

## Being a "Simple-Minded Jesus Lover" Is No Excuse for Really Bad Theology

Alan Chambers dodges the real issue at hand and inadvertently plays the role of judge.

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Alan Chambers has responded in *Christianity Today* to the controversy surrounding his public assurances to "gay Christians" that they will go to heaven irrespective of lifelong, self-affirming homosexual practice (read the news story in *CT* by Weston Gentry: "Exodus International's Alan Chambers Accused of Antinomian Theology, July 12, 2012). Chambers, who is president of Exodus International, uses four flawed strategies in his article, "Thoughts from a Simple-Minded Jesus Lover" (July 16, 2012).

**Alan's first strategy is to play the "aw, shucks" humble card.** He's not a Bible scholar or a theologian, he says, but just a "simple-minded Jesus lover," neither Calvinist nor Arminian. As "just a Christian," Alan can rise above the controversy ("That argument is so last year") to tell us what the Bible really says. This posture, however, does not entitle him to avoid the hard work of actually reading Scripture contextually (as opposed to cherry-picking favorite texts) and revising his theology when others point out the problems in his interpretation of Scripture.<sup>1</sup>

Far from Alan's beliefs rising above the fray of competing theological versions, they are mired in an extreme, cult-like variation of "once saved, always saved" view. For Alan there are no immoral behaviors of any magnitude, number, or frequency that can call into question the veracity of someone's claim to be a Christian, let alone justify a warning about possible loss of salvation. He has declared that "while behavior matters," the lifestyles that we choose—including unrepentant, lifelong homosexual practice—"don't interrupt someone's relationship with Christ." Christians don't even need to confess their ongoing sins to God any longer. Indeed, to do so would be a big waste of time because we have already been forgiven by Jesus for every sin that we will ever commit.<sup>2</sup>

The big problem for Alan is that Jesus and the entire apostolic witness to him disagree that unrepentant bad behavior has no bearing on salvation. Paul repeatedly warned his Gentile converts of the very thing that Alan repeatedly assures "gay Christians" could never happen: namely, that immoral sexual

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> I love Alan and appreciate Alan's own personal love for Jesus. Yet at 40 years old and as the president of a major evangelical Christian organization for over a decade, Alan Chambers has no excuse anymore for using this "aw, shucks" routine. The truth is that Alan has a particular theology. From it he makes public pronouncements and policy decisions for Exodus International that affect the lives of others. It is time to become a bit more theologically responsible in one's study of Scripture. "Simple" is no excuse for being "simplistic." Being "just a Christian" is no excuse for bad exegesis and interpretation of Scripture.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This view is promoted by Alan's mentor, Rev. Clark Whitten, who is Alan's pastor, chair of the board at Exodus (no conflict of interest there), and author of a recent book called *Pure Grace*. Both Alan and Clark really do believe that the ideas in this book will usher in a Second Reformation. Clark writes (and Alan believes) that, while the great Reformers may have understood justification by faith, they did not understand sanctification. The Reformers retained a legalistic framework in thinking that an unrighteous life is a mark of someone not truly saved and that God is displeased when Christians act wrongly. According to Clark and Alan, the truly radical nature of grace—its complete discontinuity with human behavior and the "lie" of the "gospel of behavior modification"—has not been perceived by the church for centuries till now. See my critique of Whitten's views in Appendix 2, pp. 31-35, of my online piece, "Time for a Change of Leadership at Exodus?"

behavior, among other offenses, can get one excluded from the kingdom of God (including 1 Thess 4:2-8; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 2 Cor 12:21; Rom 1:18-2:11; Eph 4:17-19; 5:3-6). For example, in a letter famous for emphasizing justification by faith and Christian liberty, Paul reminded the Gentile believers in Galatia:

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)<sup>3</sup>

## And again later in the letter:

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

This is the common teaching of the Two Ways in Paul. There are two kinds of people: those who live in conformity to the sinful impulse operating in the flesh and those who live in conformity to the Spirit of Jesus Christ. The former will perish; the latter will receive eternal life. Salvation is not unconditional: "In due time we will reap, *if* we do not slack off." At the same time salvation cannot be merited by anything believers do because even when we comply with the Spirit it is the Spirit that is empowering the work (compare Phil 2:12-13).

That Paul regularly issued such warnings to self-professed Christians about exclusion from God's kingdom is an historical fact. Rather than deal with this, Alan simply ignores it. Christians with a moreor-less Arminian perspective understand such texts as warning Christians about possible loss of salvation. Alan readily discards this interpretation because he asserts that his "once saved, always saved" perspective disallows the possibility.

However, unlike Alan, those who subscribe to the classical (Calvinist) Reformed view of the "perseverance of the saints" don't simply ignore these warnings. They incorporate them into their theological thinking by contending (1) that self-professed Christians who lead grossly immoral lives were never true Christians and (2) that the warnings serve a useful purpose of stimulating moral transformation among the truly redeemed. The essay by Michael Horton in *Christianity Today*, "Let's Not Cut Christ to Pieces," is a case in point.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> All translations of New Testament texts are my own from the Greek text.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Michael Horton, a professor of theology at Westminster Seminary of California (with an Oxford University Ph.D.) says this in response to Alan Chambers' views: "It is as unloving to hold out hope to those who embrace a homosexual lifestyle as it is to assure idolaters, murderers, adulterers, and thieves that they are safe and secure from all alarm.... Paul's point is clear: For Gentiles, sexual immorality (including homosexuality, within proper social boundaries) is normal, but to take that view is to exclude oneself from the kingdom of Christ. A proud sinner defiantly ignoring the lordship of Christ while professing to embrace him as Savior is precisely what Paul says is impossible. These passages do not threaten believers who struggle with indwelling sin and fall into grievous sins (see Romans 7 for that category); rather, they threaten professing believers who do not agree

What Alan does is something that mainstream Christianity has not done for almost two millennia: namely, to treat justifying faith as alive and active even in lives given over to sin. Faith is not a mere intellectual assent to the truth. It is a holistic life reorientation that conforms in trust and gratitude to the demands of the gospel (Gal 2:19-20).

While no one can achieve perfection in this life, all the NT writers expect believers to live a transformed life that conforms, in the main, to the movement of the Spirit. If they do not, if instead they still live a life under the primary influence of sin in the flesh, then according to Jesus and all the NT authors they will reap death and destruction rather than eternal life. This has always been the church's teaching.<sup>5</sup>

Alan's second strategy is to cherry-pick some Scripture texts that he then reads out of context to mean the opposite of what the scriptural author intended. Alan cites three scriptures in defense of his viewpoint. He begins by citing John 3:16, though it gets him nowhere. Apparently Alan construes from the verse's assurance of eternal life to "everyone who believes in him" that no amount of sinful behavior could ever call into question one's salvation.

Yet the Fourth Evangelist clearly does not mean that, since later in John 15:1-8 Jesus announces that he is "the true vine" and that those who are "in" him but do not "bear fruit" are destroyed like unfruitful branches thrown into the fire. Contextual evidence of this sort is not something that Alan lets disturb his preconceived ideology. First 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, and do not (as a way of life) do what is right, you have no partnership with Christ, his atoning blood does not continue to cleanse your sins, you do not love God, and you have no basis for reassuring your heart that you belong to Christ. So much for Johannine literature supporting Alan's theology that unrepentant immoral behavior has no bearing on a believer's salvation.

with God about their sin.... Refusing to agree with God about the nature of such behavior as sinful, those who embrace sexual immorality as a lifestyle reject the gospel. One cannot even seek forgiveness for something that one does not regard as sinful in the first place.... We dare not try to cut Christ in pieces, as if we could receive him deliverer from sin's guilt but not from its dominion, or as Savior but not as Lord." It is powerful testimony to have both a Reformed scholar (Prof. Horton) and a Wesleyan-Arminian scholar (Prof. Ben Witherington, "Behavior Doesn't Interrupt Your Relationship with Christ': A Recipe for Disaster"), each representing a very different view of whether a believer can ever lose salvation, agree that self-professed Christians who embrace gravely immoral lifestyles such as homosexual practice reject the gospel and are excluded from the kingdom of God. Paul says as much in 1 Thess 4:2-8:

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 (porneia), ... 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. (my emphasis)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ironically, this point is tacitly acknowledged by Alan Chambers and Clark Whitten when they speak of a coming Second Reformation arising out of Whitten's 'insights' into "pure [read: cheap] grace."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> One may start with 1 John 1:6-7: "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." For other citations, see "Time for a Change of Leadership at Exodus?," 34-35.

Even more stunning is Alan's attempt at "going a little deeper" by alluding to **Romans 6**. Alan tries to make the text say: "Believers are no longer slaves to sin but to righteousness.... [not because] we won't sin; it says that because of who we are in Christ, sin is not our master—even if we make it so," that is, even if we live as though sin is our master. As it happens, what Paul actually says is nearly the exact opposite of Alan's interpretation.

Paul insists in Romans 6 that Christians must no longer be subservient to sin operating in the flesh. Instead, they must now put their bodily members at God's disposal as instruments of righteous conduct (6:12-14). This command is, of course, consistent with the fact that believers have been baptized into Christ to share his resurrection life (6:2-11). Yet Paul goes on to explain that *the test of whether we are still slaves of sin is settled by whether we continue to live lives under sin's primary control.* If believers again put themselves at the disposal of sin, sin will recompense them with the opposite of eternal life, death (6:15-23). Paul's final answer to the question in 6:15 ("Should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?") 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 sons (and daughters) of God.

In short, the answer to the question "Why not sin...?" is: Because if you live a life under sin's primary control you will perish. Only those who are <u>led</u> by the Spirit will inherit eternal life (compare Gal 5:18). Mouthing a few words of confession, "Jesus is Lord," won't save you if you live as if sin, not Jesus, is your Lord. Alan says that grace isn't "only a get-out-of-jail-free card" (my emphasis) but also an "unequaled power to free." Yet for Alan, if a believer does "misuse" grace as "a license to sin," the believer can still use this card to "get out of jail free" and inherit God's kingdom. That is precisely what Paul denies in Romans 6:1-8:17.

The final scripture that Alan cites in his defense is **Matt 7:1-5** where Jesus cautions people about judging and enjoins them to first take the log out of their own eye. Alan uses the passage to reject church discipline (despite Matt 18:15-20) and to dismiss judgments that unrepentant "gay Christians" will not inherit the kingdom of God (despite Matt 15:19; 19:4-6).<sup>7</sup>

If Alan had only examined the context he would have seen that Matthew in 7:1-5 did not understand Jesus to be rejecting all judgment within the church. <sup>8</sup> Jesus was rather cautioning against judgment lacking in self-introspection, against majoring in minors, and against rejoicing in the damnation of offenders instead of seeking to reclaim them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Jesus himself characterized a male-female requirement for marriage as foundational in Matt 19:4-6 and referred to "acts of sexual immorality" (porneiai) as among the offenses that defile humans in Matt 15:19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> In the very next verse is a saying about not "giving what is holy to dogs" or "casting pearls before swine." Compare Paul's rhetorical question in 1 Cor 5:12: "Is it not those inside [the church] that you are to judge?"

Only eight verses later Matthew closes the Sermon on the Mount with a triplicate of warnings from Jesus (7:13-27): the warning about the gate leading to life being narrow; the warning about the necessity of bearing fruit (or else be 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. Similarly, near the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has this warning by Jesus sandwiched in between a discussion of sexual offenses: 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). Matthew is clearly conveying that Jesus warned followers who acted immorally about coming judgment and did so as a mark of love for the lost.

If this is the best that Alan can do to justify from Scripture his assurances of salvation to practicing, self-affirming "gay Christians," his position is in deep trouble indeed. It is disheartening that the strength of Alan's conviction on this matter appears to be inversely related to the strength of his biblical case.

Alan's third strategy is to attack Christians who disagree with him as "hypocritical and inconsistent," using flawed analogies in an attempt at shaming Christians for not treating all sins alike. This is Alan's main defense. He reasons that if we declare that a "willful" homosexually active life excludes someone from the kingdom of God, then any "willful" sin should get a believer excluded, including pride, alcoholism, gluttony, and looking at heterosexual pornography. Alan then drives his argument home to its logical (but absurd) conclusion: "If we exercised church discipline across the board based on the outward and inward sin running rampant in the body of Christ, there would be no one left."

The immediate problem with this line of reasoning should be obvious: The church *is* called upon to exercise church discipline (Matt 18:15-20; compare 1 Cor 5; 2 Cor 2:5-11; 2 Thess 3:6, 14-15; 1 Tim 5:19-20). Obviously the intent of church discipline is not to discipline everyone who has ever sinned but to deal with offenders whose sins are (1) manifested in outward action, (2) celebrated rather than repented of, and (3) so egregious as to indicate a life under sin's control. The fact that the early church exercised discipline on wayward members is strong proof that there is something wrong with Alan's "all sins are equal" approach.

We find just such a case in **1 Corinthians 5**, where Paul demands that the Corinthians put on church discipline a man engaged self-affirmingly in what Paul regarded as a case of extreme sexual immorality: incest (specifically, sex with one's stepmother). In effect, Alan must believe that Paul was hypocritical and inconsistent, inasmuch as Paul singled out this sin even though there were lots of sins going on at Corinth, including pride (4:6-10, 18-19; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4) and richer members stuffing their faces at the expense of poorer members during the celebration of the Lord's Supper (11:17-34, esp. 11:21-22). Why did Paul take this action? Unlike Alan, he obviously regarded self-affirming incest, even of an adult-consensual sort, as worse than the other offenses at Corinth.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> The discipline was remedial rather than punitive (an attempt to save his spirit before it is too late); and temporary rather than permanent (pending repentance; compare 2 Cor 2:5-11).

A charge of hypocrisy and inconsistency against Christians concerned about salvation assurances to homosexually active "gay Christians" would be valid only if all four of the following premises held true. As it is, none of them are true:

- 1. There were equally powerful organized lobbies in church and state for promoting all other sins. There aren't. For the couple of decades there has been nothing comparable in church and society to the full-court press for promoting homosexual practice and oppressing those who disagree. That partly explains and justifies the special attention being given to the issue of homosexual practice.
- 2. Churches were systematically "exonerating (or ignoring)" comparable sins committed in a serial-unrepentant manner. There may be some people somewhere who do this. Yet in general I don't see leaders of the church with a high view of Scripture exonerating or ignoring sexual sins like incest, pedophilia, adultery, polyamory, sex with prostitutes, rape, and bestiality; or non-sexual sins like murder, robbery, and extortion. Yes, the church does need to work more on other issues (for example, premarital sex, drunkenness, and pornography). At the same time, beware of treating as a virtue more consistency in disobeying the teaching of Jesus and promoting sin.<sup>10</sup>
- 3. Christians were not making a distinction between (a) struggling with sin but occasionally backsliding and (b) affirming the sin as a good to be celebrated and promoted. In general, I see a correct tendency on the part of the church to be less inclined to warn about salvation when offenders are genuinely struggling (albeit, not always successfully) than when offenders are unrepentant and self-affirming about their sin. Alan provides assurances of salvation to those who have no intention of repenting of homosexual practice.
- 4. All sins were equally heinous in the eyes of God and equally an indicator to the church of a life lived primarily "in conformity to the flesh." This is Alan's key premise. 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." Such an "egalitarian view of sin" is sustainable neither from Scripture nor from common sense and daily experience.

I have already devoted slightly over 10 pages to **critiquing Alan's "all sins are equal in all respects" view** in my online article, "<u>Time for a Change of Leadership at Exodus?</u>" (pp. 15-25). It would be nice if Alan would take the time to read that section carefully and actually deal with the scriptures and rationales that I put forward. I will make two points here.

First, although Alan charges with inconsistency and even hypocrisy people who treat some sins (like idolatry, homosexual practice, incest, adultery, polyamory, murder, robbery, extortion) as more severe than others, it is really Alan who is inconsistent on the whole matter. Here's why.

If Alan truly believed that all sins or wrongs were equal, then as a member of a local church or denomination, he couldn't oppose church office for any person on the grounds of morality—not for self-affirmed homosexual practice (maybe Alan supports the ordination of practicing, self-affirming "gay

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Moreover, as we shall see, Alan too is inconsistent in his evaluation of sin. Alan doesn't really believe or act on the conviction that all sin is equal but rather on the conviction that homosexual practice is closer to gluttony than to, say, incest.

Christians"?), incest, polygamy, sex with prostitutes, rape, robbery, or murder. For, in Alan's view, we all continue to sin "willfully," usually with regard to the common sins of pride, anger, gluttony, lust, jealousy, and the like.

As a parent, Alan would have to regard the offense of one of his children hitting another across the head as no worse than sneaking a flashlight into bed to do some reading after bedtime. As a husband, he would have to regard an act of adultery by his wife as no worse than his wife overeating at a particular meal. As a member of society, he would have to think that it is unjust to assign a greater penalty for raping a child than driving 10 miles over the speed limit on an untrafficked highway.

All of us in countless ways on a daily basis act on the moral conviction that some offenses are morally worse than others. Even the individual vices that Alan mentions vary with severity within their own category. One could imagine some manifestations of pride (e.g., over one's child's academic achievement) as warranting less concern than others (e.g., thinking that one is so morally good as to not need God's grace or thinking that one is racially superior). So Alan himself is inconsistent in claiming the belief that all sin is equal in severity.

Second, Scripture itself confirms that God regards some sins as more heinous than others. Granted, God acts in different ways than humans. No one can merit entrance into God's kingdom on the basis of one's own "works." However, that doesn't mean that all sins are equally heinous to God or equally indicative of a life lived in the flesh. 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 for those who repent, believe in him, and remain in him by letting the Spirit do the leading. 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.

Scripture shows that God exhibits more "wrath" over some sins than others. The Golden Calf episode is called "a great sin" in which God considered blotting out Israel (Exod 32:30). Ezekiel refers to "greater abominations" (Ezekiel 8:6, 13, 15). Old Testament law maintains different grades of punishment for different offenses, including different tiers of sexual offenses in Leviticus 20. Jesus spoke about greater and lesser commandments (Matt 5:19; Mark 12:28-31), weightier matters of the law (Matt 23:23), some people loving more because they were forgiven more (Luke 7:36-50), and a blasphemy against the Spirit that could not be forgiven (Mark 3:28-30). As we noted above, Paul obviously treated the case of incest at Corinth as a particularly great offense (1 Cor 5), since nowhere else does he recommend removal of members despite the clear presence of other sins in the community like pride, jealousy, and discord. Paul also spoke in the same letter of wrong actions meriting different penalties, ranging from suffering loss while being "saved ... as (one passing) through fire" to being destroyed by God (1 Cor 3:10-17).

High on actionable offenses for Paul was sexual immorality, which usually appeared on Paul's vice lists first or second, alongside idolatry. For Paul, as with ancient Israel and early Judaism, **homosexual practice was viewed as one of the most heinous sexual offenses**, after bestiality and before the worst forms of adult-consensual incest, adultery, and sex with prostitutes. Here are some reasons why:

- 1. The extreme unnaturalness of homosexual intercourse ("contrary to nature," "leaving behind the natural use" of the other sex), which leads Paul in Rom 1:24-27 to describe it further as a form of "sexual impurity" that is "degrading" or "dishonorable," "shameful conduct" or "indecency," and a fit "payback" for straying from God.
- 2. The priority of a male-female requirement already in the creation texts, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, which Jesus cited as foundational for establishing other principles in sexual ethics like the limitation of two persons for a valid sexual bond (Mark 10:6-9 // Matt 19:4-6).
- 3. The strong revulsion associated with homosexual practice in a series of OT texts (the stories of Sodom and the Levite at Gibeah; the feminized homosexual cult figures known as the *qedeshim* from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings; and the strongly worded prohibitions in Lev 18:22 and 20:13).
- 4. The fact that, apart from a prohibition of bestiality, the prohibition of homosexual practice is the only sexual prohibition held absolutely (no exceptions) for the people of God from creation to Christ—something that can't be said for polygamy or even incest.

It is not surprising, then, that in the extended vice list in Rom 1:18-32 Paul listed homosexual practice second only to idolatry as proof of human suppression of the truth about God and the way God made us, transparent in the material structures of creation. In 1 Cor 6:9 Paul cited "men who lie with a male" alongside "the sexually immoral" (a broad term but in context having perpetrators of incest primarily in view) and adulterers as among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Thus, not only the daily moral evaluations that everyone makes but also the writers of Scripture themselves confirm that Christians are right to treat some offenses both as more severe than others and as requiring different responses, without of course excusing *any* self-affirming sin.

## Alan's fourth and final strategy is to obscure the real issue by appealing to his own good character.

Alan closes his defense by assuring readers that he does not engage in homosexual practice, nor does he regard homosexual practice as a moral good. He adds that Christians are never going to resolve "the debates surrounding eternal security" or "whether or not someone can be actively gay and a believer." These observations throw up a smokescreen that obscures the real issue here. The real issue isn't about Alan's character or about whether he believes homosexual practice is sin or even about eternal security.

The real issue is, specifically, Alan's assurance of salvation to self-professed Christians who engage in homosexual practice and have no intention of repenting. This, in turn, is a manifestation of a more general theological problem: Alan's adoption of an extreme view of "once saved, always saved" that does not regard a transformed life as a *necessary* byproduct of justifying faith but rather treats a life led by the Spirit of Christ as optional for salvation.

In supplanting the view of Scripture on such matters, **Alan is playing the role of judge**. For he is providing assurances of salvation in instances where the Jesus and the NT authors issue warnings about exclusion from God's kingdom. Those who are already abusing God's grace in carrying out serial-unrepentant sin of an egregious sort are being encouraged (whether Alan thinks so or not) to carry on with that abuse. This is not acceptable behavior for a president of Exodus International.