

HOMOSEXUAL SIN AND THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

If there is any area of our common life today that is a source of confusion and anxiety it is the issue of homosexual behavior. This is especially true in the church. What is the genuine Christian response to what has become for many a vexing moral controversy?

The beginning point for answering that question must be Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Just as our Lord does not condemn the sinner, neither can we condemn others. Christian compassion recognizes that we are all in the same boat. We are all weak and fallen, needing mercy rather than judgment. That is why we say the church is a hospital for sinners, not a haven for saints.

Everyone is a sinner, and we are all equally welcome in Christ's faithful church, the homosexual along with everybody else. The faithful church is here as a loving support for all in our struggle against temptation. At the same time the church must insist, precisely for the sake of the faithful, on the sinfulness of yielding to temptation, including sexual temptation.

God does not distinguish between sins. And because every sin separates us from Him, He intends to separate us from our sin. Remember your catechism, "God loves the sinner, but hates the sin." We are acceptable to Him because His forgiveness and grace have the power to remove the hated sin from our life, right down to the root of our souls.

After assuring the woman taken in adultery that he did not condemn her, Jesus tells her to go, and with the aid of forgiveness sin no more (John 8:3-11). Jesus speaks with the confidence

that in forgiveness is the divine gift of self-control. Forgiveness not only heals the past, it is preventative medicine for the future.

Forgiveness contains the power for changing behavior. The moral issue of homosexuality is not being homosexual, but homosexual behavior. A homosexual does not need to be forgiven for being homosexual any more than heterosexual needs forgiveness for being heterosexual. But both will need forgiveness if they engage in sexual behavior outside of divinely ordained marriage. The standard of chastity applies equally to all (Acts 15:28, 29).

Christianity acknowledges that we may have strengths and weaknesses, inclinations and temptations, which are outside our control or ability to influence. Neither nature nor nurture is dispensed to everyone equally. But we are still held accountable for how we behave. If we cannot change the hand we have been dealt, we are responsible for how we play it.

Grace is the assistance given to us to leave our sin behind. Admittedly, amendment of life is difficult, but it has been commanded by our Lord (e.g. Matthew 5:48), and grace is the divine help, sufficient for each of us individually, to do it. As St. Augustine prayed, "Give what you command, and command what you will." One of the greatest joys of life is to discover that with God's help we really can sin less, even if it takes time and courage to accomplish it.

However, there is something new today that is the main source of confusion and consternation in the church and in public life. The Ramsey Colloquium, a group of Christian and Jewish scholars, wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*: "The new thing is a gay and lesbian movement that variously presents itself as an appeal for

compassion, an extension of civil rights to minorities, and a cultural revolution. This movement aggressively proposes radical changes in social behavior, religion, morality and law." What is now being demanded, adds John Neuhaus, "is not personal acceptance but agreement that Christian doctrine and morality are fundamentally in error."

This campaign is confronting the church with an ultimatum that homosexual behavior be removed from the category of sin, and accepted as an alternative form of normal, morally acceptable behavior. Nothing less is at stake in this than the overthrow of Christian truth and authority. Demonstrating a scandalous failure of nerve and moral force, many Christian leaders have already caved in, undermining their credibility with unconvincing declarations that biblical and doctrinal prohibitions of such behavior no longer apply.

For example, they observe that Jesus has nothing to say about homosexual behavior, so we are free, they tell us, to accept it as morally right. But Jesus has nothing to say about rape, incest, pederasty, or bestiality. Are these activities, too, morally right?

The argument from Jesus' silence ignores the unity of the moral teaching of the Bible. The Holy Spirit is the source of the moral law throughout the scriptures, Old and New Testaments alike. The Rule of Faith has never been, "Just the gospels," but the Bible as an undivided whole. As Jesus said, till heaven and earth passed away, not an iota, not a dot, would pass from the law until all is accomplished (*Matthew 5: 18*).

At the same time, we pray, in the words of one of the collects of Pentecost, that the Holy Spirit

may give us "right judgment in all things." The Holy Spirit keeps the light of Christ burning in our hearts and minds that we may see as Christians should see. We have the confirmation of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us that the commands of God are true.

The passages in the Holy Scriptures about homosexual behavior demonstrate beyond doubt that it falls under the same moral disapproval as marital infidelity. Like adultery, the Old Testament regarded homosexual behavior as punishable by death (*Leviticus. 18:22, 20:13*). While death in fact was seldom exacted, prescribing it as the maximum sentence testifies to the severity of the evil the sin produced. Not only the health and well-being of society, but its very survival depended on making distinctions between sexual right and wrong, between behaviors which supported and perpetuated the family, the irreplaceable foundation of society, and those which destroyed it.

In the New Testament, St. Paul's analysis of the fall of man includes homosexual behavior as evidence of our failure to acknowledge God as God, the sin at the bottom of all other sins (*Romans 1:18-32*). He uses this behavior as an example of destructive self-love, the sort that exchanges the truth about God for a lie, and worships and serves the creature rather than the Creator. This inversion climaxes in the deadliest error of all, calling sin good. If we no longer deplore our sin, but rather approve it, we cut ourselves off from divine forgiveness. In so doing, we commit an "unforgivable sin." It is unforgivable because in our self-approval we refuse to be forgiven. Authentic love warns us of this spiritual suicide.

If we abandon God's Word on sex we abandon His Will, which looks beyond our immediate

enjoyment and comfort to our eternal salvation. God removes guilt not by hiding it behind the illusion of a "new" moral code, but by healing it with mercy, setting Jesus' passion between our sin and its reward.

Christians believe that God, not men, made the moral rules we live by. He knows what is best for us, and what we need. To accept His commandments is to let God be God.

At the same time, we admit His demands are not easy. That is why the sacraments, the light of scripture, and self-discipline are necessary for practicing the Christian life. Without this divine help, cynicism and dissolution creep in, and with them comes the loss of hope that God can accomplish in us what He commands. Despair is the final failure to let God be God.

Your church's business is to keep before the faithful the need to stand right side up, to acknowledge God as God that we may worship Him in spirit and truth, and love one another with the same compassion and mercy that have brought us all salvation from sin.

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