

Letter to Michael

I received the following email from Michael in response to my Open Letter to the Evangelical Alliance. My reply follows it.

Hi Roy,

It is sad to hear about the whole situation that you are in. I do find it hard to accept, though, that the Christian Institute or anybody, for that matter, who stands up for traditional biblical family values, are homophobic.

They certainly do not have a hatred for gays and it would be distorting the truth if you were to say they do. You can think someone is acting wrongly and in rebellion against God and not hate them but in fact care for them so much that you want to explain where they've gone wrong.

And to say the Bible is not clear on the issue of homosexuality is surely again trying to say that something is unclear because you do not agree. You made the point that people tend to say something is clear if we agree with it but is there not also a danger of the opposite?

I feel that the Bible is quite clear of an order and purpose of creation in that God made us to function in a certain way as that is good and right. In fact was not the first thing that God found 'not good' in creation the fact that man was without a suitable helper—the helper he then creates is a woman. Is it not clear from this alone that the suitable helper for man is woman? I can't see it interpreted any other way. If there is one, please do let me know.

I feel that the Bible is clear that homosexual activity is wrong. This does not mean, however that I hate gays for it, nor do I deny that such homosexual feelings do occur. To do so would be missing a blatant fact. But just because we feel a certain way does not mean we act upon it. We are born with sinful natures in rebellion against God. If we simply followed this nature, our feelings, then we would still be on the wrong side of God—not a good situation to be in.

Thank you for your time—please do write back

yours sincerely

Michael (17)

my reply

Dear Michael,

Thank you so much for writing. Strictly speaking homophobia is not a hatred of gays, but an irrational anxiety associated with homosexuality. However, this can and frequently does express itself as a defensive hostility towards gay people. I am sure you are right when you say that many individual supporters of the Christian Institute are not homophobic. But I am afraid the political reality is that homophobia exists in our society, and all the messages that the Christian Institute (CI) sends out in its very well-funded publicity campaigns feed that prejudice.

I would suggest that the proper "image" Christians should have is as protector of the marginalised and the disadvantaged. That was certainly the way Jesus handled people like lepers and tax collectors in his day. CI is behaving towards gays exactly as the Pharisees did towards those who were held in popular contempt as "sinners".

Now about the Bible and homosexuality: you don't mention which texts you feel prove that homosexuality is wrong, but two which most people quote are found in I Corinthians 6 and I Timothy. The words used in the Greek are "arsenokoites" and "malachoi". Though often translated

as "homosexuals", they are in fact rare and uncertain in meaning. Many scholars feel their original reference is much narrower than "homosexual". For instance, it could be that they should be rendered instead as "paedophiles" and "male prostitutes". The other frequently quoted text occurs in Roman 1. Its negative thrust reflects the close association between homosexual practice and idolatry in the ancient world.

In actual fact, the modern social phenomenon of two gay men or women forming a lifelong commitment as an alternative to heterosexual marriage was probably unknown to the biblical authors. If they were aware of such relationships, they ignored them. Their comments relate solely to the kind of exploitative and commercialised sexual activity that was characteristic of pagan culture. Thus, it is perfectly possible to argue that the Bible is silent about the kind of homosexual relationships which are becoming widely accepted in Western society today; just as it is silent about many other controversial aspects of sexual behaviour like masturbation and contraception. Many gay Christian couples, however, do find a relevant biblical model for the kind of same-sex devotion they seek to express in the covenant love which is described between David and Jonathan.

The argument from the "natural" or "creation" order is very hazardous. Undoubtedly the male and female sex organs are designed to complement one another to produce babies. But sexuality means much more than reproduction. As you rightly point out, Genesis says it was given to us because "it wasn't good to be alone"—in other words the primary creation purpose of sex is inter-personal intimacy, not procreation. What are we to do when that vital loneliness-dispelling one-to-one intimacy is not found in a heterosexual relationship?

No one knows how or why homosexual orientation happens. Some feel it is part of "natural" genetic variation in the human population (like being left-handed). Some Christians see it as one of the signs of the brokenness of the natural world after the Fall (along with things like disease). A few still try to push the traditional line that it is just a personal habit or preference (like your choice of tea or coffee). But the pastoral and psychological evidence is heavily against this moralising interpretation. The experience of homosexuals is simply that they when they fall in love it is with their own sex. They no more choose to be this way than a straight person chooses to be heterosexual. It just happens that, for them, the God-ordained experience which, according to Genesis, most profoundly answers our human need for companionship, does not happen with a person of the opposite sex. Whether you compare such a condition to being left-handed or physically-handicapped, those affected have to find some coping strategy.

The only strategy CI offers is marriage or celibacy. Neither of these alternatives is pastorally sound. Neither of them works in practice for most gay men and women, a fact which a handful of honest evangelicals are at last beginning to acknowledge. That being so, some other coping strategy must be found.

I am by no means convinced that every kind of homoerotic act or desire is inherently sinful. No clear rationale is provided in Scripture for such a universal ban. But even you were right in your moral judgement on the issue, Michael, it does not follow that all gay relationships should be condemned by the Church. Sometimes in this fallen world, the "ideal" or "correct" solution to a problem just isn't available. For the sake of expediency and compassion, we have to settle instead for "the lesser evil". To use the term some writers prefer, we adopt an "optimal ethic" approach. Most Christians accept that divorce in some circumstances is rightly treated in this way. It clearly isn't ideal. There are biblical passages which some interpret to mean that it is always wrong. But neither can it be right to treat all divorcees as if they were anathematised reprobates who had committed the unforgiveable sin. Divorce is sadly sometimes the optimal alternative. Respected Christian scholars like Helmut Thielicke and Lewis Smedes have long argued that responsible homosexual relationships belong in this category too.

There is nothing necessarily "unnatural" about such "optimal" coping strategies. We don't consider it "unnatural" to wear corrective spectacles when our eyes don't work "as nature intended". We don't

consider it "unnatural" to inject ourselves with insulin when our pancreas doesn't function "normally". We don't consider it "unnatural" when straight couples engage in sexual activities that have nothing to do with making babies, but simply with their desire to share tenderness and intimacy. So why make such a fuss when gays develop their own coping strategies to deal with the hand that "Nature" has dealt them?

At the very least CI should allow that homosexuals have the right to sort out how they handle their sexuality according to their own consciences. They cause nobody any harm. They make no contribution to the "breakdown of the family" unless they are forced by social pressure into marriages that they can't sustain. They ask for nothing except equal treatment under the law and to be left alone to manage their private lives.

There is plenty of far more obvious and damaging "sin" around in our modern world. Why is CI so obsessed with the gay issue? My judgement, Michael, is that it is irrational—a manifestation of the homophobia which lies under the surface of many societies. Sadly, religions in general, and Christianity in particular, have been slow to identify the ways in which endemic secular prejudices like racism and sexism influence their teachings. Discrimination against homosexuals within the Church is just one more example of this kind of institutionalised intolerance.

One final observation. You say, Michael, that you "feel that the Bible is clear" on this issue. I am sure you are quite sincere about that, and you certainly must not suppress that conviction. You have every right to hold that homosexuality is morally wrong if that is your considered opinion. However, I believe that the intuitive interpretive clarity you experience where the Bible is concerned has been conditioned by the church culture which taught Christianity to you. A couple of hundred years ago you would have been telling me with equal earnestness that you felt the Bible clearly approved slavery. Had you lived in Germany in the 1930's you might well have quoted the Bible in support of anti-semitism. The fact is, we Christians learn *together* what the Bible is clear about. And on many ethical issues we have changed our collective mind as the years have gone by. It seems to me that we are in process of changing our mind on homosexuality too. Of course, history may prove me wrong about that. But in the meanwhile, don't you think it would be prudent for evangelicals to direct the guns of their moral outrage onto targets that everyone agrees are worthy of such assault?

There is much more I could say. This brief letter can only skim the surface of the subject, and no doubt leaves you with many dissatisfied "but's" still circling in your mind. If you want to find out more, look on my "Links" page for LGCM and write for their booklist.

I really appreciate it that you have taken the time to write and I shall add your name to my prayers.

Yours, Roy