

Dear Gladstone Elders: Zak, Brian, Alex, Eric, Sebastian, Ben, and Justin, and Community,

We have enjoyed wonderful fellowship and worship together with the Gladstone Community. Your desire collectively and as individuals to follow Jesus wholeheartedly 24/7/365 is indeed commendable and exceptional. It is what drew us to you and kept us meeting with you these four years. We have had precious times in getting to know community members and they have become dear to our hearts.

We find ourselves as time has gone on, however, in disagreement with some **practices** of Gladstone. Because we love you, we have been very much before the Lord in recent months with our concerns, and feel it best to write them down for the sake of clarity, and for all of you to hear it directly from us.

1. We are not in agreement with an unmarried adult believer needing approval of any church or community leadership to develop a relationship with another unmarried adult believer of the opposite gender for the purpose of obtaining a spouse. What young adults would benefit from is teaching and counsel providing scriptural guidelines and encouragement on preparing for marriage, why and how to keep from falling into sexual impurity, and on maintaining holiness to keep their relationship above reproach and honorable and pleasing to God. *"The LORD God said, **"It is not good for the man to be alone.** I will make **a helper suitable for him**" (Genesis 2:18). "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator **'made them male and female,'** and said, **'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?**" (Matthew 19:4-5). *"He who **finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD**" (Proverbs 18:22). *"Do we not have **the right** to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas [Peter]?" (1 Corinthians 9:5).***
2. We realize that Gladstone is a common purse community and that every man should work. However, we are not in agreement with young adults needing approval of any church or community leadership in regards to changing jobs or finding other employment. What is of utmost importance to God is not where someone works but that whatever one does, it should be done to please the Lord. *"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men" (Colossians 3:23). "So that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and **please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God**" (Col. 1:10). *"Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (1 Peter 2:16). *"All things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient. 'All things are lawful for me,' but I will not be brought under the power of anything" (1 Cor. 6:12). While all things are permissible, not all things will be good; while all things are permissible, we are not to allow anything or anyone to dominate us. We are free from the Law of Moses, we are free from condemnation. We have enormous freedom, but we are not free to go outside the wisdom of God. It is before God that our decisions in life should be made. Certainly, counsel from others is good to obtain, but the ultimate decision should be made by the individual (with a spouse, if married) before God. It should not be the decision of church or community leadership to say whether or not someone can or cannot obtain another job position.***
3. We believe that couples should have the freedom to allow the wife to remain at home as homemakers tending to her own home, whether there are minor children in the home or not. We believe that mothers should be allowed to be home with babies to nurse them as long as they feel the need to provide the God-designed nutrition specifically for their babies. We believe that mothers should be allowed to be stay-at-home moms for their children of minor age whether preschool age or school age. Each couple should have the prerogative to decide for themselves whether the wife will be a stay-at-home homemaker or work outside the home. *"Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to*

love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled” (Titus 2:3-5).

4. We believe that each couple should decide for themselves before God how to educate their children, whether it be via home education, Christian school, other private schooling, or public school. This is a couple's decision before God, not for leadership of a church or community to decide. No parent should be locked into any mode of education or place, either. What is most important is not which mode of educating or place, but that **parents** *“bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4). *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deuteronomy 6:5-7).* It is the parent's decision based on each child's needs, and the available and affordable options. Their decision could even be different and unique for each of their children.

5. We are not in agreement with all the Israel trips and the enormous amount of fund-raising time and activities these necessitate of community members. We certainly aren't against visiting the lands of the Bible. But for some to be making repeated trips there seems rather extravagant, even if it is wonderful to visit biblical sites which undoubtedly helps the Bible to come more alive. We are also not in agreement of sending on these trips workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and India, who labor in ministries struggling among poverty conditions or otherwise financially struggling circumstances in meeting the basic necessities of life, as being the wisest way to bless them. We cannot imagine that the apostle Paul would ask the churches in Macedonia and Achaia to contribute to bless the Jerusalem needy believers by sending them on a refreshing trip to see where Jesus had walked. *“I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder ... so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit ... I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings” (Romans 15:14-27). A trip to Israel would be a wonderful blessing gift to a pastor and his wife, who already had all their tangible needs met and their fellowship body was not in want. We know that you have indeed helped and come alongside each of these laborers multiple times in tangible ways to help, but the extravagance of spending for these trips we feel is way off balance when so many very real tangible needs remain with them.*

We realize that the majority, and maybe even all, of current community members may be in agreement with how things are now in community. We have no problem with anyone coming to those conclusions and agreements, as long as they are able to make them of their own free will, and they are allowed to choose other options, and at any time in the future they are able to decide differently if they feel God so leads, without feeling the need to get the community's approval but rather ask for counsel, understanding and/or blessing.

We have defended Gladstone against claims of being a cult, but we have growing concerns that the community is slipping into cult-like behavior. We know that all who have joined Gladstone are there voluntarily of their own free will and choice. We also understand that for a group to function smoothly and cooperatively, rules are necessary and that the larger a group becomes or circumstances change, sometimes more rules need to be made and become more specific.

For a group to be a cult in the doctrinal sense, essentials of the Christian faith would have to be violated. Our concern is **not** in regards to doctrinal matters.

For a group to be a cult **in the social sense**, the group is **too controlling**. We want to caution you concerning them, that you **not go beyond the bounds of limiting the rights and freedoms that adult believers have both in Christ and in our society**.

Certain social controls raise red flags in people's minds and cause them to think "cult", such as:

1. Extremely busy schedules with work, meetings, events, fund-raising activities, etc. based on the community's agenda.
2. Needing approval of the leadership to change employment.
3. Limiting contact with family and outside friends, having a community member accompany them on visits, arranging to meet in a location other than their home; or limiting visits to inside the community at community events.
4. Control over who lives where and with whom, and how long; requiring members to participate in activities or ministry involvements whether or not individuals are gifted or comfortable doing so.
5. Needing permission to develop a relationship with someone of the opposite gender to pursue a marriage partner.
6. Don't make it easy to withdraw from the community should any believe God is leading them elsewhere by being overbearing or mockingly expressing they are being disobedient, losing their faith, telling them they could fall under a curse from God, could lose their salvation, or would fail in some way elsewhere.

We believe there needs to be **more freedom and less restriction**. There is a **huge difference** between expressing concerns lovingly, gently, and seriously about situations, giving recommendations and suggestions versus imposing restrictions and coming down hard on someone, especially if they want to leave. We are **not to impose control where God allows freedom (free will), even if our whole being believes and knows they are making the wrong choice**. The father of the prodigal son granted his wish and let him go. He also longed for his return and kept hoping and looking for that, and welcomed him with a royal party when he came back repentantly.

God despises and forbids acts contrary to His holiness, among them: homosexual acts (Leviticus 18:22), prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:18), pride (Proverbs 16:5), lying (Prov. 6:17), evil plans (Zechariah 8:17), murder (Exodus 20:13), idols (Deut.. 7:25), occultic activity (Deut. 18:10-12), divorce (Malachi 2:16) and remarriage to a former wife after she has been married to another man (Deut. 24:4). But none of these sins are the unpardonable sin; and we are also not to treat people like they have committed the unpardonable sin, however they have "fallen short." Jesus continues to reach out in love, offering Himself, as we see in this example: *"Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband.... Just then his disciples returned ... but no one asked, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'" (John 4:16-27).* Jesus did not come to condemn but to restore people to God the Father. That should be the desire of our hearts, also – not to condemn but to reach out with the love of Christ, no matter how they have fallen short, that they might be restored to Him and go forward in life following Him. Only the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is unpardonable (Mark 3:22-30). Blasphemy of the Holy Spirit occurs when one knowingly, unambiguously, intentionally and permanently rejects the Holy Spirit's testimony of Jesus. With this PERMANENT REFUSAL, nothing can be forgiven, since God's plan has been rejected. This blasphemy rejects the Holy Spirit's work adamantly, intently, and with finality, and puts one beyond repentance.

God has given to each of His followers the call, even the command, to love. We are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our minds, with all our might. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves; so we are also to love ourselves. And we are to love our enemies and those who persecute us, even pray for them and

bless them in Jesus' name. We are to owe no man anything, but our love (Rom. 13:8). Let all that we do, and all that we say, and all that we think be done with His love pouring out of our hearts. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to You, O Lord. This level of love is a very high calling, and can only be achieved by completely yielding ourselves in mind, body, emotions and will to Him continually, that we might be filled and full and overflowing with the Holy Spirit that He might work through us to accomplish His will according to His purposes.

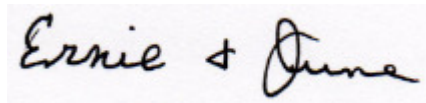
We understand that community members are asked to sign a covenant and that you think of each other as a family committed to each other for the rest of your lives. When we are "in Christ", we are in His forever family, but nowhere in scripture does it speak of any fellowship body needing to remain together till death. It is a wonderful occurrence when some people maintain fellowship with one another for the remainder of their lives, but the reality is many do not for one reason or another – and it isn't always for reasons of departing from the faith or needing to move out of the area. The marriage vow is the only human-to-human vow that God wants kept till death parts them. As long as we remain in Christ, we are members of His body; and fellowship in the body of Christ can be found across the globe in countless places. God does not mandate that we stay within one fellowship until death or until He returns.

Barnabas and Paul had a precious and deep friendship in the Lord. After teaching together for a year in the church at Antioch (Acts 11:26) the Holy Spirit set them apart as missionaries to the Gentiles (13:2). Some time after that first missionary trip, Paul wanted to make a return trip with Barnabas, but they came to a disagreement (15:39). This disagreement did not alienate them as friends and as brothers, nor was it over a doctrinal issue. It was over taking Mark again. A strong disagreement is a vastly different thing, than a falling out. Years later, Paul requested that Mark be brought to him, "for he is useful to me for ministering" (2 Tim. 4:11).

Those in the Gladstone Community have been like spiritual sons and daughters to us, as well as our spiritual brothers and sisters. We come to you with our love for you in the Lord. We care very much about you. We hope our four years with you have proven that. Our prayer is that before the Lord you will consider seriously these concerns. We want those in Gladstone to live victoriously in the freedom we have in Christ Jesus while enjoying the love and support He wants us to have and enjoy in Christian fellowship. We want nothing but God's best and His abundant blessing on you and your efforts done in Jesus' name and for His glory. We will henceforth be visiting other churches in the body of Christ for worship and fellowship, but we hope to also visit from time to time again with you for worship and fellowship in our shared bond and love of Christ and God our Father.

Therefore, since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God... We have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have exploited no one. I do not say this to condemn you; I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts... I have spoken to you with great frankness; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. (2 Cor. 7:1-4)

In Christ's redeeming love,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ernie + June". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ernie and June Stickler

March 17, 2018

