

LINE ON LIFE

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What Christians Believe about Homosexuality *

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From what we hear or read in the news, many of us believe that contemporary Christians all have a similar view of homosexuality. However, most of the news concerns an extremely vocal segment of Christians.

Within Christianity, there seems to be a great range of philosophical views with many topics – including homosexuality. In a 1980 article, theologian James Nelson described four viewpoints of homosexuality currently held by various Christian denominations. The first is a **rejecting-punitive** view. This view not only completely rejects homosexuality, but espouses punitive action against gays. Historically, this has been the predominant view for Christianity. For centuries, Christianity has condemned homosexuals, kicking them out of the church. The clergy promoted persecution of gays, including killing homosexuals when they were discovered. Many gays were burned at the stake. (The bundles of sticks that were tied together to be ignited were called "*faggots*". This is where this negative term for homosexuals originated.)

The rejecting-punitive view relies on literal interpretation of selected portions of the bible. In 1976, a statement – issued from the Biennial Clergy-Laity Congress meeting of Greek Orthodox Church – illustrates this view.

"Thus the functions of the sexual organs of a man and a woman... are ordained by nature to serve one particular purpose, the procreation of human kind. Therefore, any and all uses of human sex organs for purposes other than those ordained by creation, runs contrary to the nature of things decreed by God.... The Orthodox Church believes that homosexuality should be treated by society as an immoral and dangerous perversion and by religion as a sinful failure. In both cases correction is called for. Homosexuality should be accorded the confidential medical and psychiatric facilities by which they can be helped to restore themselves to a self-respecting sexual identity that belongs to them by God's ordinance."

Another position advocated by some Christians is **rejecting-nonpunitive**. Like the first view, homosexuality is seen as inherently unnatural and must be condemned. However, because of Christ's grace, they believe that homosexuals should not be condemned. In contrast to the rejecting-punitive view, they support the civil rights of homosexuals. The persecution of gays is viewed as unjust and hypocritical.

Qualified acceptance is a third view. They still view homosexuality as a sin. However, they also acknowledge that our current medical and psychological science can do little to help homosexuals to change (assuming they would want to change). This position indicates – if homosexuals cannot refrain from sexual activities – they should be in fully committed relationships.

Full acceptance is the fourth major theological position among Christians. This position views sexuality as an important ingrained part of human love. Ethical sexual relationships are those that include commitment, trust, tenderness, and respect for the partner. This viewpoint does not judge the relationship differently because of the sex of the partner.

When advocating this full acceptance position, these churches give their full blessing to sexual unions in which partners vow lifelong commitment to each other. Gay church members are welcomed to all aspects of the congregation. They can even be ordained as ministers. (The United Church of Christ was the first American denomination to have an openly gay person ordained in 1972. Four years later, the same thing occurred in the Episcopalian church.) Those with the full acceptance position also support the civil rights of gays and lesbians. However, this view is still held by only a minority of Christians.

Those who reject others merely because their beliefs are different have an egocentric fallacy or an ethnocentric fallacy.

Those who have strongly held viewpoints often not only reject contrasting ideas, but they also reject the people who hold them. Those who are rejected may be called "*un-Christian*", "*crazy*", "*the devil's spawn*" or some other negative label. This labeling is related to two different fallacies.

The first is an **egocentric fallacy**. ("*Ego*" means "*I*".) This is the incorrect belief that our own personal values and experiences are shared by other people in general. We use our beliefs and values to judge the behavior of others. In expressing these beliefs, people who have this fallacy typically remark that, "*People believe....*" rather than, "*I believe....*" In attributing the belief to "*people*" rather than just ourselves, we imply that most others think the way we do. Labeling this as a fallacy does not indicate our values are unimportant. However, since our values are personal, they may – *or may not* – be shared by others. Unless you conduct a scientific poll, you cannot be sure what others believe. (Even with scientific polls, problems can occur if you assume that people will *always* tell you what they truly believe.)

The **ethnocentric fallacy** or **ethnocentrism** is the belief that our own group – race, religion, ethnic group, country or culture – is innately superior to others. Stereotypes of other groups reinforce ethnocentrism.

We like to have support for our ideas, beliefs and values. To a great extent, we choose friends because they think the way we do. If our ideas, beliefs and values are strongly held, we feel threatened if someone expresses contradictory ones. Rather than closely examining both the contradictory ideas and our own, it is easier to reject the persons or

groups who hold these ideas. We will tend to see "*them*" as being less worthwhile than "*us*" (people who support our views). By giving "*them*" negative labels, it seems to justify our unthinking rejection of their ideas. This is the start of prejudice and hate.

If we allow ourselves to get to know "*them*", often we find that they are very much like "*us*". Don't reject others merely because they don't share all of our ideas, beliefs or values. ***Stop the hate!***

* Adapted from Robert Crooks and Karla Baur's *Our Sexuality*, Brooks/Cole Publishers, 1996, page 254, and Bryan Strong, Christine DeVault and Barbara Werner Sayad's *Core Concepts in Human Sexuality*, Mayfield Publishing, 1996, pages 42-43.