



"Why do Christians Hate Homosexuals?"

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"If Christians Are Supposed to Love Everyone, Why do They Hate Homosexuals?"

It seems you can never get away from the issue of sex. Our newspapers are full of lurid details of celebrity affairs, while the Church is presented as bigoted and out of date whenever it seeks to uphold Jesus' teaching on sexual morality. How do we even begin to tackle these questions when we are coming at the issue of homosexuality from such different perspectives? Especially when personal identity is so often defined by what we do sexually.

The first thing to ask: Do Christians hate homosexuals? The truth is that some individuals who call themselves Christians have acted hatefully towards homosexuals, and we need to begin by definitively rejecting that reaction and expressing our sorrow that this has happened. In my work in different parts of the country I have encountered a surprising number of people who are struggling with the issue of sexual identity and who feel that they have been on the receiving end of terrible treatment by the Church. As we try to present what the Bible says about homosexual practice we must remember that we are treading on incredibly sensitive ground. The best answer is to be a Christian who loves people in the gay community.

But if we as Christians don't hate homosexuals, aren't we bigots to call homosexual activity morally wrong? The word bigot means 'a person who is intolerant of the views of others: Is this true of us as Christians? It doesn't have to be.

Christians must be prepared to tolerate other views, but this does not mean they have to agree with them. The word tolerate itself implies that I respect the other person's right to express their view. (If I agree with them there's nothing to tolerate!)

If we aren't bigots, then aren't we stuck in the dark ages? Don't we need to catch up with the rest of society and stop being such prudes? Shouldn't Bible texts that speak against homosexual practice be taken as being in a particular cultural context which is completely irrelevant to a Western liberal society? It is argued that in a society where homosexual partnerships are culturally acceptable these texts simply do not apply anymore. They are out of date - and so the Church should catch up with the moral developments of the society it finds itself in.

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The assumption behind this idea is that the Bible was written in a moral context when any sexual activity outside of marriage was frowned upon. However this is simply not the case. Homosexuality was widely practised in the Roman Empire as well as the preceding Greek civilisation, where it was often seen as an integral part of a young man's education. It is in this context of widespread homosexual activity that the New Testament is written.

Interestingly, the same is true of the Old Testament; the Canaanite and Assyrian civilisations around Israel had a general acceptance of homosexual practice, and yet texts such as Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13 rule out homosexual practice for those of the Hebrew religion. The fact that the other things outlawed in these texts, such as wearing clothes of mixed fibres and eating shellfish, are no longer prohibited is down to Jesus' claims to have fulfilled the requirements of the law for us. It may seem arbitrary to hold onto some of the Old Testament and not other bits, but Jesus and the apostles both go on to uphold moral law in the life of the Christian. So if these texts are not entirely culturally conditioned they must be dependent upon a moralism outside of themselves.

Nature vs nurture

While the practice of same-sex sexual activity is no innovation of Western liberal society, it appears that the view that people are 'by nature' homosexual has entered mainstream opinion more recently. The question posed to the Bible may be something along these lines: How can a loving God deny people the opportunity to be what they are by nature? Here we come back to the foundational issue in this question: identity. What makes me what I am? This may well be the crux of the area of disagreement between us.

For the Christian an individual is not purely defined on the basis of their sexual orientation or activity. It may be an important part of our self-expression but it is not the final definition point of our nature. The Bible teaches that all human beings are created in the image of God and that human life is therefore precious. The individual has significance and dignity just by being human; every human is loved by God. This may sound banal but it is actually incredibly profound. However we behave, whatever our proclivities, we are precious!

It is also important to be clear here that it is not Christians alone who may want to dispute the idea that people are gay by nature or that one's sexual orientation is in some way pre-determined. The vocal gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell, who founded OutRage!, condemned any search for a gay gene as 'the flawed theory which claims a genetic causation for homosexuality' [1]. It is likely that a whole range of factors contribute to a homosexual orientation - environmental, genetic, hormonal, behavioural. The human being still has a capacity to make choices and pursue goals. The Christian would want to affirm the dignity of every human being and make a distinction between personhood and behaviour.

When answering this question we need to be incredibly sensitive about where our friend is coming from. For many people this is a painful personal issue, while for others it is an intellectual objection to taking Christianity seriously. This does not mean that there are not meaningful answers to be given, but our manner and tone are all important. Can we convey the unconditional love of Jesus and still stand by His moral teaching that sex is given by God for expression within

marriage? God knows that this will involve pain and sacrifice not just for the person inclined towards homosexuality, but also to some heterosexuals who would love to marry but don't find a partner, and for married people who are unhappy or unfulfilled but remain faithful to their marriage vows. Can we somehow be real about the fragility of our sexuality and the complex approach required to work these issues out, whilst at the same time trying to be faithful to the teaching of the Bible? I hope so.

[1] *The Times*, 20 February 1997