not tied to their sexual feelings nor to any other feelings, thoughts or behaviors. Their identity is in Christ. They were made in the image of God. They, along with all of us,

must find completeness and wholeness in Christ and obey what is taught in Scripture. As Christopher Yuan puts it, "We should never put our identity in our sin nature or in our flesh."

I don't agree with Stanley that the shame that someone feels because they hold same sex attraction is a category all to itself. For example, many women with eating disorders feel shame, and it has nothing to do with their sexual orientation or anything they have done or haven't done. They just feel and believe that there is something fundamentally, inherently wrong with them. They just feel like they don't meet some standard – not behavioral-wise, but simply by who they are. They feel unworthy, and they feel shame at their core. So, this cannot be used as an excuse to not lead those who feel same-sex attraction in the way of Christ because supposedly it is a "different kind of shame."

In Dr. Mohler's commentary of October 3, 2023, he wrote, "There are at least two big things missing here that are essential to our understanding of the gospel and the Christian life. The first of them is repentance. 'Repentance is not just an option in the Christian faith. It's the command of Christ, and that a call to repentance is actually part of the gospel. It's not just to believe. It is to believe and repent of sins. The repentance of sins is one of the proofs of the Holy Spirit working within the heart to convict of sin and to draw us to Christ. It is a double movement by the Holy Spirit, to make us understand that we are convicted of our sins and thus we desperately need a savior and then to pull us to Christ who indeed is mighty to save. And I simply say that a gospel without repentance simply is not the gospel as is revealed by Christ and in the New Testament.'

He continued: "The second thing missing here is the entire category of sanctification. And this is a big problem frankly in a lot of evangelicalism today, in which you do have an easy believism that simply says, 'You give intellectual assent to the gospel and you're a Christian.' There is nothing about the demand to obey the commands of Christ and to live faithfully as a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. And needless to say, that is exactly what we find in the New Testament."

This brings me to another issue related to Stanley and the mission of North Point Community Church. It

is a "seeker church," and they believe their calling is to draw in unbelievers. So, my assumption has been that Stanley thinks that the church can at least be open and inviting to the LGBTQ community so they will be more inclined to step through the doors of the church and then at some point accept Christ and receive their salvation. I don't know this for a fact – all I can do is surmise this by his actions. But if repentance is necessary for salvation, and if people don't believe they are sinning, then they won't be inclined to repent – in which case, will they really be saved? In that case would they be asking Jesus to be only their spiritual Savior, but not their Lord? And why would they have any incentive to repent and turn from this if they don't think their behavior is sinful?

Following are some verses that indeed teach that repentance is an essential element of receiving salvation:

1 Corinthians 6:9-11: "*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*"

The commentary notes in my Bible say the following regarding the previous verses: "Paul is describing characteristics of unbelievers. He doesn't mean that people who engage in these behaviors are automatically excluded from heaven. Christians come out of all kinds of different backgrounds, including these. They may still struggle with evil desires, but they should not continue in these practices. However, those who persist in these practices with no sign of remorse will not inherit the kingdom of God. Such people need to reevaluate their lives to see if they truly believe in Christ."

Acts 26:17-18, 20: "*...I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.... I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.*"

John 8:10-11: *“Jesus straightened up and asked her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ‘No one sir,’ she said. ‘Then neither do I condemn you.’ Jesus declared. ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’”*

Luke 23:43: *“But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, “‘Since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserved. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’”*

I whole-heartedly believe that the church should offer a ministry for LGBTQ young people and their parents where they can be encouraged to maintain their relationship with each other, be exposed to what God teaches regarding this vital area of life, and find support from others who are on the same journey. I also applaud Stanley for taking the initiative to do so. However, I don't agree with the position that he has taken regarding this very important issue, and I think he is leading astray those of the LGBTQ community.

