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Line in the Sand

by Christina Tyson, Captain

What does it mean for Christians to love their homosexual neighbours?

When it comes to our interaction with the homosexual community, Christians have been known for hatred and bigotry. This despite the Bible's charge (in both old and new testaments) to love our neighbours as ourselves.

These days, our neighbours, family members or close friends may well be gay. This was always so, but now that society is more accepting of homosexuality those who once lived double lives or who hid 'in the closet' are free to celebrate their sexuality in the public eye. And it's in the public eye that some of the conflict between Christians and homosexuals has played out, with a heritage of mistakes and misunderstandings on both sides.

It may be convenient for Christians to say that we 'love the sinner and hate the sin'—our common defence for biblical condemnation of homosexual behaviour—but how do these words sound to homosexuals? Sexuality is such a personal and genuinely felt part of one's own self, so how does a homosexual feel when they hear those words? Surely the word they hear loudest, no matter how kindly or sincerely we speak, must be hate—not love.

Most of the time these words are said at a distance from those they are directed towards. There might be a few—and far fewer than a media hungry for conflict and sensation would have us believe—who make public protests. But generally, condemnation happens at a distance, in abstract discussions and Bible studies or from pulpits that don't readily invite rebuttal.

Christians bring biblical texts and traditions of theological understanding to the homosexual debate. We are motivated by concern for the sacrament of marriage and a determination to strengthen the family unit. But how things are unsettled when someone we care about is gay. How impotent and harsh such words then sound: to 'love the sinner but hate the sin'. If we think these words don't feel personal when heard by someone who's gay, then we need to think again.

Gay, an acronym for 'Good As You', has come a long way since the Homosexual Law Reform campaign of the mid-1980s when The Salvation Army (supported by other Christian churches) administered a New Zealand-wide petition against the reform Bill. This was an era of fear, just a few years after the start of the AIDS epidemic in which a disproportionate number of homosexuals were affected. The climate of that time cannot be separated from the bickering which ensued.

Fear and righteous indignation can be a potent mix, and ripples of enmity still trouble Salvation Army relationships with the gay community.

The debate will continue. It's problematic because polarised opinions remain—inside the church as well as outside. Some Christians maintain that the practice of homosexuality is condemned in the Bible and that homosexuals are made, not born. Extremists speak as though homosexuality is the worst kind of sin. At the other extreme are Christians who believe homosexuals are born as homosexuals. God made them, and therefore any biblical references that seem to prohibit loving homosexual practice are outdated and culturally slanted. This view offers acceptance to homosexuals in loving monogamous relationships.

A centrist perspective is that while the Bible condemns homosexual practice, it doesn't elevate this as a worse sin than adultery, pride, lying, lust, envy, drunkenness or even gluttony. Any such 'rank system' is of human making, not God's.

In all of this, we must never lose sight of the most important people—homosexuals themselves. I recall St. Augustine's words: 'Our hearts were made for you, O Lord, and they are restless until they rest in you.' Everyone—male and female, gay or straight—has spiritual needs. We must take care that attempts to prescribe moral behaviour from a Christian perspective do not ostracise people from the Church, or keep them from experiencing God's grace and love.

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Christians are supposed to be identified by love—God’s love. But the message of God’s love cannot be heard when the louder Christian message is one of bigotry and intolerance.

This is no easy issue, and perhaps my personal view that it is time to step back from dogmatic assertions of universal Christian assent is naïve, but I do not see whether or not someone is homosexual as the ultimate line in the sand. I remain far more challenged by Jesus’ ‘line in the sand’, which is for me to love God (allowing him to challenge me on every aspect of my life, including my own sexuality) and to love my neighbour.

It may be impossible to reach consensus, but I hope we can at least refuse to sacrifice love at the cost of disagreement.