

Love the sinner, hate the sin: A rhetorical analysis of how Christians talk about homosexuality

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Introduction

Homosexuality has been a controversial issue within the church, and it “remains a potent and divisive issue that is fracturing congregations” (Usher, 2007, p. 14). The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) is a prime example of this today. In a church wide assembly, the denomination accepted a statement allowing practicing homosexual clergy who are in monogamous relationships. The reaction to the statement has prompted some members to leave their churches and there is even talk about splitting the denomination because of the issue. It is often clear where people stand in the issue of homosexuality.

While the ELCA has voted to accept practicing homosexual clergy, there are other churches and congregations who have spoken very loudly against homosexuality. Fred Phelps has led the members of the Westboro Baptist Church on over 41,000 demonstrations since 1991 against what they call the “fag lifestyle of soul-damning, nation-destroying filth” (Phelps, 2009, np). Proudly bearing signs that say “God Hates Fags” or “Fags die, God laughs” among other hate-filled sayings, the Baptist minister and church members have drawn national attention. While this example shows an extreme opinion and reaction to homosexuality, the attitude may be more prevalent in the church than we would like to admit. “It is important to realize that this expression of God’s hate, this expression of rancor toward those participating in unlawful sexual practices, comes not only from the fringe ... This hatred is mainstream ... And there is something about homophobia that arouses a deep religious fervor that extends the more moderate spectrum of contemporary evangelical groups” (Cobb, 2006, p. 3). Even if the attitude is not truly in the church, many people believe that Christians are anti-gay. “When most of us engage

homosexuals, we come across as arrogant, self-righteous, and uncaring—the opposite of how Jesus engaged outsiders” (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007, p. 93). Homosexuality is a controversial and important issue for the Church today, and one aspect of the issue that must be addressed is how we talk about homosexuality.

Method of Inquiry

My methodology for this essay is a rhetorical criticism, where I will weave through different sources and piece together a critical analysis of how the church has addressed homosexuality, especially the use of the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin.” To provide possible explanations as to why the dialogue has failed, I will incorporate several communication theories in my analysis, including Kenneth Burke’s logology, George Herbert Mead’s Symbolic Interactionism, W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen’s Coordinated Management of Meaning, and Muzafer Sherif’s Social Judgment Theory.

I hope that in piecing together this essay, I will not simply add fuel to an already hot fire in the discussion of homosexuality. I recognize that I come to this topic with a bias and my own personal convictions and experiences. I come from a Missouri Synod Lutheran background and have discussed the issue with several professors at Concordia, an LCMS, Midwestern private university. I have not had any first-hand experience with having homosexual desires or struggles, but I have a good friend that is a professing gay Christian who has often confided in me. While I come to this topic with certain beliefs and experiences, my prayer is that I will come closer and be drawn closer to the Truth that is found in Christ and I pray that He will take away any lies that I have believed or read as I have searched out this topic.

Theoretical Background

One communication idea that I find very important and useful for studying the discussion on homosexuality is an idea that is common in several communication theories. The idea is that the language we use shapes how we view the world. Kenneth Burke was one theorist who wrote about this idea, saying that human reality is rooted in the use of symbols, especially language. He said that how people speak affects their “perceptions, social organization, beliefs, attitudes, and values. . . . Our motives for reacting to any situation arise not from the situation itself but from what we *call* the situation” (Brummett, 1999, p. 741). Burke believed that the choice of language can “conceal or reveal, magnify or minimize, simplify or complexify, elevate or degrade, link or divide. . . . But language also “thinks for us”: it shapes our experiences of the world, our communication of those experiences, and their subsequent validation by others. Said Burke, the most important and most accessible *facts* about human beings are not to be found in what they do, or in their biologies and chemistries (as some maintain), but in their language, and in what they *say* about what they do” (Simons, nd, p. 4).

Burke was not the only theorist to write about the importance of language in shaping perceptions of reality. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity looks specifically at how a culture’s language can also affect how the people in that culture think or act (Griffin, 2002). George Herbert Mead also taught about creating social realities using language, which was captured by his student Herbert Blumer in the theory Symbolic Interactionism. This theory explains that “humans act toward people or things on the basis of the meanings they assign to those people or things . . . meaning arises out of the social interaction that people have with each other . . . an individual’s interpretation of symbols is modified by his or her own thought processes” (Griffin, 2002, pp. 56-58). Two of the practical applications for this theory include

looking at the effects of name-calling and why it is damaging, and the self-fulfilling prophecy and how the view other people have of you can affect your view of yourself (Griffin, 2002).

Another theory linked to this idea of the importance of language is Coordinated Management of Meaning by W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen. They believed that “persons-in-conversation co-construct their own social realities and are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create” (Griffin, 2002, p. 66). This theory encompasses more than just the language as it also looks at speech acts, the episode, relationship, self, and culture in the back-and-forth interaction of people in conversation. The name comes from the coordination of fitting together stories lived with stories told, and when the two people in conversation come to the same meaning, it displays the management of meaning (Griffin, 2002). This theory also touches on dialogic communication, which “means speaking in a way that makes it possible for others to listen, and listening in a way that makes it possible for others to speak” (Griffin, 2002, p. 77).

While not as closely related to the way language shapes our realities, one communication theory about influence will be useful when looking at the issue of homosexuality. Social Judgment Theory by Muzafer Sherif explains how there are three attitude zones: latitude of acceptance, latitude of rejection, and latitude of noncommitment. Depending on how important the issue is to a person affects how highly ego-involved they are. The theory tries to guide someone in making statements in order to influence another person’s beliefs. If a statement falls in a person’s latitude of noncommitment, they are more likely to accept it than if they were to hear a statement falling in the latitude of rejection, which could actually drive them further away from the position presented. The higher the ego-involvement is, the smaller the latitudes of non-commitment and acceptance and the larger the latitude of rejection (Griffin, 2002).

Keeping these theories in mind while looking at the issue of homosexuality and how it is discussed in the church will help us to analyze how effective communication has been and why it may have been ineffective.

A stunted discussion

While homosexuality has been a controversial issue in the church, the discussion about homosexuality often seems to be silenced and stopped. Instead of entering conversations asking questions and searching for truth, I believe that many Christians have been caught limiting the conversation by the language used and being unwilling to participate.

The first problem comes in how language has been used. Unfortunately, when we begin discussing homosexuality, even within the church, it often comes down to two sides: anti-gay and pro-gay. Within the church, the anti-gay side has presented a case on why homosexuality is against Biblical teaching, citing verses such as Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27, or 1 Corinthians 6:9. The pro-gay side within the church has included people like the Reverend Mel White, one of the founders of the organization Soulforce, a gay Christian organization. He attempts to reconcile the Christian faith with belief that homosexuality is not a sin. As Chavez (2004) points out, Soulforce and evangelical churches have typically been set up as opposing sides, setting forth the pro-gay and anti-gay sides. There are several problems with setting up the dialogue, including how the naming oversimplifies the issue, allowing false dichotomies, and how it sets up the dialogue as “us-vs.-them” rather than people with a common identity in Christ.

The first problem is that the opinions and beliefs about homosexuality vary widely, but we often depict it as two distinct sides. I do not believe that I am the only person who has been guilty of viewing the issue as two-sided, with one camp opposed to homosexuality and one camp

accepting of homosexuality. However, the issue is much more complex than that. There are many different views on homosexuality, ranging from the moderate to extreme. In a personal interview, Dr. Russ Moulds, Professor of Education at Concordia, called the people involved in the discussion “constituents” or “stakeholders,” showing that it is more than one or two sides. Even with what one might consider a “side” there are multiple viewpoints. He gave the examples the militant homosexual who would like to see homosexuals a protected group of people deserving political attention; the silent homosexual who simply wants to live peacefully; the distressed homosexual who may be frustrated with his or her desires; and the person who may have homosexual orientation but refuses to act on those desires based on his or her beliefs as a Christian. Moulds said there are many other constituents who may identify with or understand homosexuality because of personal experience. Other constituents may include people who believe homosexuality is acceptable but is not their orientation, those who believe homosexuality is wrong and may desire to minister to homosexuals, and people with extreme hatred for homosexuality. This listing is not intended to be exhaustive or even explain completely a person who may identify with one of those labels. Humans are complex creatures and there are many different views and experiences about homosexuality. Limiting the conversation to two sides limits the understanding we can have of who we are talking to by allowing us to assume that we already know what the other person believes when that is most likely not the case. Using Burke’s idea of language, we can see how when we talk about homosexuality and a debate on the topic as two-sided, then we are limited to understanding it as only two sides, which is not an accurate reflection of reality. If we force people into one side or another, we will run into problems when views may be somewhere in the middle. It is also difficult because all of the views, from moderate to extreme, are lumped together and associated together. The problems from the

extreme, such as hate crimes or hate speech, may be blamed on those who have never spoken out in such a way.

One example of this in the homosexuality debate, beyond even the naming of two sides, is the argument that homosexuals are either born that way and it must therefore be moral; or they choose to be homosexual and it is immoral. Chavez (2004) recognized that the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) people are rarely narrow enough to understand in only two options. She wrote that Soulfence is limiting their scope and audience by accepting a typically conservative Christian binary in the born vs. choice debate. She wrote that by accepting the terms of the evangelic Christian church, “Soulforce may not be representative of the experiences of many people it purports to represent” (Chavez, 2004, p. 258). While coming from a different view, Assistant Professor of Theology Dirk Reek and Assistant Professor of Theology Charles Blanco, each in separate personal interviews, explained how Christians do not have to accept the argument that if homosexuality is “nature” and not “nurture” then it must be God’s will. They cited other sins that are genetic, such as alcoholism, or common to men, such as lust. These sins may be present from birth, but that does not mean that they are an accurate reflection of what God intended.

Using the language of two sides to the argument also leads to the problem of the dialogue becoming an argument, an “us-versus-them” mentality. Especially with terms like “anti-gay” or “pro-gay” we can get “othering” people and making outgroups. “The process of othering creates individuals, groups and communities that are deemed to be less important, less worthwhile, less consequential, less authorized and less *human* based on historically situated markers of social formation such as race, class, gender, sexuality and nationality” (Yep as quoted in Mitra, 2008, p. 7-8). When we view homosexuals as the other group, it is easier to

allow the hatred or homophobia that has been pervasive in our nation. Kinnanan and Lyons (2007) also include a quote from an interviewee named Peter. “Many people in the gay community don’t seem to have issues with Jesus but rather with those claiming to represent him today. It’s very much an “us-versus-them” mentality, as if a war has been declared. Of course each side thinks the other fired the opening shot” (91). As Christians, it should be a red flag when we see the “us-versus-them” mentality because Christ makes it clear that we are supposed to engage the people in the world like He did, not be set apart and consider ourselves highly like the Pharisees in His day.

To make matters worse, the opposing sides often view the other as the “pollutant” (Nixon, 2008, p. 609). “One can repetitively hear the distinguishable features of the Jeremiad today ... The national, heterosexual family, a religious tradition—If not the core tradition of the nation with civil and legal enfranchisements—Is perceived to be under attack by the nontraditional homosexuals” (Cobb, 2006, p. 8). For conservative Christians, the thought of allowing homosexuality to go un-condemned would be compromising the church’s teachings. From a different view, pro-gay Christians believe that the church has been missing the historic and contextual readings of the typical anti-gay passages, and that they need to be open to new interpretation (White, nd).

Creating an outgroup also leads into CMM and how participants in the conversation can only continue in the conversation when they manage the meanings between them. If the participants never agree on any stories told, they cannot continue on in the conversation to a place of agreement to live any stories together. There will always be tension as they both fight to make ground with the other person. This has been the problem in the homosexuality debate, and because it is often an issue of faith, the tension can be even stronger. "When an argument is

based on faith, the believer can never be wrong." (Usher, 2007, p. 10). People in conversation who are unwilling to budge because it is a faith issue for both can lead to very messy and heated debates if they are not careful. "Such persons believe that they possess universal, non-contingent truth which is revealed to them by inerrant readings of the Christian Bible. Belief in inerrancy entails adherence to divinely sanctioned moral standards, and so conservative Christians cannot easily tolerate beliefs and practices that violate (their readings of) biblical data" (Crowley, 2007, p. 102). "Some of the same students who are open to understanding sexism and racism close down when we discuss heterosexism. They justify their lack of openness by appealing to 'my religion' (Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007, p. 151).

Many of the people involved consider a successful discussion one where they already knew the answer and convince the other person to convert to their belief or opinion. For example, students on a Soulforce "freedom ride" traveled from school to school to create dialogue with students at Christian colleges. However, their conversations started with an "intolerant demand for tolerance (Usher, 2007, p. 4)" and a preconceived view of what people should learn about how the Bible should be read. "For evangelical gay Christians, reconciliation is conversion to the 'Truth' that god accepts gays and lesbians" (Usher, 2007, p. 4). In another instance, a lesbian professor of human sexualities wrote "On some issues, there is no common ground: it is not about tolerating the 'gay thing'; It is about taking a pro-LGBTQ stance" (Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007, p. 164). If this demand for conversion and false sense of dialogue occurs in those who are "pro-gay" then it has definitely happened on the other side as well, as seen in a conversation between two men of faith who disagree about the issue of homosexuality. "Phil attempts to spring an identity trap when his questions imply that it is not possible to hold both liberal views about sexualities and be a representative of the church. There is no fruitful

discussion about sexuality between these two, simply a statement of position and consequence, received in silence by the other person. Such silence is not neutral, but tends to support the heteronormative status quo (Sparkes as cited in Nixon, 2008, p. 608).

Getting to a point where stories can be told and lived together may be even more difficult in our culture. Reek described several problems in our society and culture today that stop conversations before they can continue to any progress.

1. We have failed in critical thinking skills.
2. Our postmodern culture leads us to defend our own case without an overarching standard, resulting in justifying anything we may want without thinking critically about it.
3. We have a narcissistic culture.
4. We have a sense of anxiety when we meet people who are different from us, which can invite questions of power and competition.
5. A common metaphysical understanding is that reality is in nature, so what is in nature must be willed by God.

The lack of critical thinking combined with the postmodern understanding means that people may be presented with enough relevant information to logically want to make a change of opinions, but the desire to hold onto a personal truth and refusal to concede any facts or arguments means that even if a sound argument is made, it can easily be ignored. This furthers the difference between the stories told and the stories lived.

An important part of the discussion of homosexuality within the church is what Scripture has to say. This, too, shows how sides have been named and a basis of disagreement has prevented any fruitful discussions from occurring. Blanco, who teaches Interpretation of the

Pauline Epistles, Interpretation of the Gospels, and Greek language classes, explained the differences in interpreting Scripture and how it affects beliefs. At this point, there is a back-and-forth debate as to whether homosexuality is against the Bible or not.

“If you presuppose that the scriptures are the inspired word of God, then we would presuppose a coherency of message and not be faced with lots of contradictions. If you presuppose that its of human origin, and maybe the spirit had a little bit of work involved with the writing of it so there is some good and also some fallible human stuff, then you presume that you are supposed to pick and choose,” said Blanco. The implications of the first view is that, when faced with verses that don’t make sense or don’t seem to fit together, we can use scripture to interpret scripture and try to find how they fit together because God was always directing the words. However, if the second understanding is the starting point, using other scripture to interpret a verse doesn’t make a lot of sense. If it is human in origins, why would we use Paul’s writing to interpret what Moses wrote? Instead, raising doubts about the context or meaning of words can cast doubt on the truth and application of that particular verse.

Even for people who say the Bible is infallible, it may not mean that they believe it is without errors. Around the scientific revolution, people began questioning the infallibility of the Bible, such as how verses seem to claim that the sun moves around the earth, not the other way around. They began saying that the Bible is infallible in what it is intended to teach. This became a slippery slope when applied because the interpreter, when approached with a verse they do not like, can say that the Bible is not really meant to be taken seriously at a that point because it is not a book about that topic. White describes the problem and shows how people had used Scripture to declare Galileo a heretic when he said the universe is sun-centered, not earth-centered. The argument is that the Bible is not a book about astronomy, it is a book about God,

so those verses are wrong. However, Blanco explained that with the first view, that the Bible is completely true and without fault, we recognize that all truth is God's truth, whether it is about His Son or about the stars. Our understanding of those verses now is phenomenological; even today we say that the sun rises and sun sets while fully believing that the earth does the moving, not the sun. We have been tripped up because the way we talk about things does not always accurately reflect reality, but in this instance, we have the education and background to understand something different than what we say.

Because of the loss of meaning with the word infallible, inerrant is often used now to describe the Bible. However, this word too has limitations. It sounds like the Bible is a mathematic document, as though one could prove the statements in the Bible like geometric problems. We must not forget that the Bible is a piece of literature, and thus, there are times that the words are not to be taken only at face value. For example, reading that Jesus was the Lamb of God doesn't mean that he had white wool and black hooves.

Another element of the discussion is how truth is revealed over time. Blanco explained two understandings of progressive revelation. In accordance with the first view of inerrant scripture, progressive revelation means that truth has always and will always be the same, but we understand it differently. Many of the laws in the Old Testament are seen as shadows of something to come. While in that time, the people had only the shadow to look to. Now we look to Christ instead of all of the law because we see Him as the one who cast the shadow. Jesus doesn't simply overturn the law and say it is no longer applicable; He is the fulfillment of the law.

These issues can all be seen in the discussion of homosexuality within the church. Mel White in his pamphlet "What the Bible says – and doesn't say – about homosexuality" is a

resource that represents at least one view on the verses about homosexuality from the belief that the verses do not condemn homosexuality. Although he doesn't explicitly explain his beliefs as Blanco did, it seems that he has an understanding of the Bible that it is infallible when talking about God, but not about human sexuality. This difference in the infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible is a belief that could cause two people who are talking about the verses to come to a standstill in the conversation when they can't even agree on how the Bible should be interpreted. Another difference that could prevent discussion is how truth is "revealed" over time. White wrote as a third premise to his argument that "we must be open to new truth from scripture" (White, nd, p. 6), and his fourth premise is that "The Bible is a book about God—not about human sexuality" (White, nd, p. 8). He cites verses in the Old Testament that we no longer observe today, such as stoning adulterers (Deut. 22:13-21). In another section, White points out that Old Testament law, like not eating pork or not wearing clothing with mixed fibers, is also not observed, so we can throw out these verses that are apparently no longer applicable. According to Blanco, instead of ignoring these verses, we look to see how they were fulfilled or affirmed by Christ. An example of a fulfilled law would be the sacrificial system, while an affirmed law would be "do not commit adultery," which Jesus actually affirmed and expanded its meaning to include lust in the sermon on the mount, according to Blanco. The list can continue of examples of how the very basis of belief is different, preventing substantial conversations.

Love the sinner, hate the sin

In an analysis of how the church speaks about homosexuality, the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" is an important phrase to evaluate. The phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" has been attributed to Augustine when he wrote "With love for mankind and hatred of sins"

(Knowles, nd, np). In modern times, the phrase is attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, according to Moulds. It has become a popular phrase to use and is often seen as a Christian guideline on how to react to someone who is sinning. While perhaps intended to aid Christians, the phrase has been ineffective for several reasons. The overarching reason, in my opinion, is linked to the idea that the language we use affects how we view the world, and in this case, it has cast too simple a shadow on the issue.

One reason the phrase has fallen short is because “pro-gay” Christians do not view homosexuality as a sin. When approached with the idea that homosexuality is a sin, one could accept the phrase but reject the idea that they are part of the group of “sinners.” This belief may vary for different people, but White outlines his faith in his pamphlet on Soulforce’s Web site. He explains how he reconciles the Bible verses to his life as a homosexual, explaining that he believes the verses have been misinterpreted in condemning homosexuality (White, nd).

Not only do “pro-gay” Christians view homosexuality as compatible with their faith, but they also identify themselves with their homosexuality. Conservative Christians try to separate homosexuality from the person by using terms such as “homosexual behavior” or “homosexual acts,” but for homosexuals, the behavior and act can’t be separated from the person. "By disassociating the link between behaviour and identity, the Lords do not acknowledge that, for a large proportion of society, the two are inextricably linked" (Baker, 2004, p. 103). Baker defines identity as being either “intrapsychic” because it comes from within and is fixed and stable, or “acquired” because it comes from an internalized adoption of socially imposed or constructed roles. To give examples of these things, an intrapsychic identity would be like being a man because of the genitalia. The acquired identity of being a man would be in how one talks or dresses according to the culture, and identity does not need to be active to be true. For example, a

doctor is identified as a doctor even at the grocery store when away from the practice (Baker, 2004). With this in mind, homosexual identity may be viewed by some as intrapsychic or acquired, but for many homosexuals, it is not an identity that exists only when they are in homosexual acts, but it is an identity that is true at all times. To separate the two would be taking away a major way of defining oneself. For others, homosexuality may be an identity that is forced onto people because society insists that the people identify themselves as such. "Were I a heterosexual male, I would spend comparatively little time calling myself heterosexual. But the heterosexual society in which I live has continually forced me to call myself gay" (Schreiber as cited in Mitra, 2008, p. 22). Whether it was a personal decision or one forced by society, gay Christians must deal with the difficulty of balancing being homosexual and being a Christian. Where a heterosexual Christian can identify solely as a Christian and find identity in Christ, the homosexual Christian may have to fight much harder to get to that same place. The idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy may be helpful to remember at this point, because forcing an identity onto people through actions or words and lumping varying beliefs, from extreme to moderate, may frustrate people and cause them to want to give up before even starting. For example, if a professor expects someone to fail and the student perceives that, the student may get frustrated and simply live up to the teacher's poor expectations. If Christians engage homosexuals as though they are far different and unnatural, they may perceive that view, which can affect how they act or how the Christian views them.

In talking about homosexuality, the church has also approached the topic as though homosexuals are the problem. In doing so, we have objectified the people and have thus silenced them. "It silences GLB individuals by objectifying them; it transforms their sexuality and awareness of it into a problem that others encounter and others must solve" (Lynch, 2005, p.

398). We never invite homosexuals to be part of the conversation (Lynch, 2005, p. 384). Bennett also addresses this issue and points out that in objectifying and othering homosexuals, we don't encourage liberation from homosexuality but rather, self-loathing (Bennett, 2003, p. 345). From my perspective as a conservative Christian, it is easy to "other" people who have homosexual identities or orientations, talking about them rather than talking to them. I'm sure this has the potential to happen from other points of view as well, but the problem still remains that talking at other people or about other people is not the same thing as talking to or talking with people. This difference in how we talk impacts how the conversations proceed, as people who feel talked at or objectified may be placed on the defensive from the beginning, hindering fruitful conversation once again.

As said before, how we talk about issues will impact how we view those issues or view reality. In this case, I believe a problem with the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" is that it is a simple, one line phrase trying to solve a complex issue. After talking to Moulds, Reek, and Blanco, I believe that while the idea may not be directly from the Bible, the concept is good in that it does attempt to help us understand a difference between law and gospel. The problem, however, is that when we use the phrase, we often wonder how to react to homosexuality and we say this one phrase, and the conversation ends. It is deceptive to use the phrase because it sounds as though it should be easy to react to homosexuality. Even for people who understand the complexity of the issue, it can be easy to forget because the short phrase makes it sound so easy. In Kinnaman and Lyons (2007), one person outside the Christian faith said, "Christianity has become bloated with blink followers who would rather repeat slogans than actually feel true compassion and care. Christianity has become marked and streamlined into a juggernaut of fearmongering that has lost its own heart" (15).

Because there are at least two sides of this issue, people want to see different sides of the phrase emphasized. Conservative church members have often erred on the side of “hating the sin” while GLBTQ members of the churches want to see “loving the sinner” focused on, even if they don’t call themselves sinners because of homosexuality. Any efforts to stay the middle ground and proclaim both love for sinner and hate for the sin ends up in multiple constituents unsatisfied. "While the church still advocates the stance of 'Love the sinner, hate the sin,' the institutional rhetoric now emphasizes the hatred of the sin" (Lynch, 2005, p. 383). After a document in the Catholic church was written to parents of GLB, some of the church leadership "forced the committee to revise the letter to emphasize the church's condemnation of homosexuality and to explicitly claim in a set of footnotes that discrimination against homosexuals in housing and employment was legally and morally acceptable" (Lynch, 2005, p. 384). Social judgment theory may be a helpful theory to evaluate some of the problems with trying to apply one part of the phrase more heavily than the other. Especially because many people are highly ego-involved in the issue of homosexuality, either because they have personal experience or strong opinions because of faith, people will be especially sensitive to hearing attacks or perceiving attacks from others. Even if an attack is not explicitly said, a statement that falls close to the line between the latitude of noncommitment and latitude of rejection will be perceived as more extreme than it really is. Every statement uttered has the potential to push people farther away from the intended belief.

Unfortunately, the church is full of sinners, and because of that, we have not always acted out in love. We don’t know how to love perfectly and have turned the church into an unsafe place for homosexuals. "Churches are likely to remain places of danger . . . [LGBT people] will need safe places in which to learn to distinguish the voice of Christ from the alien cultural

commitments of the rest of the Church. They are likely to experience the Church of Christ as a garden infested with unseen dangers, or as a poisoned well" (Vasey as cited in Nixon, 2008, p. 609). We have thrown Bible verses at each other, pointing to each other's sin. We have tried reparative therapy to change people, leading to psychological damage in some (Bennett, 2003, p. 345). We may say that homosexual is a sin like any other, but we often view it as a gross and worse sin (Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007, p. 163). We even use the phrase "love the sinner, hate the sin" as an excuse to hate and not show Christ's love. "Not only is this hurtful for the LGBTQ person to hear, but it is also harmful for the LGBTQs as a group. This rhetoric makes it possible for hate crimes to occur. Any speech that says that homosexuality is an abomination is, therefore, an enabling condition for hate-crimes against LGBTQ people that permits *others* to commit those crimes. Labeling LGBTQ people as sinners makes them vulnerable to potential violence at the hands of someone claiming to be backed by God or the church" (Deeb-Sossa & Kane, 2007, p. 162).

What also worries me is that in our effort to focus on the sin of homosexuality and emphasize how it is "unnatural," we may have members of the church who don't know how to get help. The word unnatural may be making people who don't understand or embrace their homosexual desires feel embarrassed, ashamed, or alone. While no sin is uncommon to man and one that our High Priest Jesus can understand, the way we talk about homosexuality makes it sound as though there is special condemnation for the homosexual, even if never practiced. One Christian interviewee in Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) said, "If my church friends hear me talk sympathetically about gays, they get bent out of shape about it. It's interesting that our antennae don't go up when people admit to gluttony, lying, using pornography, or getting a divorce, but we seem fixated on homosexuality" (105). Blanco also touched on this point, and said that

picking any sin and saying it is worse than another is pride and goes against the gospel because it essentially uninvites a group of people from the gospel that was intended for all people.

Is there a solution?

The phrase may not have to be thrown out simply because it has not always been effective, but perhaps we may need to expand and explain the complexity of that when we discuss the phrase. Oberdeck (2005) wrote that we often water down the law, which is what happens “with the oft-used statement ‘God hates the sin, but God loves the sinner.’ Both statements are undoubtedly true, but placing the two together results in a falsehood, at least to the ears of an uninformed culture” (p. 400). Instead, Oberdeck proposes adding clarification. “A. GOD HATES THE SIN A1. And condemns the sinner to hell. B1. God sent his Son to die so the sinner can be forgiven, and B. (BUT LOVES THE SINNER)” (p. 400). Blanco said that we often face this problem because we need to talk about more than one issue at a time. He used an analogy of a constellation, where each star represents a different part of the conversation. You can’t take away one of the stars and still see the full constellation. Similarly, when we talk about homosexuality within the church, we need to talk about more than just law or just gospel. It includes law, gospel, how the church in the past has responded, how people have been hurt, how today’s culture views the world, what scripture says, how scripture is interpreted, etc. Again and again, we must reiterate that it is a complex issue.

Homosexuality is a complex issue, and one way to acknowledge the complexity (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007) is to get to know GLBTQ people. Getting to know actual people can help us understand that it is not a cut and dry issue, but there are amazing people behind the labels we have assigned. It is also important to note that we cannot exclude the opposing side

from the conversation. "Studies on prejudice indicate that greater interaction with gay and lesbian people might reduce prejudice (Mitra, 2008, p. 15).

Communication will be key if we want to get anywhere. It is not easy and I may not have always been successful even in this paper, but we have to recognize how our words and shape reality and even oppress people. We should not start the conversation with a fallacy of poisoning the water, where we assume that we know what the other side will say before they say it, or even accuse them of saying something simply because they hold a certain belief (Reek). "Let nobody presume to announce in advance what we are going to learn before we come to learn it! That, indeed, is the mark of a false prophet!" (O'Donovan, 2003, p. 24).

If we hope to get anywhere in a discussion within the church, we have to start where we agree on some of the stories told so we can go through life together and coordinate the stories lived. We must start with our identity in Christ. "Let us begin, then, from a systematic question, the question of identity. What can be meant by this term, and can there be such a thing as a homosexual identity? ...We ask ourselves 'Who am I', 'What am I?' and the term 'identity' serves to sum up the answers we reach...Our identities, the Gospel tells us, are given us in Christ risen from the dead; they are to be found within that lordly humanity which stands before God in the 'last Adam'. Other identities, whether national, class, family or whatever, are relative and secondary" (O'Donovan, 2003, p. 29).

The church has, in the past, been the most dangerous place for the issue of homosexuality to be discussed. If we want to have any meaningful conversations, we must not be content with repeating a slogan but must strive to seriously show Christ's love. People need to feel safe in the church, not hated or feared. "One thing I have noticed is that the more comfortable I have

become in talking about gay issues in the classroom, the more students seem comfortable. They will discuss gay issues *if* it feels safe enough to do so" (Nelson as cited in Mitra, 2008, p. 23).

Blanco brought up a very important point to me. Even with this issue of homosexuality, we can see how God works all things for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. It may be difficult to see how good can come such a messy situation, but the conversations about homosexuality may reveal other things within the church. We must call sin a sin, but that means that it is wrong to single out any sin and point fingers. We also must confront how the church has reacted to other sins. Why have we ignored scripture that says divorce is wrong? Why do we not take pride or gluttony more seriously? AIDS is viewed as the punishment for homosexuality, but what, then, is adult-onset diabetes for obesity? We may have a long road ahead of us in dealing with the issue of homosexuality, but in the process we must not be afraid to also come under the scrutiny of the law, so that we may once again be put to death with our sins and raised anew in Christ Jesus.

Conclusion

Several communication theories have aided in analyzing how the church has been talking about the issue of homosexuality. Unfortunately, the church has often failed to show Christ's love when we single out sin and label it as a worse sin than others. The language we use has a direct impact about how we view situations, which is why using a simple phrase like "love the sinner, hate the sin" for a complex issue like homosexuality is ineffective.

I know that this study has been limited for several reasons. For one, this is a huge and complex topic. One semester's worth of reading hardly scratches the surface on resources available that represent many different views. Another limitation was the fact that in order to

present the information, I had to use language that sometimes was limiting. I hope that in doing so, I did not offend or cause further harm.

There is much room for more research in this topic. Specific examples of how the church talks about homosexuality could be beneficial to see more clearly how communication has been ineffective. Other communication theories may be beneficial in analyzing how we talk about homosexuality, and more depth of insight can probably be added to all of these issues discussed, especially the idea of talking at each other rather than talking to or with. The issue is complex and even though there are many voices currently in the debate, I believe it can always use more people who are willing to humbly follow after Christ and show His love to others. As Blanco said, “We must be willing to hear and listen and proceed humbly.”

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