

## Time for a Change of Leadership at Exodus?

### ***Alan Chambers Assures “Gay Christians” That Unrepentant Homosexual Practice Is No Barrier to Salvation ... among Other Gospel Distortions and Bad Moves***

**Robert A. J. Gagnon, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor of New Testament, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary – Author of *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Abingdon Press; 500 pgs.) and co-author of *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views* (Fortress Press)

[gagnon@pts.edu](mailto:gagnon@pts.edu) - [www.robagon.net](http://www.robagon.net)

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Before I address specifically the title of this article it may be helpful to tell a real-life story from the mid-first century A.D. about a shocking case of sexual immorality in a Christian community. Paul, God’s chief Apostle to the Gentiles, warned the church at Corinth (Greece) about tolerating an actual case of incest between a self-professed believer and his stepmother (1 Corinthians 5). In that context he added:

*Stop deceiving yourselves: Neither the sexually immoral [note: the incestuous man is called ‘a sexually immoral person’ in 5:11], nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor ‘soft men’ (malakoi; i.e. men who feminize themselves to attract male sex partners), nor men who lie with a male (arsenokoitai), nor thieves, nor greedy defrauders [or: extortionists], not drunkards, not those who viciously slander others, not robbers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor 6:9-10; emphasis added; translations of NT texts throughout this article are my own from the Greek)*

What did Paul mean by “Stop deceiving yourselves”? He meant: Thinking that self-

professed believers in Christ could live unrepentant, egregiously immoral lives and get away with it. It is not surprising that Paul in this offender list puts first sexual offenses along with idolatry. The issue at hand is one of sexual immorality; moreover, idolatry and sexual immorality were always one-two (in either order) in Paul’s vice or offender lists. In a letter that nearly everywhere else was about unity and that was constantly addressing the Corinthians’ sins, only here in a case of gross sexual immorality did Paul go so far as to recommend removal from the life of the community as a temporary remedial measure to call the offender to his senses (1 Cor 5:2-13). Paul hoped that the offender’s spirit might yet “be saved on the Day of the Lord” when Christ came to judge the world (5:5).

Had Paul forgotten about his message of grace and love when he wrote the warning? No, the warning was part of that very message. Paul loved the incestuous man enough to send him a wake-up call before it was too late and the offender would lose everything. Paul knew that God’s grace

existed not to promote immorality and other forms of unrighteous conduct. It existed, rather, to lift a people out of sin's lordship by conforming them into the image of his Son through the power of Christ's Spirit. Thus he could say about himself later in the same letter (incidentally, the place in 1 Corinthians with the greatest concentration of the Gk. word *charis*, grace):

I am the least of the apostles, I who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by *the grace of God* I am what I am, and *his grace* that (was poured) into me did not become empty; but I worked hard, more abundantly than them all—not I but *the grace of God* with me. (1 Cor 15:9-10; emphasis added)

Paul knew that God's grace poured into his heart was unmerited. He was unworthy, especially so because of his persecution of the church before becoming a believer. But Paul's experience of that grace led him to "work hard," harder than any of the other apostles. Hard work did not mean "works righteousness." Paul knew that this hard work was energized by God's gracious gift of the Spirit.

The problem with the incestuous man was that the grace of God, which not only brought forgiveness of sins but also empowered a transformed life, had become "empty" (Gk. *kenē*) in him: "in vain, ineffective, for nothing, wasted." Why? His life was given over to an egregious form of sexual immorality: incest. This was all the evidence that Paul needed to deduce an absence of a sufficiently transformed life and a severely truncated (or possibly non-existent) faith. There was now a real danger that the grace poured into the incestuous man's life was becoming "empty, for nothing, in vain."

As with the analogy of a believer having sex with a prostitute, the incestuous man was doing

something very sacrilegious, though he didn't see it that way. Despite being joined to Christ and "one spirit" with him, he was now becoming "one body" with another, his stepmother, in an immoral sexual union (1 Cor 6:15-17). Some of the Corinthians may have believed that sexual behavior had no impact on their relationship with Christ. After all, they reasoned, we have already received the symbols and benefits of salvation (6:12; 10:1-5). Paul thought differently. He reminded them that sexual immorality was a particularly potent sin against the very body that served as a temple for Christ's Spirit (6:18-19). Being a believer didn't make the sexual immorality a lesser offense. It made it worse since in a perverse way it involved Jesus in the offense. It was tantamount to having immoral sexual intercourse on the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. Believers who were "bought with a price," the price of Christ's amends-making death, belong to God for the purpose of "glorifying God in [their] body" (6:20), not engaging in sexual immorality. So they must "flee sexual immorality," an injunction that not coincidentally parallels the later command, "flee idolatry" (10:14).

The warning and the remedial measure of church discipline had as their purpose reclaiming the immoral man for God's kingdom. That is true grace and love. Love "does not rejoice in unrighteous conduct, it rejoices together with the truth" (1 Cor 13:6). Paul didn't have to write such strong words about the incestuous man and the sin of sexual immorality. He could have made life easier on himself and avoided any tension with the Corinthian house churches by writing to them something like the following: "I want to make known to you that, while God does not want this man to be having sex with his stepmother (much less mother), he can be assured that his relationship with Christ will not be interrupted by such behavior. He'll come out of it if we focus on

grace.” He didn’t write this because he knew that the man had already abused the concept of grace. Now the man’s very life was at stake, which is why Paul could chastise the Corinthians for not “mourning” over the condition of the incestuous man (5:2; one mourns at a funeral).

Even for his own life Paul recognized the need for vigilance. Imagine that: Paul, the great apostle whose life appeared to be one unending experience of self-sacrifice, suffering, and deprivation in the cause of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to a lost world (1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 2:14-16; 6:4-10; 11:23-33; 12:7-10). If anyone should have been able to “rest on his laurels” and slack off, that person would be Paul. Yet Paul applied an athletic image to himself, one which the Corinthians would well understand since the Isthmian Games at Corinth were superseded in importance only by the Olympic Games in Athens:

Do you not know that those who are running in a stadium are all running but (only) one receives the prize? Be running like this in order that you may convincingly receive it. Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in every way. So those people (do it) in order that they may receive a perishable wreath but we an imperishable one. Hence I am running like this: ... I whip my body into shape and bring it into subjection (as though my slave), *lest somehow, after proclaiming to others, I myself should come to be disqualified.* (1 Cor 9:24-27; emphasis added)

Here again Paul could have said something much different: “My brothers and sisters at Corinth, don’t put your focus on sin management. And certainly don’t think about being disqualified from receiving eternal life because eternal life is already guaranteed. Do what I do: Focus on the

fact that your victory wreath of eternal life is already won, knowing that no bad behavior on your part can ever change that fact. Don’t get involved in a works-righteousness mode of thinking, as if you have anything to do with whipping your body into shape.” But Paul said something quite different. He communicated to them that the race wasn’t over and that even he, a hard-working apostle, couldn’t now slack off. He was still in rigorous training, like an Olympic (here Isthmian) athlete.

It wasn’t just for his own benefit that Paul made these remarks. Paul used this athletic metaphor as a lead-in for another warning to the Corinthian believers (10:1-13). Paul recounted to them the Old Testament story of the destruction of the wilderness generation as God’s judgment for their involvement in idolatry and sexual immorality. “These things,” Paul said, “were written for our admonition.... So let the one who thinks that he stands watch out lest he falls” (10:11-12). What is at stake for the Corinthian believers? Paul has already told them in 6:9-10: The sexually immoral and idolaters will not inherit *the kingdom of God.*

Similarly, in his next extant letter to the Corinthians, Paul expresses his fear that when he comes again he “may have to mourn over many who have continued in their former sinning and did not repent of the sexual impurity (*akatharsia*), sexual immorality (*porneia*), and sexual licentiousness (*aselgeia*) that they practiced” (12:21). Why mourn over those who do not repent of engaging in sexual immorality? Again, as with 1 Cor 5:2, one mourns at a funeral. The very lives and eternal destinies of the offenders are at stake.

## Alan Chambers' Falsification of the Gospel of Grace: Assuring Gay Christians of a Place in Heaven Irrespective of Repentance

Why have I spent the time to show how Paul responded to a circumstance of grave sexual immorality by a person “who calls himself a brother” in the faith (1 Cor 5:11)? (Note: Whether the sexual offender in question was a genuine Christian or not Paul seems a bit uncertain, though the analogy and discussion in 6:15-20 suggests that Paul tentatively assumed that he was.) The reason is that, sadly, Alan Chambers is now promoting a very different, even contradictory, view of things. Chambers is the president of Exodus International, an evangelical “umbrella” organization located in Orlando, FL, that provides support for ministries to persons who do not want to live out of same-sex attractions but in a manner consistent with their Christian faith. It is the largest organization of its kind in the world. I love the members of Exodus; they are a “light for the world” and “city situated on a hill” (Matt 5:14). I want for them nothing but the best.

In a recent interview in [The Atlantic](#) (June 20, 2012), Alan Chambers dealt a serious blow to the mission of Exodus, a mission that involves calling the lost to repentance and to true grace, true faith, and true hope. Alan made every effort to assure “gay Christians” that engaging regularly and unrepentantly in homosexual practice will not jeopardize their relationship to Jesus and God (note: I use “gay” as a term for identifying persons who *affirm* their same-sex attractions).

- **In response to a question about how he regards “gay Christians ... in a same-sex marriage,” Alan declared: “Some of us choose very different lives than others. But whatever we choose, it doesn’t remove our relationship with God” (emphasis added).**

Taken at face value, Alan’s statement *assures* self-professed Christians that they could turn to *any* unrepentant sinful lifestyle (note Alan’s oddly neutral expression: “very different lives”), no matter how egregious (incest, pedophilia, bestiality, serial murdering, rape, gross exploitation of the poor, virulent racism, or any combination thereof) and for any duration of time, and never have to be concerned about the security of their relationship with God. For Alan such behavior, apparently, cannot even raise doubts for others as to the genuineness of the offender’s faith.

- **When asked whether that meant that “a person living a gay lifestyle won’t go to hell, as long as he or she accepts Jesus Christ as personal savior,” Alan responded that “my personal belief is that ... while behavior matters, those things don’t *interrupt* someone’s relationship with Christ (emphasis added).**

As we have seen and shall see, Alan’s approach of providing *assurances* of salvation to those actively engaged in sexually immoral intercourse is a very different approach than Jesus’ and Paul’s *warnings* that immoral sexual behavior, among other offenses, can get one excluded from the kingdom of God and thrown into hell (Matt 5:27-32; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Rom 1:18-2:11; Gal 5:19-21 with 6:7-9; 1 Thess 4:2-8; 2 Cor 12:21; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6).

In fact, Paul tells us a couple of times that, both when he was personally with his converts and now again when he is writing them, he has warned them that sexually immoral behavior is high up on the list of things that can get one excluded from the kingdom (1 Thess 4:1-3; Gal

5:19-21). Why warn self-professed believers about this repeatedly if, as Alan claims, their alleged relationship with Christ cannot be interrupted by any sinful behavior? Shouldn't Paul rather have been assuring them, as Alan Chambers assures "gay Christians"? It is not simply a matter of Alan *not mentioning* these warnings. It is a matter of Alan *asserting their exact opposite*.

The fact that Alan has made similar remarks over the past year-and-a-half confirms that this view is now a settled conviction for him. In a March 2011 televised show entitled "Our America with Lisa Ling: Pray the Gay Away?" Alan stated:

- **There are people** out there who are **living an active gay Christian life**. God is the one who called them and has their heart and they are in fellowship with Him, and **I do believe they will be in heaven with me, I do—if they have a relationship with Jesus Christ**, they will. We serve that kind of God that says, 'Come to me as you are.' **His love is unconditional. He wants our hearts more than anything** (for video click [here](#) and go to the last minute).

Of course, the statement begs the question of whether God indeed "has the heart" of someone who claims to be a follower while actively engaged in unrepentant sexual immorality abhorrent to God. God's love is *unmerited* and *undeserved* but it is false to say that God's love is "unconditional." A person does have to believe in Jesus Christ. That is a condition. Paul states in the thesis statement of his letter to the Romans that the gospel is "God's power to bring about salvation for everyone who believes" that gospel (Rom 1:16). The famous John 3:16 promises eternal life to "everyone who believes in" God's

Son whom God handed over to death for our sake, in order to make amends for our sins. Faith in Christ is a condition of salvation. But it isn't an action that *merits* the reception of God's grace. Therefore, it isn't a "work" or "deed" that earns a reward or compensation of any sort (Rom 4:4-5). But if one doesn't exercise such faith, one doesn't inherit the kingdom.

*Faith*, in turn, is not mere intellectual assent to the truth. It is a *holistic life reorientation in accord with the truth of the gospel*; certainly an imperfect reorientation but a climatic realignment of life nonetheless. Paul contended that self-professed believers who engaged unrepentantly in certain sinful lifestyles of an egregious sort ran a high risk of being excluded from the kingdom of God—not because grace is not grace but because faith, true faith, manifests itself in a transformed life "for God" (Gal 2:19). Active homosexual behavior for Paul was one such sinful lifestyle, along with others, that showed a person to be living primarily out of the sinful impulse operating in the flesh rather than out of the Spirit's power.

As James notes, "faith," understood as mere assent to the truth, "is dead" (2:17, 26). "Even the demons believe [that God is one]—and shudder" (2:19). The justifying faith that Paul talks about is of a very different sort. Those who have such faith say "yes" to Christ and "no" to self because they are convinced that Christ loved them so much that he died for them; trust that what Christ has done is better than what they could ever do for themselves; and die to their own interests while letting the indwelling Christ do the living within the body (Gal 2:20).

On Jan. 6, 2012 at a "Gay Christian Network" Conference in Orlando, Alan Chambers once again stated his belief that homosexually active Christians would be in heaven:

- I honestly trust [GCN leader Justin Lee], and I honestly like him, and I honestly believe that he loves Jesus and that we are brothers in Christ and that we will spend eternity together ... and because of that, **the thing that brought me here** [to the GCN conference] **first and foremost is: We're Christians, all of us. We may have diverging viewpoints ... but the thing that brings us together, the thing that causes us to even want to have this dialogue, or need to have this dialogue, is the fact that we all love Jesus. We all serve him. We serve the very same God and believe very different things** (for video click [here](#) and go to the 1 hr. 2 min. mark).

Given these declarations on three separate occasions, we may be sure that Alan was not caught off guard, misspoke, or was misquoted in any way in the recent *Atlantic* interview. Alan himself has stated on his blog site: "Many thanks to Jennie Rothenberg and *The Atlantic* for an incredibly fair shake with this article."

In my view *these settled convictions on Alan Chambers' part* (which, incidentally, are not the only problem statements and decisions that Alan has made; see below) *are a serious enough departure from Scripture (and so from the historic mission of Exodus) that Alan should be asked to step down from leadership in Exodus. Failing his voluntary resignation, he should be removed.* This call for resignation applies as well to the Chair of the Board of Exodus, Rev. Clark Whitten (who is also Alan's pastor), since, as we shall see later, Alan has derived his theological views on the matter from Rev. Whitten. We will note later that Alan had some hand in the recent resignation of

the Vice-Chair of the Board for making comments that Alan felt did not represent the mission of Exodus but which in my view, if an offense at all, were much less so than the offense of Alan's repeated assurances to "gay Christians." So Alan has established the precedent for his own removal: making comments that undermine the mission of Exodus. We can thank him for his service as President of Exodus since 2001, even as we recognize that Exodus is not bound to any one person. Even Presidents of the United States are restricted to two four-year terms.

It pains me to say this because I personally like Alan. I appreciate very much the testimony of his life in resisting ongoing same-sex attractions. I am aware that Alan still believes that homosexual practice is sinful and I am glad for that (though this is a very minimalistic expectation for the president of an evangelical organization like Exodus). I appreciate too that it is Alan's heart's desire to help people who want to leave the homosexual life (though it appears that he has given up on calling to repentance "gay Christians" who think otherwise). Alan's motives are good insofar as he believes that by assuring "gay Christians" of their salvation he will make it more likely that they will leave homosexual behavior behind (though he is misled since such persons are already abusing the concept of God's grace). At his best Alan is an engaging speaker. He has borne much abuse for the sake of the gospel from homosexualist critics (abuse that may now be taking its toll). Alan has had a positive impact on many lives for the gospel and I congratulate him for his work during his long tenure as President of Exodus.

I have agonized for months about whether I should go public with my concerns about Alan's leadership with Exodus. I have written to Alan a half dozen times since January 2012 when Alan

made similar statements at a meeting of the “Gay Christian Network.” Our exchange was cordial but Alan has made clear to me that his views are fixed and will not change. Still, I had hoped that he would at least refrain from public comments of this sort. With his *Atlantic* interview it has become evident that he has no intention of keeping his aberrant views to himself. In fact, these views will define Exodus (even when Alan couches them as “his opinion,” which he only partly does in the *Atlantic* interview). There are, to be sure, many good parts to his interview. But the bad parts, which involve convictions at Alan’s theological center, are so bad that they fairly nullify the good.

As the opening to this article suggests, my main concern is that Alan’s comments to those living a homosexual life are ultimately unloving and ungracious. I don’t doubt that Alan intended his comments to “gay Christians” to be otherwise. Yet the actual result is to leave such persons deceived by giving them a message of “peace and security” when instead danger hangs over them (1 Thess 5:1-11). Who is gracious and loving? The parent that assures a child that crossing a busy intersection without looking both ways will produce no harm or the parent that does everything in his or her power to warn the child about the potential harm? Obviously the latter, for the warning is part of the makeup of a loving parent. In fact, state social services agencies count the former as abuse.

We saw above how Alan’s assurances to “gay Christians” are the antithesis of how Paul operated with regard to a case of sexual immorality in the church at Corinth. Compare also the following warning from Ephesians:

No longer walk as the Gentiles walk ... who ... have given themselves up to sexual licentiousness (*aselgeia*) for the doing of every sexual impurity (*akatharsia*).... [You

were taught in Christ] to put off your old human ... and to be renewed in the spirit of your mind ... and to clothe yourselves with the new humanity that was created ... in the righteousness and holiness of the truth.... Sexual immorality (*porneia*) and sexual impurity (*akatharsia*) of any kind ... must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.... *Know this indeed, that every sexually immoral person ( pornos) or sexually impure person ( akathartos) ... has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming on the children of disobedience.* (4:17-24; 5:3-6; my emphasis)

The last point is important. The wrath of God is *still* coming on the disobedient. Those who profess to be Christians but live sexually immoral lives will be classed with the disobedient and left “no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” Any other claim is deception (“let no one deceive you with empty words”). Note too that in Rom 1:24-27 Paul explicitly labels homosexual practice as a particularly egregious instance of *sexual impurity (akatharsia)*, one of the terms used in the passage from Ephesians cited above.

We have to remember that the church’s understanding of God’s grace comes primarily from the Pauline letters. Earlier in Ephesians we read these famous words: “By grace you have been saved through faith; and this not from you, (it is) the gift of God, not from works, in order that no one may boast” (2:8-9). Did the writer of Ephesians suddenly forget what grace was all about and lapse into “works righteousness” when he pointed out in 4:17-24 and 5:3-6 that being under grace did not mean that self-professed believers would escape destruction if they continued in a sin-controlled life? Or does grace include such honest warnings that drive away self-deception and reinforce the point that we are

saved for God and not for selves and that God's wrath is still coming upon the disobedient so we shouldn't continue to live as disobedient people? The text in Ephesians 2:8-9 continues: "For we are his made product, having been created in Christ Jesus for (the purpose of doing) good works, which God prepared beforehand in order that we might walk in them." The transformed life is *not* optional for the recipients of God's grace.

God's grace is marvelous. It includes enjoining the church to be extraordinarily gullible in accepting the genuineness of someone's confession of repentance after a ridiculously large number of relapses and repentances (Luke 17:3-4, for seven times per day; Matt 18:21-22, for seventy-seven times or seventy times seven). However, grace does not entail assuring self-professed believers that, "whatever" they do and irrespective of repentance, their relationship with Christ will be uninterrupted, for that would leave such persons trapped in the very sin that leads to destruction.

The prodigal son is only truly "found" and "alive" when he leaves the life of profligacy and returns penitently to his father, acknowledging that he has sinned and is not worthy to be called his son (Luke 15:18-24). He would not be "found" or "alive" if he came back for more money in order to return to his former life. Alan Chambers wants to assure the prodigal son that he is still found and alive even when he returns to his prodigal ways. That is a dangerous mistake, especially for the offender. It is certainly not love and grace.

There is a long-standing division within Christ's church as to whether salvation, once acquired, can ever be lost. Some believe in an eternal security "once saved, always saved" (OSAS) doctrine. I once believed that but I think the overwhelming weight of the New Testament

speaks against it. Persistent and unrepentant sin of an egregious sort, I believe, can get one excluded from eternal life. There are too many texts that make the point clear: for example (and I am making no attempt at being exhaustive),

John 15:2, 6; Rom 8:12-14; 11:20-22; 1 Cor 3:17; 6:9-10 with ch. 5; 9:24-10:13; 15:1; 2 Cor 6:1; Gal 3:1-5 with 5:2-4; 5:19-21; 6:7-9; 1 Thess 4:3-8; Col 1:23; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6; 1 Tim 3:6; 4:1; Heb 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 12:15-17; 2 Pet 2:20-22; 3:17; Rev 2:5; 3:3-5; 3:16; 22:19; Matt 5:13, 29-30; 6:15; 18:23-35; 22:11-13; 25:14-30 (= Luke 19:11-27); Mark 4:16-19; 13:13, 20-22, 32-37; Luke 13:6-9; 14:28-33.

Developing the argument for this would require another paper at another time. Suffice it to say, no one can know for certain when a believer crosses the line into falling away. Not even in the case of the incestuous man could Paul make that call; Paul simply referred to him ambiguously as "someone who goes by the name of brother" (1 Cor 5:11). But he could warn the offender, as he frequently warned all his followers, that an immoral life put one at high risk of not inheriting God's kingdom. By way of analogy, a parent can't say for certain, if his or her child skates out into thin ice, precisely when (or even if) the child will fall through the ice. Nevertheless, the parent can warn the child of the grave danger involved in traveling onto the thin ice. It is not a question of earning salvation (which the New Testament authors clearly state cannot be done) but rather of letting Christ live within oneself, to which faith (if it is true faith) always says "yes."

The oft-cited Rom 8:35-39 listing all the things that "will not separate us from the love of Christ" or "the love of God in Christ" speaks only of things external to ourselves: persecution, a deprivation of material goods, angels and other spiritual powers, death. The remark "nor any other

creation [or: created thing]" (8:39) appears to refer primarily to the material structures of non-human creation or at least created things external to one's own self (compare 8:18-23, which distinguishes "creation" from the sons or children of God). The lists do not include "a life lived under the control of sin operating in human members" and for good reason: Paul has already stated clearly that such a life leads to death (6:16, 21; 8:12-14).

However, whether or not one believes that salvation can be lost is not essential to my point. The classic view of eternal security (OSAS) does not come out much differently on the point of whether a genuine believer can be saved while living under the control of sin operating in the flesh. Take John Calvin, for example. Calvin, arguably the greatest exegete of Scripture among all the Reformers, was a staunch believer in OSAS (well, actually more accurately put as "perseverance of the saints"). Yet he insisted (in his commentary on Romans, specifically ch. 8):

Those in whom the Spirit does not reign do not belong to Christ; therefore those who serve the flesh are not Christians, for those who separate Christ from His Spirit make Him like a dead image or a corpse. . . . Free remission of sins cannot be separated from the Spirit of regeneration. This would be, as it were, to rend Christ asunder.

My concern about Alan Chambers' views is not that he believes OSAS but rather that his particular brand of OSAS (which he has developed under the tutelage of his pastor and board chair, Rev. Clark Whitten) is so extreme that it severs the integral connection between faith in Christ and a

life led by the Spirit of Christ, so far as the existence of a relationship with Christ and inheritance of the kingdom of God is concerned. Alan, through Rev. Whitten, believes that while the Reformers got justification by faith right, they all got "sanctification" wrong; and that no one understood "sanctification" correctly until Clark Whitten came along 500 years later to reveal it to us. (I'm not being sarcastic here; Alan and Rev. Whitten have actually made comments to this effect; see Appendix 2 at the end of this paper on Whitten's views.)

A moderate, classical view of OSAS, however, understands that genuine faith manifests itself in a transformed life through the power of the indwelling Spirit of Christ. A life lived under the primary sway of sin is evidence that a person's faith is (or has become) little more than an assent to the truth. And that is not the kind of faith that Paul was talking about when he proclaimed justification by faith. All this is to say that my disagreement with Alan Chambers does not boil down to a difference of opinion regarding eternal security. It boils down to a difference over whether, as Calvin says, one can separate "free remission of sins ... from the Spirit of regeneration." Calvin, though holding a perseverance view, would say that people like Alan who think that such a separation can take place have "torn Christ apart."

I will say more about the relationship of grace and works in the theology of Jesus and Paul in Appendix 1. However, before doing that, we should first consider a number of other problems introduced by Alan Chambers.

## Other Problematic Statements and Policy Decisions Made by Alan Chambers

In my view Alan's assurances to "gay Christians" that their unrepentant homosexual practice does not "interrupt" a relationship with Jesus is by far the single biggest problem created by Alan. However, it is far from being the *only* problematic remark or policy decision made by Alan Chambers recently. Others include:

- Alan insisted in the *Atlantic* interview that **"there's no place in the Bible that says this sin [of homosexual practice] is worse than any other. We're guilty in the church of creating a hierarchy of sin, and that's done tremendous damage."**

This statement goes hand-in-hand with the assurances to "gay Christians" cited above by minimizing how bad homosexual practice is. Other Christians will say (wrongly) that all sin is equal but without drawing the implication from it that serial-unrepentant homosexual practice has no bearing on getting in and staying in a relationship with Jesus. What makes the view particularly harmful in Alan's case is that he appears to link it in some way to his assurances to "gay Christians."

Taken at face value, Alan's statement that in God's eyes there is no sin "worse than any other" (and so no "hierarchy of sin") implies that Alan thinks that both taking home a company pen and Hitler's extermination of six million Jews are equally heinous to God—a belief that is manifestly absurd.

I understand why Alan *wants* the Bible to say that no sin, including the sin of homosexual practice, is any worse than any other sin. He wants to say to people: You are making homosexual practice too big a deal and not attending to a range of heterosexual sins. In my opinion, the latter is true for some; the former is

not true. Scripture (including Jesus) makes a *huge* deal of a male-female requirement for sexual ethics as a foundation for nearly everything else in sexual purity matters: prohibitions of homosexual practice directly and prohibitions of incest, polygamy, and divorce indirectly. I believe that Alan Chambers is distorting the weight of that message in ways that will not be healthy for church or society. The attention being given to the issue of homosexual practice by the church is also a necessary *response* or *reaction* to the full-court press of homosexualist advocacy in the West, an advocacy that threatens with loss of numerous civic freedoms Christians who disagree. Alan not only misreads Scripture here but also misreads the cultural context.

The issue of "a hierarchy of sin" is such a wide-ranging topic that I am reserving it for the next section of this paper. Without trying to be exhaustive I'll give twelve examples/arguments from Scripture for the former and seven for the latter. Suffice it to say for now that the evidence from the Bible points overwhelmingly in the direction that God does indeed view some sins as more heinous than others and that homosexual practice is among them.

- **When the *Atlantic* interviewer noted that "gay Christians" don't necessarily read the Bible as rejecting committed homosexual unions, Alan responded: "There is room for discussion, for sure.... All of these ... issues are important for sure, but they're not the primary issue."**

*For sure?* Exodus bills itself as "the largest worldwide ministry to those struggling with same-sex attraction seeking to live a life that reflects the Christian faith." It is not wise or productive for the president of Exodus to suggest in any way that

there is some legitimate basis in Scripture for approving committed homosexual unions—especially when, incidentally, there isn't. Certainly too, for an *evangelical* organization like Exodus which is supposed to regard the Bible as the highest authority for matters of faith and practice, what *the Bible* says about a male-female requirement for sexual relations and about homosexual practice has to be a matter of *prime* importance.

- In the past few months Alan Chambers has worked hard to disassociate Exodus from NARTH (National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality) and the reparative therapy movement, indeed from any group that has interest in helping people to experience shifts from homosexual orientation. Last week Alan stated categorically in [“Defining Exodus – Letter from Alan Chambers for June 2012”](#) (June 19):

**“We are no longer an organization that associates with or promotes therapeutic practices that focus on changing one’s attraction.”**

When the *Atlantic* interviewer asked whether “the goal of Exodus” was to try “to make gay people straight,” Alan flatly responded “No, not at all.” He added:

By no means does being part of Exodus mean we don't still struggle or feel tempted. It's a very real part of the lives we lead. Our goal isn't to snap our fingers and pretend those struggles don't exist. But we have a conviction that same-sex sexual expression is incompatible with a healthy Christian sexual ethic. It's not that we don't have attractions. It's just that we have a

priority higher than our sexual orientation.

Fair enough. Knowing Jesus and obedience to God's will are naturally the main goals and not change of orientation. Moreover, I myself have often written and said that the greatest manifestation of change, and one over which the angels especially rejoice, is when one continues in obedience to the Lord in spite of persistent urges to do otherwise. (My plenary address at an Exodus Conference a few years ago focused on that very point.) It is no great feat to be obedient to Jesus when one experiences no strong desires to violate God's will. The theme of the power of God operating in the midst of ongoing deprivation and human weakness is a powerful message of 2 Corinthians (e.g., the thorn-in-the-flesh passage in 2 Cor 12:7-10; also 1:9; 2:14-17; 4:7-12).

Moreover, I have never thought that radical transformation from exclusively homosexual or near so (Kinsey's categories 5 and 6) to exclusively heterosexual or near so (categories 0 and 1) to be common or easy, particularly for men (see my *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2001] 420-29). If anything, I am a bit more cautious than I was when I first wrote about these matters over a decade ago—though I still don't think that the evidence shows that people are “born homosexual” in the same way that they are born with a given gender or eye color.

That being said, I feel that Alan has gone too far in trying to disassociate Exodus from reparative therapy. An AP interview of Alan at the start of the 2012 Exodus Conference (still going on as I write, in fact) reports:

The group's president, **Alan Chambers, told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the conference would highlight his efforts to**

**dissociate the group from the controversial practice usually called ex-gay, reparative or conversion therapy.** “I do not believe that cure is a word that is applicable to really any struggle, homosexuality included.... For someone to put out a shingle and say, ‘I can cure homosexuality’—that to me is as bizarre as someone saying they can cure any other common temptation or struggle that anyone faces on Planet Earth.” **Chambers has cleared books endorsing ex-gay therapy from the Exodus online bookstore in recent months. He said he’s also worked to stop member ministries from espousing it....** He said “99.9 percent” of people he’s encountered in two decades with Exodus were not able to completely rid themselves of same-sex attraction” (“Christian group backs away from ex-gay therapy,” June 26, 2012; emphasis added; online: <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/06/26/christian-group-backs-away-from-ex-gay-therapy/>).

The purge mentality that Alan appears to be operating with strikes me as an overreaction: an attempt by Alan at inoculating Exodus and himself from the intemperate reactions of strident homosexualists. It is not necessary that reparative therapy achieve complete transformation from “gay” to straight in order to be helpful. One or two shifts along the Kinsey spectrum or a change in intensity of homosexual impulses can be beneficial. Alan’s anecdotal comment that “99.9 percent” of the people that he has come across in Exodus have not been able to eliminate every vestige of same-sex attraction is great press for homosexualist advocacy groups but otherwise meaningless. It would be a different story if Alan claimed that not even incremental changes in orientation occur but that appears not to be the case. (I have heard from a reliable source that he acknowledged recently to Exodus leaders that “deep and lasting change does occur in numerous ways for maturing believers.”)

Not everyone will have experienced same-sex attractions as a result of a perceived distance with a same-sex parent or peers. But apparently some do and experience significant help from such a therapeutic model. I can understand that some believers who have not experienced the shift in orientation that they hoped for from reparative therapy would not be high on its use. Yet since the narrative “reparative therapy didn’t help me (or help me enough)” is not true for everyone in the “ex-gay” movement, why be so all-or-nothing and close off opportunities for others? In shutting off Exodus completely from NARTH and any orientation-change approach, Alan Chambers is making the issue of reparative therapy all one thing or all the other.

- **Alan Chambers has moved in the past year or two to take Exodus out of the “culture wars,” in a rather one-sided way, abandoning the very helpful role that Exodus leaders played in the past to inhibit homosexualist advances in the political sphere.**

The AP article cited above reports that, though the Exodus Conference is meeting in Minneapolis months before a statewide vote on a constitutional amendment to ban “gay marriage,”

Chambers said the timing is coincidental.... He said he wants Exodus to disengage from politics. “For those that don’t hold to the same Biblical ethic that I do, I think **there’s room for further discussion without a culture war** that has really served no one,’ Chambers said. **‘I think it’s time for us in the church to move on from that fight.’**”

Of course, homosexualist groups are not going to disengage from the “culture wars” just because Exodus or the church does. On the contrary, they

smell blood in the water and will only fill the vacuum created by Christian departure from the political sphere, foisting on us laws that will attenuate our own civil rights and coerce acceptance of homosexual unions in the civil sphere.

As I write, on the Exodus International Facebook page there is this comment from “Exodus International” under the *Atlantic* interview posting: **“We are not a political organization, nor do we have an official stance on same-sex marriage.”** This makes about as much sense as a marriage fidelity group declaring: We have no official stance on whether the state should celebrate adultery and polyamory. In April 2010 Alan Chambers had Exodus pull out of the Day of Truth event for the nation’s public schools, an event created by the Alliance Defense Fund as a free-speech response to the Day of Silence event pushed by homosexualist groups.

The [Fact Page](#) on the Exodus website declares: “While we care deeply for how social issues affect our world, **Exodus takes no position on policies or politics.**” But does Alan Chambers act consistently on this matter of depoliticizing Exodus? It appears that he does so only with regard to political stands that homosexualist advocacy groups would find objectionable. For **if one goes to their [Exodus Policy Statements page](#) one will see a Policy Statement on the Criminalization of Homosexuality** that was released just a week ago that declares Exodus’s commitment to “stand” with “the LGBT community” against “any legislation that deprives others ... based on their sexual orientation ... of a consensual adult relationship.” This Policy Statement was posted on June 18 as a result of some comments made in Jamaica by the Exodus Board Vice Chairman, Dennis Jernigan, which in turn led to Jernigan’s resignation (due to pressure from Alan?). Dennis

went to Jamaica to lead some worship services and share his testimony. When asked at a press conference if he knew why President Obama was suddenly threatening Jamaica with sanctions for criminalizing homosexual behavior, he made a few comments. You can judge for yourself whether his comments justify any pressure from Exodus leadership for him to resign (for the video go [here](#)). To me the comments are relatively innocuous; it is certainly true that Obama “is deceived [on the issue of homosexual practice] and [has] done more damage than good.” Also on the Policy Statements page is a link to a statement opposing the 2009 Uganda Anti-Homosexuality Bill, as well as an anti-bullying statement that includes a declaration that “every individual deserves equal protection and every offender should receive equal punishment.”

This strikes me as grossly inconsistent. For an organization that is now supposed to be a-political, to a point where Exodus leadership cannot declare an official position even against “gay marriage,” let alone provide active help, they have become remarkably political on other matters such as criminalization and bullying. It seems like Exodus is still political. Under Alan’s leadership Exodus just won’t take any positions on political matters for which they might get tremendous flak from homosexualist advocacy groups.

- Many persons who have played an important role in Exodus have expressed concern over the fact that Alan has changed Exodus into a more top-down organization with less input from member ministries, particularly by **minimizing representation on the board of Exodus by member ministry directors.** This is not an area that I can say much about beyond reporting the common refrain. It at least

raises a question not just about leadership content but also leadership style.

- A less significant point but one that speaks to issues of consistency, waffling, and wisdom is Alan's response to the *Atlantic* interviewer when asked "**whether it's better to be in a committed, monogamous gay relationship than to live a promiscuous life**":

I'd say that for heterosexuals, **it's better to be in a monogamous relationship but not married than to live a promiscuous life**. I'd say the same for homosexuality. Regardless of what I believe about sex outside of marriage, monogamy is always better than promiscuity. There's more to it than that, of course—if **someone were to ask my advice, it wouldn't all boil down to saying it's okay to be monogamous and not married**. At the same time, if it's just a matter of those two choices, the better choice is monogamy.

First, as regards consistency, how does this observation square with Alan's previous comment that all sin is equal? If there is no hierarchy of sins in God's eyes (as Alan had just argued), what difference does it make if a homosexually active person is in a committed relationship or having multiple short-term relationships? At least to God it shouldn't make any difference, judged by Alan's reasoning.

Second, as regards waffling, Alan makes a key distinction between being monogamous and married, for *both* homosexuals and heterosexuals,

which certainly *sounds* like Alan is saying that support for homosexual marriage is preferable to homosexual monogamy without marriage. He later posted on the Exodus Facebook page in response to a criticism: "I absolutely agree that any sexual expression outside of a monogamous heterosexual marriage is sin."

Third, as pertains to wisdom, Alan should have realized the intent of the question: namely, to make gay monogamy and gay marriage look relatively respectable. Instead, he fell for the trap sprung for him. He failed to think analogically and note how absurd the question would be if one replaced "gay relationship" with "incestuous relationship": Is it better to be in a loving long-term incestuous relationship with one other family member for life than to be in promiscuous incestuous relationships with more than one family member? An incestuous relationship is so bad that making it monogamous and long-term doesn't materially improve the quality of the incest. In fact, as regards longevity, God wants the relationship to stop yesterday; making it long-term only regularizes the sin. The same applies to homosexual practice.

I think that Alan's confusing response to a question such as this illustrates the need for a President of Exodus who is better prepared and more unafraid of criticisms from homosexualist circles. Alan has been in a mode of knee-jerk appeasement to homosexualist circles for so long now that by default he is predisposed to making badly thought-through comments.

## Alan Chambers' Claim That the Bible Nowhere Has a Hierarchy of Sins or Says That Homosexual Practice Is Worse than Any Other Sin

As noted earlier, Alan Chambers insisted in the *Atlantic* interview that **“there’s no place in the Bible that says this sin [of homosexual practice] is worse than any other. We’re guilty in the church of creating a hierarchy of sin, and that’s done tremendous damage.”**

Alan made the following “argument” at the [Opening Night General Session](#) at the 2012 Exodus Conference as a proof that homosexual practice is no worse than any other sin: **“Jesus didn’t hang on the cross a little longer for people who ... have been involved with same-sex attraction or who have been gay or lesbian”** (some have told me that the line was borrowed from Mike Haley in his Love Won Out messages). It sounds like a nice sound bite and can be helpful for those who think that homosexual practice is too bad to be forgiven by God. But it doesn’t establish Alan’s claim. The length of time that Jesus hung on the cross is irrelevant. It is *the fact* of Jesus’ death that counts for atonement. Nor is anyone arguing that Jesus’ death cannot cover big sins. It covers big and little sins for those who repent and believe in the gospel.

Put simply, *Christ’s universal coverage of sin through his death on the cross does not mean that all sins are equal in all respects but only that all sins are equal in one respect: They are all covered.* If they were not, no one would enter the kingdom, for God is so holy that any sin would disqualify a person from entry if moral merit were the basis for acceptance. By way of analogy, one may have health coverage for all injuries great and small and pay the same amount for the coverage regardless of the injury; but that doesn’t mean that no one injury is more severe than any other injury.

As we shall see, there is a mountain of evidence from Scripture (in addition to reason and experience) that shows that Alan’s categorical declaration of what “the Bible says” is little more than a projection of a preconceived ideology and personal wishes.

Why, then, does Alan insist on an ‘egalitarian view of sin’? There may be several reasons working together in Alan’s mind. First, Alan in general seems to be overeager to do whatever he can to soften criticisms from homosexuals. The latter, many of whom are very good at being outraged at anything that disagrees with their agenda, go bonkers when they hear homosexual practice described as a severe sin. Second, Alan, as someone who continues to experience same-sex attractions, may feel that it makes him out to be a worse person than people without such attractions. If so, he has arrived at a false conclusion. Third, Alan is pushing an egalitarian view of sin at least in part out of pastoral concerns, so as not to turn off homosexual inquirers with a message that they might find hard to swallow. The flipside of this is that he wants a theological basis for criticizing any sense of self-superiority or uncharitable spirit coming from the church. This comes across both in Alan’s remark that “a hierarchy of sin” has “done tremendous damage” and in his [recent criticism](#) of a pastor who had made strong remarks about the perversity of homosexual practice. Alan stated:

Only in the minds of bigots does God punish homosexuality but withholds his wrath against the 95 percent of the same population that engages in heterosexual sex outside of marriage.... We have an angry and bitter gay-rights community today and it’s our fault. The church created it.... We have

beaten these folks with the Bible and given other folks a pass and that's not fair.

There is some truth in Alan's remarks but also some intemperance and lack of charity on his own part (use of the term "bigot") and some exaggeration. The idea that, if the church had just delivered the message on homosexual practice as sin with more love and more balance, there wouldn't be *any* expression of anger and bitterness from the "gay-rights community" is preposterous. Note to Alan: Jesus was a loving guy and yet he was crucified for speaking the truth. Sin hates any restraint of its power and those under the controlling influence of same-sex attractions are no different. In addition, expressions of outrage and efforts at intimidation are an integral part of the homosexualist strategy for coercing societal approval of homosexual practice.

Alan also has to be careful that in his rush to appease homosexualists he doesn't end up denying Scripture itself, which does characterize homosexual practice in very negative terms, not as the only sin to be sure but nonetheless as a grave offense. One wonders whether Alan deep down thinks that the Apostle Paul is a bigot for giving special attention to homosexual practice in Romans 1:18-32 as a particularly self-degrading, shameful, and unnatural practice that is in part its own "payback" for those who engage it.

While I have some sympathy for a pastoral motivation to stress more the element of universal sin to inquirers who might otherwise have anti-Christian prejudices activated, I cannot accept Alan's blatant falsification of the Bible in claiming that the church, in viewing some sins (like homosexual practice) as worse than other sins, has "created" a "tremendously damaging" view that the Bible itself does not substantiate. I shall show below that both the general view that some sin is more heinous to God than others and the

specific view that homosexual practice is a particularly severe sexual offense in God's eyes (in seriousness somewhere between consensual incest and bestiality) are well documented from Scripture. Parenthetically, if Alan is really serious about the view that no one sin is worse than any other, he shouldn't be upset by the comparison to consensual incest.

Let it be understood what the biblical view of some sin as worse than others *does not* entitle anyone to do:

1. Deny one's own sinfulness apart from God and need for Christ's atonement.
2. Excuse one's own sin.
3. Treat others in a hateful manner or wish for them that they not come to repentance (in the manner of Jonah's initial view toward the Ninevites).
4. View anyone as immoral or spiritually inferior simply for the mere experience of urges to do what God strongly forbids.

On points 1 and 2, Paul believed *both* (1) that some sin is worse than others (idolatry and sexual immorality were major concerns, for example; and within the category of sexual immorality, he had particular revulsion for homosexual practice, then incest, then adultery and sex with prostitutes; Rom 1:24-27; 1 Cor 5; 6:9, 15-17; 1 Thess 4:6); *and* (2) that "all have sinned and fall short of in God's glory" and can only be made right by God's grace through Christ's redeeming work (Rom 3:23-25). The two points are not in opposition or even in tension. The fact that all sin is equal in one respect—any one sin can disqualify one from the kingdom of God if one doesn't receive Christ—does not infer that all sin is equal in all respects—some sins provoke God to bring judgment upon his people more than others.

With respect to the third point, recognizing the special severity of homosexual practice should in no way lessen the pastoral love and care shown to persons acting out of same-sex attractions. On the contrary: The greater the severity of sin, the greater the outreach of love. This is the lesson that we learn from Jesus' outreach to tax collectors and sexual sinners. There is a tendency in the church, on both sides of the theological aisle, to correlate severity of offense with lack of love. So the liberal argues that in order to love someone we have to reduce the severity of the offense that the offender engages in or eliminate the offense altogether. The conservative sometimes maintains the severity of the offense at the cost of exercising love to the offender. Jesus (and Paul) taught us to uphold love and an intensified sexual ethic at the same time. He didn't have to lower the gravity of the offense of exploitative tax collectors in order to love them. Rather, because their offense was so grave (i.e., putting others at risk of starvation by collecting more in taxation than they were assigned to collect and profiting thereby), he devoted a greater proportion of his ministry outreach to them. The inverse relationship between the severity of the offense and the outreach of love (the greater the offense, the lesser the loving outreach; the greater the loving outreach, the lesser the offense) is pure paganism that we must drop from the church altogether.

Regarding the fourth point, no one is at fault merely for experiencing urges that one does not ask to experience and does not seek to cultivate. For example, the fact that someone experiences same-sex attractions at all is not something for which one is morally culpable and does not in any way justify a designation of the person as morally depraved. Same-sex erotic desires, like any desires to do what God expressly forbids, are sinful desires (i.e., they are desires to sin), which is why

the one experiencing the desires should not yield to them either in one's conscious thought-life or in one's behavior. Alan strikes me as a little confused on this point. In his "Letter for June 2012" entitled "[Defining Exodus](#)" Alan states:

Exodus does not believe SSA [same-sex attraction] is sinful. However, sexual expression resulting from SSA is. Making such clear distinctions has been a failure of the Church.... At Exodus International one of our primary missions is to communicate that we all have propensities that if indulged can lead us into sin, but those attractions or inclinations are not sinful.

As it is, Alan has not made entirely clear distinctions." The statement that same-sex attraction is not sinful is true if Alan means only that one is not held culpable for the mere experience of the attraction; but false if he also means that the desire is not a sinful desire. Feelings of jealousy, covetousness, greed, pride, or sexual arousal for an illicit union are all sinful desires; but one isn't culpable for them unless one willingly entertains them in one's mind or acts on them in one's behavior.

Here is what the biblical view of different severity of sins *does* entitle one to do:

1. Use it to gauge the extent of another's movement away from God's grace and thus the level of intervention needed.
2. Deny that societal or ecclesiastical accommodations to some sins (like divorce and remarriage after divorce) justify accommodations to greater sins (adultery, incest, homosexual practice, pedophilia, bestiality). People can logically move only from greater to lesser offenses, not lesser to greater offenses.

God has given us all a sense of right and wrong with our consciences. We rightly have a sense that some actions are more evil than others and codify that sense in our laws, however imperfectly. Granted, even our consciences have been affected by the corrupting influence of sin, and nowhere more so than when we excuse our own sin. Moreover, our relative ordering of sins can be skewed by our own sinful desires. However, the *principle* that some sins are more heinous than others, not just in their effects on humans but also in the estimation of God, is God-given. If we didn't have that sense within our moral compass, society would be far more perverse than it already is.

Surely even Alan must acknowledge that for a woman's husband to tell her a "white lie" about spending \$50 rather than \$25 on a new watch is not as bad as if he had committed adultery against her with five other people. Surely Alan would have to admit that in God's eyes (and not just ours or the victim's) it is worse for a parent to rape a child than for a parent to scold a child a little more than is necessary for an offense. Nobody actually lives in the belief that all sins are equally severe on a moral plane. Indeed, often it is those who argue in connection with homosexual practice that all sin is equal that get particularly upset if one compares homosexual unions to incest, bestiality, or pedophilia. They do so precisely because they regard incest, bestiality, and pedophilia as "really bad" and don't want homosexual behavior to be associated with them. Such a reaction, however, is already a concession to the obvious principle that some sins are worse than others. Not a day goes by that people don't regularly assess some actions as greater wrongs than others. In my household if my youngest child goes to bed but sneaks in a little flashlight to do so reading or drawing beyond any reasonable bedtime and against her parents' wishes, she has done wrong but in a relatively light way as compared to, say, hitting her sibling.

Not only is the belief that all sins are equal to God in all respects manifestly absurd to human logic and experience, but also the great Christian traditions are agreed that some sin is worse than others. This is recognized even within the Reformed tradition, which emphasizes (rightly) universal human depravity (note: I am a member of the PCUSA). For example, the Presbyterian Larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) states: "All transgressions of the law of God are not equally heinous; but some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others" (7.260; elaboration in 7.261; cf. the Shorter Catechism 7.083). Not only is this a Protestant view, it is also a Catholic view (note the difference between venial and mortal sins, as well as differentiations of gravity within the category of mortal sins) and an Orthodox view. I invite anyone to cite for me a creedal formulation from a major Christian denomination that contends that all sin is equally bad in God's estimation. (Maybe there is; but I am unaware of such.) For a contemporary evangelical perspective, see J. I. Packer's *Christianity Today* [article](#), "All Sins Are Not Equal" (2005).

Now I will grant that citing the consensus view of the major Christian traditions does not prove that some sins are indeed more heinous to God than others. My point is simply that it is not my view on the subject that stands outside the mainstream of Christian faith, but Alan's.

Still, I'm a "Scripture man" and Alan's argument is that "there's no place in the Bible that says this," so let's go to Scripture. **Supporting evidence for the view that the Bible regards some sins as worse than other sins** is virtually endless so I'll stop after giving a nice dozen.

(1) In the Old Testament there is a clear ranking of sins. For instance, in **Leviticus 20**, which

**reorders the sexual offenses in ch. 18 according to severity of offense/penalty**, the most severe sexual offenses are grouped first (20:10-16). Among the first-tier sexual offenses (along with adultery, the worst forms of incest, and bestiality) is same-sex intercourse. Of course, variegated penalties for different sins can be found throughout the legal material in the Old Testament.

(2) After the **Golden Calf episode** Moses told the Israelites, **“You have sinned a great sin.** But now I will go up to Yahweh; perhaps I can make amends for your sin.” Obviously the Golden Calf episode was a huge sin on the part of the Israelites, a point confirmed by the severity of God’s judgment. There had to be lots of sinning taking place among the Israelites from the moment that they stepped out of Egypt. Yet only at particular points did God’s wrath “burn hot” at the actions of the Israelites. Why so if all sins are equally heinous to God?

(3) **Numbers 15:30** refers to **offenses done with a “high hand”** (deliberately and perhaps defiantly) as more grievous in nature than relatively unintentional sins (15:22, 24, 27, 29).

(4) In **Ezekiel 8** Ezekiel is lifted up by angel “in visions of God to Jerusalem” where he sees varying degrees of idolatry going on in the Temple precincts and the angel twice uttering the phrase, **“You will see still greater abominations”** after successive visions (i.e. things detestable to God; 8:6, 13, 15; cp. 8:17).

(5) **Jesus referred to “the weightier matters of the law”** (Matt 23:23) such as justice, mercy, and faith(fulness), which were more important to obey than the tithing of tiny spices, even though the latter too had to be done (Matt 23:23). These formulations imply that violations of weightier or greater commandments (like defrauding the poor

of their resources for personal gain) are more severe than violations of lesser or ‘lighter’ commandments (like paying tithes on small foods like spices), which Jesus stated should be done without leaving the weightier matters undone. Jesus adds the following criticism: **“Blind guides, those who strain out the gnat but who swallow the camel”** (23:24). What’s the difference between a gnat and a camel if all commands and all violations are equal?

(6) **Jesus famously pinpointed the two greatest commandments** (Mark 12:28-31). **He also said, “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments** (of the law) and teaches the people (to do things) like this will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:19). Again, to have greater and lesser commandments is to have greater and lesser violations.

(7) I would submit that **Jesus’ special outreach to economic exploiters (tax-collectors) and sexual sinners**, all in an effort to recover them for the very kingdom of God that he proclaimed, was not so much a reaction to their abandonment by society as an indication of the special severity of these sins and the extreme spiritual danger faced by such perpetrators. In this connection one thinks of **the story of the sinful woman** who washed Jesus’ feet with her tears, wiped his feet with her hair, kissed them with her lips, and anointed them with ointment (Luke 7:36-50). Jesus explained her extraordinary act by telling a parable of two debtors: **the one whom the creditor “forgave more” would be the one who would “love him more.”** The clear inference is that the sinful woman had done something worse in God’s eyes. Although Jesus’ Pharisaic host did not appreciate the woman coming into contact with Jesus, Jesus extolled the woman’s actions: **“Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many [or: much, great], have been forgiven, for she**

loved much [or: greatly]; but the one who is forgiven little, loves little” (7:47). Alan Chambers treats the notion of being forgiven of greater sins as a bad thing. Jesus turns the idea on its head. Think about how Alan could have used the biblical concept of some sins being more severe than others: *Some of us may have needed more forgiveness, but I tell you that this has made us understand the Lord’s grace that much better and so love the Lord that much more.*

(8) Another obvious instance of prioritizing some offenses as worse than others is Jesus’ characterization of “**blasphemy against the Holy Spirit**” as an “eternal sin” from which one “never has forgiveness”—in context referring to the Pharisees’ attribution of Jesus’ exorcisms to demonic power (Mark 3:28-30).

(9) According to **John 19:11** Jesus told Pilate, “You would not have any authority against me if it had not been given to you from above. Therefore **the one who handed me over to you has greater sin.**” The reference is either to Judas (6:71; 13:2, 26-30; 18:2-5) or to Caiaphas the High Priest (18:24, 28). “Greater sin” obviously implies the Pilate’s action is a lesser sin.

(10) **Paul talks about different grades of actions in 1 Cor 3:10-17:** One can construct poorly on the foundation of Christ and suffer loss while still inheriting the kingdom. However, to “destroy the temple of God,” the local community of believers, over matters of indifference would bring about one’s own destruction at the hands of God. This destruction is contrasted with being “saved ... through fire” over the lesser offenses. Major commentators of 1 Corinthians (e.g., Gordon Fee [Pentecostal], Richard Hays [Methodist], David Garland [Baptist], Joseph Fitzmyer [Catholic]) agree (1) that a distinction is being made between the degree of severity of actions; and (2) that Paul is addressing the

individual believer’s salvation. So Gordon Fee: “That Paul is serving up a genuine threat of eternal punishment seems also the plain sense of the text.” “Those who are responsible for dismantling the church may expect judgment in kind; it is difficult to escape the sense of eternal judgment in this case, given its close proximity to vv. 13-15” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], pp. 148-49). So too Garland, who succinctly states that “bleak judgment” awaits those who destroy the community at Corinth; “their salvation is at risk” (p. 121).

(11) If all sin is equally severe to God then **why did Paul single out the offense of the incestuous man in 1 Cor 5 among all the Corinthians’ sins as requiring removal from the community?** Why the particularly strong expression of shock and outrage on Paul’s part? Furthermore, if there were not a ranking of commands, how could Paul have rejected out of hand a case of incest that was monogamous and committed? If the values of monogamy and commitment to longevity were of equal weight with a requirement of a certain degree of familial otherness, Paul could not have decided what to do. Obviously, this was not a difficult matter for Paul to decide. He knew that the incest prohibition was more foundational.

(12) **First John 5:16-17 differentiates** between “a sin that does not lead straight to death” (for which prayer may avail and rescue the offender’s life) and “**a sin that leads straight to death**” (“mortal sin,” for which prayer will not avail).

These twelve examples (do we really need to come up with more?) should make clear that Alan Chambers’ contention that the Bible nowhere indicates some sins to be worse in God’s eyes than others is without merit.

Where Christians like Alan sometimes get mixed up on the issue is in thinking about Paul's argument for universal sin in Romans 1:18-3:20. Yes, Paul does make the point that all human beings, Jews and Gentiles alike, are "under sin" (3:9) and "liable to God's punishment" (3:19). In fact, his point is not merely that "all sinned and fall short of [or: are lacking in] the glory of God" (3:23) but also that all have "suppressed the truth about God" and about ourselves accessible in the material structures of creation (1:18-32) or in the direct revelation of Scripture (2:1-3:20). Paul argues: We can't say that we sinned but didn't know that we sinned. We sinned and did know (somewhere in the recesses of our soul) or at least were given ample evidence to know. In short, all are "without excuse" for not glorifying God as God (1:20-21).

What Paul *is* saying is that any sin can get one excluded from God's kingdom if one thinks that one can earn salvation through personal merit or make do without Jesus' amends-making death and life-giving resurrection. What Paul *is not* saying is that all sin is equally offensive to God in all respects. The argument in Romans 2, for example, is not that Jews sin as much (quantitatively) and as egregiously (qualitatively) as Gentiles on average. Any Jew, including Paul, would have rejected such a conclusion out of hand. Idolatry (1:19-23) and sexual immorality / homosexuality (1:24-27) were not nearly as much of a problem among Jews as among Gentiles (obviously "the common sins" of 1:29-31 were more of a problem). Rather, the argument is that, although Jews sin less and less egregiously than Gentiles on average, they nonetheless know more because they have access to "the sayings of God" in Scripture (2:17-24; 3:1, 4, 9-20). So it all evens out in the wash, so to speak, as far as needing to receive God's gracious work in Christ is concerned (3:21-31).

Nevertheless, Paul didn't begin the extended vice list in Romans 1:18-32 with idolatry and sexual immorality (specifically, homosexual practice) and give expansive treatment to those two types of sin (9 verses as compared to 4 for all the rest) in order to demonstrate that all sin is equal. Yes, part of Paul's purpose in giving special attention to these two sins may have been to lay a trap for the unsuspecting (imaginary) Jewish dialogue partner by appealing to his anti-Gentile prejudices. Certainly, too, they were particularly good examples for proving the point made in 1:18-20 about humans suppressing an obvious truth about God or about themselves visible in "the things made" (1:20). Yet there is a third reason for Paul to give these two vices special attention. It has to do with the fact that Paul nearly *always* began vice or offender lists with idolatry and sexual immorality, in either order, in his address to Christians—not just in Rom 1:18-32. He did so because he regarded idolatry and sexual immorality as especially severe offenses (within a set of not uncommon sins) that not only brought havoc to God's people but also, frankly, really 'ticked God off.'

That point is underscored for Paul by the story of Israel's wanderings in the desert after leaving Egypt, a story which Paul discusses in 1 Cor 10:1-13. What really irked God and precipitated divine destruction was their idolatry and sexual immorality:

These things became examples (archetypes) for us, in order that we might not be desirers of evil things, just as those persons also desired. *Nor become idolaters*, just as some of them (were)... *Nor let us commit sexual immorality*, just as some of them committed sexual immorality and fell in one day twenty-three thousand. (1 Cor 10:6-8; my emphasis)

Well then, if **biblical authors and Jesus** treat some sins as worse in God's eyes than other sins, **do they regard homosexual practice as one of the more severe sexual sins?** Alan Chambers' answer in the *Atlantic* interview is categorical: "There's no place in the Bible that says this sin [of homosexual practice] is worse than any other." The problem is that Alan is not a biblical scholar (nor is his mentor Clark Whitten). He gives no indication that he has researched the issue. (Extrapolating 'logical' conclusions from popular assumptions of what the atonement does or does not imply in the absence of analysis of specific texts in context does not count as research.) Therefore, he should not be casting himself in the role of someone who can make categorical statements about such matters. Here are seven good arguments why I think the answer to the question is "yes."

(1) Both the highly pejorative description and the extended attention that the apostle Paul gives to homosexual practice in **Rom 1:24-27** indicates that Paul regarded homosexual practice as an especially serious infraction of God's will. As a complement to idolatry on the vertical vector of divine-human relations, Paul chose the offense of homosexual practice as his lead-off example on the horizontal vector of inter-human relations to illustrate human perversity in suppressing the obvious truth about God's will for our lives perceptible in creation or nature. It makes little sense to argue that Paul took extra space in Rom 1:24-27 to talk about how homosexual practice is "dishonorable" or "degrading," "contrary to nature," an "indecency" or "shameful/ obscene behavior," and a fit "payback" for their straying from God in order to show that homosexual practice was *no* worse than any other sin. Paul obviously gave idolatry and homosexual practice more airtime because they were two classic, not-uncommon examples of great human depravity that could only occur after humans had first

blinded themselves to the truth around them. In the case of homosexual practice, humans would have to suppress the self-evident sexual complementarity of male and female (anatomically, physiologically, psychologically) before engaging in intercourse with members of the same sex.

(2) **Jesus' appeal to Gen 1:27** ("male and female he made them") and **Gen 2:24** ("for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his woman/wife and the two will become one flesh") in his remarks on divorce-and-remarriage in **Mark 10:6-9** and **Matt 19:4-6** show how important a male-female prerequisite for marriage was to Jesus. Jesus argued that the "twoness" of the sexes ordained by God at creation was the foundation for limiting the number of persons in a sexual bond to two, whether concurrently (as against polygamy) or serially (as against repetitive divorce and remarriage). If Jesus regarded a male-female prerequisite as foundational for extrapolating other sexual ethics principles (i.e. marital monogamy and indissolubility), wouldn't a direct violation of the foundation (homosexual practice) be more severe than a violation of principles built on that foundation (polygamy, adultery, remarriage-after-divorce)?

The argument that Jesus must have regarded divorce and remarriage-after-divorce as the more serious issues (i.e. because he explicitly criticizes them) misses the point that Jesus didn't have to argue against homosexual practice in first-century Judaism because the very thought of engaging in such behavior was 'unthinkable' for Jews (we have no evidence of Jews advocating such behavior, let alone engaging in it, within centuries of the life of Jesus). Jesus was setting out to close the remaining loopholes in Judaism's sexual ethics (another was adultery-of-the-heart), not to

recapitulate more severe prohibitions already universally accepted by Jews. For example, the fact that Jesus said nothing about incest is an indication that he *accepted* the strong strictures against it in Levitical law. It is not an indication that he regarded remarriage-after-divorce as an equally serious or more serious offense.

(3) Apart from ruling out sex between humans and animals, **the male-female requirement for sexual relations is the only sexual requirement held absolutely for the people of God from creation to Christ.** The first human differentiation at creation is the differentiation between male and female. In **Gen 2:21-24** the creation of woman is depicted as the extraction of a “rib” or (better) “side” from the human so that man and woman are parts of a single integrated whole. Woman is depicted as man’s sexual “counterpart” or “complement” (Heb. *negdo*). A male-female prerequisite is thus grounded in the earliest act of creation. Compare the situation with incest prohibitions: Most such prohibitions cannot be implemented until after the human family spreads out and becomes numerous. In addition, while we see a limited allowance of polygyny in the OT (multiple wives for men, though never polyandry, multiple husbands for women), subsequently revoked by Jesus, and some limited allowance in earliest Israel of what will later be termed incest in Levitical law (e.g., Abraham’s marriage to his half-sister Sarah; Jacob’s marriage to two sisters while both were alive), there is never any allowance whatsoever for homosexual practice in the history of Israel. Virtually every single law, narrative, poetry, proverb, moral exhortation, and metaphor dealing with sexual matters in the Old Testament presupposes a male-female prerequisite. The only exceptions are periods of apostasy in ancient Israel (e.g., the existence of homosexual cult prostitutes, which narrators still label an abomination).

Why are there no positive exceptions? The reason is evident: A male-female prerequisite belongs to an inviolate foundation supremely sacred to God. Homosexual practice is a *direct* violation of that foundation. Polygyny is a violation of the monogamy principle that is only *secondarily* extrapolated from a male-female prerequisite. Incest is a violation of a requirement of embodied otherness that is only *secondarily* extrapolated from the foundational analogy of sexual otherness established at creation. Consequently, homosexual practice is worse than incest and polyamory because (1) it is a direct attack on a sexual paradigm instituted at the very beginning of creation, whereas incest and polyamory prohibitions develop later only secondarily from a male-female paradigm; and (2) homosexual practice, unlike incest and polyamory, is never practiced by positive characters in Old Testament narrative or sanctioned by Israelite law.

(4) **Leviticus 20** lists homosexual practice among a first tier of sexual offenses (adultery, the worst forms of incest, and bestiality; 20:10-16) that are worse than a second tier of sexual offenses (20:17-21). In **Leviticus 18**, although in the concluding summary (Lev 18.26-27, 29-30) all the sexual offenses in Lev 18 are collectively labeled “abominations,” “abhorrent” or “detestable acts” (*to’evoth*), only man-male intercourse in 18:22 (and 20:13) is specifically tagged with the singular *to’evah*. Outside the Holiness Code in Lev 17-24 the term is normally used for various severe *moral* offenses (not merely acts of ritual uncleanness), including occasionally homosexual practice (Deut 23:18; 1 Kgs 14:24; Ezek 16:50; 18:12; probably also Ezek 33:26).

(5) **A triad of stories about extreme depravity**—Ham’s offense against his father Noah

(Gen 9.20-27), the attempted sexual assault of male visitors by the men of Sodom (Gen 19.4-11), and the attempted sexual assault of the Levite passing through Gibeah (Judg 19.22-25)—feature a real or attempted act of man-male intercourse as an integral element of the depravity.

(6) The severe character of homosexual practice is amply confirmed in **Jewish texts of the Second Temple period and beyond** (for texts, especially Philo and Josephus, see *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 159-83). Jews in the Greco-Roman period regarded man-male intercourse as the prime example, or at least one of the top examples, of Gentile impiety (e.g., *Sibylline Oracles 3*; *Letter of Aristeas* 152). Only bestiality appears to rank as a greater sexual offense, at least among “consensual” acts. There is some disagreement in early Judaism over whether sex with one’s mother is worse, comparable, or less severe. The absence of a specific recorded case of same-sex intercourse in early Judaism from the fifth century B.C. to ca. A.D 300 also speaks to the severity of the offense. Regarding the possibility of Jews engaging in this abhorrent behavior, a text from the rabbinic *Tosefta* comments simply: “Israel is not suspected” (*Qiddushin* 5:10).

(7) **The historic position of the church over the centuries** is that the Bible understands homosexual practice as an extreme sexual offense. For example, among the Church Fathers Cyprian (200-258) called it “an indignity even to see.” John Chrysostom (344-407) referred to it as “monstrous insanity,” “clear proof of the ultimate degree of corruption,” and “lusts after monstrous things.” Theodoret of Cyr (393-457) called it “extreme ungodliness.” John Calvin, no slouch when it came to emphasizing universal depravity, nonetheless labeled homosexual practice “the fearful crime of unnatural lust,” worse than “bestial desires since [it reverses] the whole order

of nature,” “vicious corruption,” “monstrous deeds,” and “this abominable act.”

The Bible is clear and consistent on these four points:

- 1) Some commands of God are weightier and greater and more foundational than other commands.
- 2) Some violations are therefore greater than other violations.
- 3) Violations of greater commands are strong indications of a sick soul and of a life that either has never been led by the Spirit or is now turning away from being led by the Spirit
- 4) Only those who are led by the Spirit and walk in the light participate in the atoning work of the cross. As 1 John 1:7 says: “*If we are walking in the light as he himself is in the light we have partnership with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*” The text doesn’t say: If you believed in Jesus at one point in your life, the blood of Christ will cleanse you from all sin no matter how you behave. It says: “If we are walking in the light ... the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.” There is no sin-transfer to Christ apart from self-transfer; no living without dying; no saving of one’s life without losing it.

If I encountered a brother in the Lord going a bit overboard with money or material things; or beginning to have loose boundaries in interactions with persons that might be of sexual interest or beginning to have more struggles with sexual desire in his thought life; or complaining a bit much, I wouldn’t likely conclude that there was something seriously wrong with that brother’s spiritual life. But if I found out that this self-professed brother in the faith had become a bank

robber or was using a Ponzi scheme to bilk people out of their life savings; or was involved in an adulterous affair or sleeping with his mother or having sex with persons of the same sex, I would be more than a little concerned about the

person's relationship with Christ. Why? The bigger the sins, the greater the indication that the person is not living a Spirit-led life that necessarily and naturally flows out of genuine faith. Is there any Christian who doesn't (rightly) think this way?

## Appendix 1

### More on the Bible Versus Alan Chambers as regards Assurances to “Gay Christians”

Inasmuch as Alan Chambers wants to assure “gay Christians” that they will “go to heaven” irrespective of serial-unrepentant homosexual practice, it is clear that he wants to do away entirely with any warnings about the eternal repercussions of the untransformed life. Yet consider Matthew’s programmatic statement of Jesus’ teaching in **the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7)**. How does the Sermon end? It ends with a triplicate of warnings: the warning about the narrow gate (“For the gate is narrow and the way that leads to life presses in [or: is hard] and those who find it are few”); the warning about the necessity of bearing fruit (“every tree that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”) and Christ’s response of “I never knew you” to those who say to him “Lord, Lord” but who do not do his will; and, finally the warning about those who build their house on sand because they only hear Jesus’ words but don’t do them and are destroyed when the cataclysm comes (**7:13-27**). Clearly, then, Jesus proclaimed the dire consequences that befell those who claim Jesus as their Lord if they do not in fact have him as Lord of their life.

Indeed, at the beginning of the Sermon, two of Jesus’ six antitheses or contrasting statements (“You heard that it was said ... but I say to you...”) defining the new ethic of the kingdom of God have to do with sexual purity. In between them appears this warning: If a body part threatens your downfall, remove it, because it is better to go into heaven maimed than to be thrown into hell full-bodied (**Matt 5:29-30**). Similar is Jesus’ remark about fearing God who can send both body and soul to hell (Matt 10:28). Even in the story of **the woman caught in adultery**, Jesus tells the woman “Go, and from now on no longer be sinning” (**John 8:11**), a statement that, based on a parallel line elsewhere in John, implies “lest something worse happen to you,” namely, forfeiture of eternal life (John 5:14; cp. 5:24-29). In **John 15:1-8** Jesus announces that he is “the true vine” and that

those who are “in” him but do not manifest a transformed life are destroyed like unfruitful branches thrown into the fire.

Unfortunately, these concepts about sin and salvation proclaimed by Jesus have no place in Alan Chamber’s theology regarding God’s grace and love. That is because Alan, unlike Jesus, apparently does not see *moral transformation as an indispensable middle term between faith and the transformed life*. But isn’t an immoral life evidence of a truncated or nonexistent faith? One wonders if Alan views faith as more of an initial confession of faith in Christ than a necessary ongoing feature of Christian life (like breathing for the physical life); and more of an assent to the truth than a genuine trust borne out of gratitude for what Jesus has done for us. True, he urges Christians who have unease about homosexual attractions to bring their behavior into alignment with Scripture’s male-female requirement for sexual relations. However, he assures homosexually-active, self-professed Christians who do not share this unease that they will be in heaven with him. For him, “while behavior matters,” it is not, and can never be, an indication that Jesus is not (or is no longer) Lord in someone’s life.

Yet we know that the early church viewed participation in sexual immorality as a prime indication that a believer’s faith was not (or no longer) genuine. Luke tells us in his citation of **the Apostolic Decree** in Acts 15:21, 29 (similarly, 21:25) that Gentile “believers” were accepted into the church as such only if they agreed to “abstain from sexual immorality” (*apechesthai ... tes porneias*). We know too that this was Paul’s approach because he used the same injunction in what is probably his first extant letter:

We ... urge (you) in the Lord Jesus that, just as you received from us the (instruction about) how you ought to walk and please God, just as you do indeed walk, that you

abound (even) more. For you know what instructions we gave to you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God: your holiness [or: sanctification], that you abstain from sexual immorality (*apechesthai ... tes porneias*), ... because the Lord is an avenger concerning all these things, just as also we told you before and were charging (you before God). For God did not call us to sexual impurity (*akatharsia*) but in holiness [or: sanctification]. For that very reason the one who rejects (this instruction) rejects not a human being but God who gives the Holy Spirit to you. (1 Thess 4:1-8; my emphasis)

This passage begins Paul's moral exhortation in the letter. He twice states that he had already given this instruction to them (the letter was written within months of his previous contact). The instruction was to live holy lives, which was pleasing to God. First on the list was to "abstain from sexual immorality," which he also called "impurity." Along with the command went a warning: To do otherwise was to act in a manner offensive to God's Spirit, tacitly reject God, and call on one's head God's vengeance.

The same type of warning appears in what may be Paul's next extant letter:

The works of the flesh are apparent, which are (of the following sort): sexual immorality (*porneia*), sexual impurity (*akatharsia*), licentiousness (*aselgeia*), idolatry ... and the things like these, (about) which I am telling you beforehand [i.e., before God's day of judgment], just as I told (you) beforehand [i.e., when I was personally with you] that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21)

Again, Paul reminds the Galatian believers that he had already conveyed this warning to them when he was with them. There is simply no point in Paul repeatedly warning self-professed believers that those who engage in sexual immorality and other severe offenses will not inherit the kingdom of God unless he believed such an outcome to be possible for his converts. The significance of sexual offenses for Paul is underscored by the fact that the first three vices

are all synonyms for sexual misconduct. Not even idolatry appears before the sexual vices, despite the fact that nowhere else in the letter is there any indication that sexual immorality was a besetting problem among the Galatian believers.

Paul's discussion of homosexual practice in **Romans 1:24-27**, which he calls a particularly indecent and dishonoring case of sexual impurity (*akatharsia*), occurs after his reference to idolatry (1:19-23) in the context of an extended vice list (1:18-32), which concludes with the statement that such offenses are worthy of death (1:32). Those who do not repent of such practices will encounter God's "wrath on the day of wrath and of the revealing of God's righteous judgment," viewed as the opposite of eternal life (2:7-9). Later in **6:19**, Paul commands the Roman believers: "Just as you presented your members as enslaved to sexual impurity (*akatharsia*) and to (other acts of) lawlessness, resulting in lawlessness, so now present your members as enslaved to righteousness, resulting in holiness." There is a clear back reference (or intratextual echo) to the mention of sexual impurity in 1:24 (these are the only two uses of *akatharsia* in the letter), where homosexual practice is depicted as a prime example. The context indicates that leaving behind such behaviors is not an option for believers. Those who live as slaves of sin are in fact sin's slaves, whatever they confess with their mouths. Their outcome is "death," contrasted with eternal life (6:15-23).

The overarching question for **Rom 6:15-8:17** is: "Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?" (6:15). This is an excellent question for our discussion here, since many Christians might characterize Alan Chambers' position as more "gracious." However, Paul's immediate answer, "May it not happen!" indicates otherwise. Indeed, Paul has already to some extent answered it in the preceding verse: "For sin will not be lord over you, for you are not under the law but under grace" (6:14). That "sin will not be lord over you" means not just that believers are forgiven but, much more, that they no longer obey sinful desires (6:12). To be "under grace" is

to put oneself at God's disposal "as if alive from the dead" so as to live a life of righteousness; otherwise one would still be a slave of sin (6:13). Paul's ultimate response comes in **8:12-14**:

*So then, brothers (and sisters), we are debtors not to the flesh, (that is,) to live in conformity to the flesh. For, if you continue to live in conformity to the flesh, you are going to die. But if by (means of) the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being led by the Spirit of God, these (very ones) are (the) sons (and daughters) of God. (emphasis added)*

This is the teaching of the two ways, a teaching whose antecedents lie in the Old Testament and which Paul still affirms: There is a way that leads to life (= living according to the Spirit) and a way that leads to death (= living according to the flesh; Rom 8:4-11). Paul couldn't be clearer: If persons who claim to be believers continue to live as they did as unbelievers, including engaging in sexually immoral practices such as homosexual behavior, they will not inherit eternal life. Paul makes a similar point about the necessity of living a Spirit-controlled life in **Gal 5:18** when he states that only "if you are being led by the Spirit" are you "not under the law's jurisdiction." The inference is that self-professed Christians who live a life under the control of the sinful impulse operating in the flesh—and for Paul this included people engaged in serial-unrepentant sexual immorality—are still under the jurisdiction of the law of Moses, not under grace, and so still face judgment.

So the answer to the question, "Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace?" (6:15) is: No, because if self-professed believers continue to live under the lordship of the sinful impulse operating in the flesh—which, incidentally, includes engaging in sexually immoral behavior such as homosexual practice—they will perish because they are still under the law's jurisdiction and not under grace, no matter what they claim to be the case. The law retains jurisdiction over everyone who lives primarily out of Adamic flesh rather than being led by the Spirit

of Christ. Certainly it is true that "There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus" (**Rom 8:1**). The key, however, is "being in Christ Jesus," which is not a static concept but a life characterized as one "led by the Spirit of Christ" and thereby under Christ's controlling influence. So Paul can say in **Galatians**: "Those who belong to Christ (have) crucified the flesh with its passions and its desires" (**5:24**); "I died in relation to the law in order that I might live for God; I have been crucified with Christ; and I no longer live but Christ lives in me and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and handed himself over for me" (**2:19-20**).

Recapping, let us **compare Paul's approach to Alan's**:

- Paul made a point of repeatedly warning his Gentile converts that if they continued to engage in sexually immoral conduct (including homosexual practice, incest, adultery), they would not inherit the kingdom of God or eternal life.
- Alan Chambers repeatedly assures self-professed Christians who engage in serial-unrepentant homosexual practice that they will be in heaven.

Which one is correct? The chief apostle to the Gentiles who accounts for a considerable chunk of the New Testament or the President of Exodus International? You decide. It is important to bear in mind that Alan Chambers is not just ignoring Paul's warnings. He is contradicting them. He cannot dispute that Paul stressed these things to his converts. It is not possible to interpret these texts otherwise.

Oh yes, it is not just Paul but Jesus too. As we have seen, Jesus clearly thought that the absence of "fruits" showing a transformed life could disqualify someone who calls Jesus "Lord" from inheriting God's kingdom. In fact, he defined discipleship as taking up one's cross, denying oneself, and losing one's life (**Mark 8:34-37**). He also warned people (metaphorically) to remove body parts that threaten their downfall lest they

be thrown in hell, which Matthew has in a context of sexual ethics. And he implies to the woman caught in adultery to stop sinning lest she fail to obtain eternal life. Judgment sayings of Jesus account for roughly a third of all Jesus sayings in the Synoptic Gospels, minus those found only in Matthew (for a run-down of these go [here](#), pp. 6-13). In Matthew the percentage is twice that. In short, Jesus warned people all the time about not entering the kingdom of God, including those who claimed to be followers.

Needless to say, the New Testament evidence that an untransformed life leads to exclusion from God's kingdom can easily be multiplied many times over if we were to cast our net over other Pauline literature, Johannine literature (especially 1 John; see Appendix 2), Hebrews (a letter chock full of warnings about falling away), the General Epistles, and Revelation (for example, the letters to the seven churches in Rev 2-3).

Let's return to Paul and the question of grace. Did Paul forget his own message about God's grace and love? No, *grace in Pauline thought has nothing to do with extending permission to sin*. In **Romans 6**, as we seen above, Paul categorically denies that grace should either motivate sin (6:1) or make sin a matter of indifference so far as receiving eternal life is concerned (6:15). On the contrary, grace includes God giving the life of the new creation, through the power of his Spirit, to overcome sin's dominion in the lives of believers (6:2-4; 7:6; 8:5-14). For Paul the problem with the law of Moses was not that it legislated or even that it condemned sin; the main problem with the law was its weakness, its inability as an external script to defeat the internal power of sin in the flesh (7:7-23; 8:3). Paul is unequivocal that he died in relation to the law in order that he might now truly "live for God," which he can do not through his own flesh but through the Spirit of Christ living in him (Gal 2:19-20), the power of the new creation (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17). Yes, Christ's death made amends for human sins in a definitive way that the Old Testament cult could never accomplish (Rom 3:24-25; Heb 7-10). That's a huge part of grace, as is the continuing application

of the blood of Christ throughout the Christian life. Nevertheless, it is not possible to sever atonement from the Spirit-led life. Those who do so have arrived at "cheap grace."

God has done everything on our behalf, having his own Son die an excruciating death to make amends for our sin and raising him from the dead to usher in the life of the new creation (1 Cor 15:3-4; a gospel "by which also you are being saved, *if you are holding firmly to [it] ... unless you believed without purpose / in vain*"). God did this so that we might be extricated from the sin-controlled life that still leads to destruction. We used to be controlled by the sinful impulse active in our fleshly bodies. But as Paul noted immediately after warning about offenders like the incestuous man who risk not inheriting God's kingdom: "And **these things some of you were**. But you had yourselves washed off, but you were made holy [or: sanctified], but you were justified by (calling on) the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by (receiving) the Spirit of our God" (**1 Cor 6:11**). Note that the "were" does not mean that believers no longer experience innate desires to do what God forbids (on the contrary: Gal 5:17). It means that, in the main, their life is no longer controlled by such impulses. Christians are expected by God to engage no longer in these behaviors in a serial-unrepentant way. At least that is what God requires. Obviously the incestuous man didn't get the message previously; but he may well have at a later date, if 2 Cor 2:5-11 refers to him. Until he turned away from such practices, his inheritance of God's kingdom was at risk (1 Cor 6:9-10).

If, as Rom 1:18-32 indicates, God's wrath is exhibited in God stepping back and handing people over to enslaving, self-dishonoring desires that result in a heaping of sin and cataclysmic destruction, then God's grace must be the opposite of that: namely, God stepping forward and liberating people from these degrading desires that lead to death so that they might serve God with a holy life and thereby avoid the cataclysmic judgment (Rom 6). *Assuring "gay Christians" that persistent and self-affirming*

*homosexual practice will not disrupt their relationship with God is not gracious but rather a twisted manifestation of divine wrath, leaving people deceived till the day of recompense.*

People with cheap-grace theologies can't begin to fathom remarks like this from Paul in his famous treatise on (of all things) freedom from the law:

Do not be deceiving yourselves: God is not (to be) mocked, for whatever a person sows, this also he (or she) will reap, because the one who sows to his (or her) own flesh will, from the flesh, reap (a harvest of) destruction; but the one who sows to the Spirit will, from the Spirit, reap (a harvest of) eternal life. And let us not be bad in doing what is good for in due time we will reap

(our harvest), if we do not slack off. (Gal 6:7-9)

Paul hasn't slipped into a "works righteousness" mentality when he makes such remarks inasmuch as Paul recognizes that the power for both willing and doing "for God's good pleasure" comes from God (Phil 2:13). There is no human merit involved. Paul's theology connects grace closely to the transforming power of the Spirit (compare the expression "the Spirit of grace" in Heb 10:29). Those who reject that power reject God's grace. *In effect, although Alan doesn't know it because he operates with a truncated view of grace, he is assuring homosexually-active, self-professed believers that they will be safe in rejecting God's grace.*

## Appendix 2

### A Note on the Views of Alan Chambers' Theological Mentor: Clark Whitten

In order to understand Alan Chambers' theological views one needs to sample the problematic views on grace by Alan's pastor at Grace Church Orlando, Exodus Board chair, and theological mentor: Clark Whitten. Rev. Whitten is the author of *Pure Grace*, a recent book published by Destiny Image Press. One can read the introduction and first chapter at <http://news.destinyimage.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Pure-Grace.pdf>. Additional pages can be viewed on Amazon.com.

In his blurb for the book Alan himself says: "To say that I recommend [Clark's book *Pure Grace*] is the understatement of the century." High praise indeed. At a service in Whitten's church on [Mar. 25, 2012](#) Alan Chambers introduced Clark's book with the words: "God has unveiled something that has been veiled for hundreds and hundreds of years." Alan believes that for centuries the church has not understood the fullness of God's grace until Rev. Whitten came along to expound it in his new book.

Whitten himself tips his hat to Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers for getting justification by faith correct. But he says that they got wrong the doctrine of sanctification. And "nothing has changed in the church for 500 years," Whitten tells us. Until now, that is. Whitten believes that his understanding of grace is inaugurating a Second Reformation. "And the gospel is going to become good news again," Whitten claims.

Here is a little compilation of some quotes from the Introduction and chapter 1 that give a sense of where Rev. Whitten is headed:

"Listen, Jesus did not die to modify your behavior! ... Christians are not required to confess their sins to God in order to be forgiven, we already are forgiven.... How

much time will that free up! ... I believe that New Testament repentance is not the Holy Spirit convicting of sin, me feeling sorry, confessing the sin, asking for forgiveness, and committing to stop doing it.... That ... is heathenish! ...

"My bad works don't move God any more than my good works move Him. He simply isn't moved by 'works' of any kind. If you are motivated to do a great work for God, good luck! ... Many think and teach that while sin doesn't destroy my relationship with God as a believer, it does damage my fellowship with God implying God punishes or disciplines me for sin by withdrawing His fellowship.... The threat of God withholding fellowship while remaining in relationship is another non-biblical concept. It is a lie.... We are free to [do anything, good or bad] ... all without condemnation from God.... Our liberty isn't negated by our sin....

"Luther and Calvin got it right concerning justification by faith.... However, they didn't get it right concerning sanctification.... [The anti-gospel says:] 'The Holy Spirit was given to you to empower you to act better and better and convict you of your sin when you stray. God is pleased when you act right. When you don't, He will clean your clock! Fear God and keep His commandments.' Religion—not real Christianity—is and always has been in the behavior modification and sin management business.... The old religious approach of 'I am justified, I am being sanctified, and I will be glorified' is a lie.... Progressive sanctification is nonsense.... [As a believer it is foolish to think that you can any longer do anything to] tick the Big Guy off."

Anyone who reads my critique of Alan Chambers' views will get a good sense of why I think Rev. Whitten has a truncated understanding of the New Testament witness on grace. Beyond that I offer here a few additional observations. Frankly, I'm already giving the book more attention than it deserves. That I give it any attention at all is only to convey the unfortunate influences on Alan's thinking; and, more, to give readers of this article a sense that Alan's erroneous statements about what Scripture allegedly does and doesn't say are part of a larger iceberg of theological error on which any ship of faith might flounder (sorry, this is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic). Finally, I give it some attention in order to make clear that a leadership change must involve not only Alan Chambers as President but also Clark Whitten as Board Chair.

According to Rev. Whitten, "Listen, Jesus did not die to modify your behavior!" Unless Whitten is trying to be cute with words and give them meanings that they do not normally have, he is way off target here. Perhaps he means by "modifying one's behavior" only a superficial modifying that does not involve a transformed heart for God and a new creation. But living for God/Christ necessarily involves a "total home makeover," including the area of behavior. For example, Paul tells his churches that Christ "died for all *in order that those who live might no longer live for themselves* but rather for the one who died for them and was raised" (2 Cor 5:15); that Paul "through the law died in relation to the law *in order that I might live for God*" (Gal 2:19); and that "those whom [God] foreknew he also predestined *to be conformed to the image of his Son*" (Rom 8:29). First-order business for Paul with his converts involved urging them to abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thess 4:1-8). Huge chunks of the Pauline letters are devoted to instructing the

converts on how to live (i.e. *parenesis* "advice" or moral exhortation; e.g., Romans 12-15; Ephesians 4-6). Jesus defined discipleship to himself as denying oneself, taking up one's cross, and losing one's life (Mark 8:34-37). The Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is largely devoted to strategies for living in this world as heirs of God's kingdom, closing with a triplicate of warnings regarding the necessity of not just hearing Jesus' words but doing them. There is no end to the texts that we could cite pointing to the necessity of a transformed life.

Rev. Whitten says: "Christians are truly free. We are free to laugh or cry, read a novel or the Bible, eat meat offered to idols or avoid it, drink wine or water, smoke or chew, get fat or fit, attend church or stay at home, tithe or give nothing—all without condemnation from God. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (see Rom. 8:1) doesn't mean no consequences or loss, but does mean no condemnation." Three comments here:

(1) Note that Rev. Whitten doesn't say: "We are free to commit sexual immorality and to worship idols alongside Christ and to murder." He picks more minor offenses or things that are only offenses to some Christian subcultures. This reluctance to "go all the way" with his examples shows that even he himself does not believe his rhetoric fully. Indeed, if he did apply his "no condemnation" to these grave offenses there would be such widespread outrage that he would have to resign as chair of the board at Exodus immediately.

(2) Notice that Rev. Whitten does say that we can "eat meat offered to idols or avoid it" and it doesn't affect our relationship with God (though there may be other consequences). This view clearly does not reflect Paul's teaching in 1 Cor 10:14-22 where Paul states that to eat idol meat

in an idol's temple establishes a partnership (*koinonia*) with the demon behind the idol even if one does not believe that idols have any real existence. So Paul warns "flee idolatry" and then has an ominous "You are not stronger than God, are you?"—all in the context of reminding them that the wilderness generation never made it to the promised land because of their idolatry and sexual immorality (10:1-13). Paul absolutely forbids such cultic associations. Yet Rev. Whitten has the temerity to say "We are free to eat meat offered to idols" without giving any restriction as to venue.

(3) Rev. Whitten also rips Rom 8:1 from its context when he uses it as a proof text for how behavior can never interrupt our relationship with God and Christ. First, the "no condemnation" applies only "to those who are in Christ Jesus." To be "in Christ" is to be under the controlling influence of Christ's Spirit. The assurance does not apply to those who call themselves Christians but do not, in fact, live in the main within that controlling influence. To be "in Christ" is to have Christ live in oneself and for Paul that means "living for God," being "crucified with Christ" such that "I no longer live but Christ lives in me and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:19-20). Romans 8:1 is within the larger context of Rom 6:1-8:17 where the driving question is, "Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?" The final answer to that question appears in 8:12-14: "So then, brothers (and sisters), we are not debtors to the flesh, that is, to live in conformity to (the sinful impulse operating in) the flesh, for *if* [there's that "if" again] you live in conformity to the flesh, you are going to die. But *if* by means of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are being *led* by the Spirit of God, these [and not those who merely confess that

Jesus is Lord but live as if sin is their lord] are the sons (and daughters) of God" (8:12-14). In other words, why not continue to lead a life in slavery to sin as a believer? Answer: Because if you continue to do so and are not being led by the Spirit of Jesus Christ you will be back under the law's jurisdiction and perish, i.e. not receive eternal life. Compare Gal 5:18: "But if you are being *led* by the Spirit, [then and only then] you are not under the law('s jurisdiction)." Rev. Whitten considers such an answer to "Why not sin?" impossible for believers and yet this is precisely how Paul answers his own question.

Hear what Paul says to the Gentile believers at Rome: "See then (the) kindness and severity of God: on the one hand, on those who fell [i.e. unbelieving Israel], severity; on the other hand, on you (the) kindness of God, *if* you continue in the kindness, since (otherwise) you too will be cut off" (Rom 11:24). What does it mean for some Israel "branches" to be cut off the cultivated olive tree? It means, quite clearly, that unbelieving Israel is currently in a state of "unsalvation," headed for destruction. The situation is not irrevocable: they can be grafted back in if they do not persist in their unbelief with respect to Christ (11:23). But if they do persist, certain destruction awaits.

What then does it mean for Paul to say that the Gentile believers have been grafted into the cultivated olive tree? It means that as things now stand they are headed for inheritance in God's kingdom and already share in the Spirit of Christ, the lifeline from the world above and age to come. But what does it mean that if they do *not* continue in God's kindness they will be cut off? By analogy to the situation with some Israel branches it can only mean cut off from the sphere of salvation. The fate of neither group is irrevocable: those cut off can be grafted in if they believe in Christ; and those who believe in Christ can be cut

off in the future if they do not continue to lead a life of faith, a holistic life reorientation to God.

We do have to continue in the faith. Yes, God has made atonement for sin and has given us the gift of the Spirit and even imparts to us the will to do good along with the power to do it (Phil 2:12-13). But we do have to acquiesce to God's work in our lives. We do have to say regularly "yes" to God and "no" to a life lived for self. Anything less is cheap grace, truncated grace, indeed, no grace at all. For grace is not only forgiveness of sins; it is also empowerment through the gift of Christ in us, such that Paul could say earlier in the same letter: "Sin shall not exercise lordship over you, (precisely) because you are not under law but under grace" (Rom 6:14).

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One of Whitten's major claims is that the message about confessing our sins in 1 John 1:9 in no way applies to Christians but only to a one-time moment of salvation when we first receive Christ. After that we don't have to do it anymore; that all our future unrighteous acts are cleansed, no matter to what extent we walk in darkness, and we never need to confess to God future sins. In his book he says enthusiastically: "Christians are not required to confess their sins to God in order to be forgiven, we already are forgiven.... How much time will that free up!"

Whitten ignores the immediately preceding verses in 1 John:

"If we say that we have partnership with him and are walking in darkness, we lie and do not have the truth; but if we are walking in the light as he himself is in the light we have partnership with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1:6-7).

In other words, *if* we say that we are Christians who have already confessed our sins to God and that he has forgiven us, but then we lead our lives under the primary control of sin (walk in darkness), we do *not* have ongoing partnership with Christ and his atoning death does *not* continue to apply to us its cleansing effect.

For Clark Whitten (and thus for Alan Chambers) you "get grace," you understand it, when you can say to yourself that you are free to commit any sin without any consequences in terms of one's relationship with God. That is what liberty is, he says. But 1 John repeatedly states that if you walk in darkness, keep on sinning as a defining feature of your life, are not keeping God's commands, love "the world" with its lusts, as a way of life do not do what is right, or hate your brother, you have no partnership with Christ, his atoning blood does not continue to cleanse your sins, you are from the devil rather than from God, the truth is not in you, you do not remain in Christ and God, you are not in the light, the love of the Father is not in you, you have not come to know God, you remain in death and have not transferred to life, you do not love God, and you have no basis for reassuring your heart that you belong to Christ. You are, in short, a liar.

These are all very strong words but, as any reasonable person can see from the texts cited below, they run throughout First John. It is hardly a case of cherry picking to point them out. They are everywhere in all 5 chapters. You have to try real hard to ignore them in order to miss them:

"The one who says, 'I have come to know him,' and is not keeping his commandments is a liar and the truth is not in him.... By this we know that we are in him: The one who says that he remains in him ought—just as that one (Jesus) walked—also himself to walk like this" (2:3-6).

“The one who says that he is in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness until this very moment” (1 John 2:8).

“If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (2:15).

“If you know that he is righteous, you know that also everyone who does what is righteous has been born from him” (1 John 2:29).

“No one who remains in him keeps on sinning [i.e. as a pattern of life]; no one who keeps on sinning has seen him or has known him. Little children, let no one deceive you: The one who does what is right is righteous, just as that one (Jesus) is righteous. The one who keeps committing sin is from the devil, for from the beginning the devil is sinning.... Everyone who has been born from God does not keep on committing sin [as a pattern of life] ... because he has been born from God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are evident: everyone who does not do what is right is not from God, also the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:6-10).

“We know that we have transferred from death to life because we love the brothers; the one who does not love remains in death. No one who hates his brother... has eternal life remaining in him.... By this we will know that we are from the truth and will persuade our heart before him” (3:14-20).

“The one who keeps his commandments remains in him and (Christ) himself in him” (1 John 3:24).

“The one who does not love did not come to know God for God is love.... If we love one another God remains in us” (1 John 4:8, 12).

“If anyone says ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar. For the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love the God whom he has not seen.... By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and do his commandments” (4:20; 5:2).

“If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin that does lead straight to death, he will ask and he will give to him life, for those whose sinning does not lead straight to death. There is a sin that leads straight to death. I am not saying that you should ask about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin that does not lead straight to death” (5:16-17).

“We know that everyone who has been born from God does not keep on sinning (as a pattern of life)” (5:18).

Soak in these verses from 1 John. Meditate on them and see if you are not convinced how in earnest the author is to communicate to us the urgency and necessity of a transformed life.