

CAN SEXUAL ORIENTATION BE CHANGED?

'Accept them as they are'

The July 25 Forum pro/con debate on the question, "Can Sex Orientation be Changed," may give your readers the mistaken impression that this is a clear-cut either/or issue, Christian faith or scientific fact.

Ninie O'Hara seems to say that, based on the Bible, the Christian view is that all homosexual behavior is sinful, that homosexuality itself is a mistaken choice which can be changed, and that Christian teaching or conversion can effect that change.

V. Gayle Spears cites research and policy positions which seem to indicate that homosexuality is not a personal choice and that homosexuality as such should not be branded some kind of sickness needing healing. Since she does not specifically condemn any type of homosexual behavior, some people might assume that "science" says this behavior is OK.

As an ordained Christian minister and Bible teacher, and a member of Louisville's Religious Leaders for Fairness, I wish to introduce a more nuanced position avoiding absolutism on either side.

I have heard the personal testimony of a man who said he once was homosexual with up to seven different partners. But through Christian conversion he changed and is now happily married and the father of children. Therefore, I would never claim that no homosexual can change.

On the other hand, I have heard the personal testimony of many people of homosexual orientation, men and women, who say that as they grew up they realized that homosexuality was their orientation apart from any choice. I have met both men and women who said they tried every means to change, including religious and psychiatric counseling, without success. Several married and had families, in the vain hope this would be effective. . . .

Ann Landers (*Courier-Journal*, April 26, 1992) reported that the vast majority of gays said they had no choice. One wrote: "I've been beaten

up, spat on and discriminated against in the job market. Who would choose this?" Still, most of the 75,000 who wrote to Landers had apparently accepted the situation: by a margin of 30-1, they said they're glad to be gay.

Religious Leaders for Fairness agree with Spears' statement that homosexual orientation is highly resistant to change. We should not make such persons feel inferior or guilty or sick or sinful and force them through treatments which have little or no positive effects. We should accept them as they are and help them to accept themselves.

Homosexual behavior is a different matter. We would counsel homosexuals the same as we do heterosexuals: avoid promiscuous sex and relations that are exploitative or abusive. Seek a loving, faithful, one-to-one relationship. For heterosexuals that leads to conventional marriage, and for homosexuals it leads to same-gender life partnerships.

As for the Bible texts condemning homosexual behavior, they address certain specific cultural situations. In the Old Testament, they condemn both heterosexual and homosexual relations in connection with pagan fertility rites. In the New Testament, the same kind of pagan, idolatrous behavior is condemned, and also the type of homosexual behavior in which a comparatively strong and powerful person takes advantage of a weaker partner.

Jesus gladly received all sorts of people whom their religious and social cultures excluded. Therefore, I sincerely believe that Jesus would likewise show sympathetic and affirming concern for today's homosexuals who suffer so much from hatred and discrimination.

The Bible has no specific texts to condemn same-gender partners in a loving, non-exploitative, mutually faithful relationship. . . . Religious Leaders for Fairness advocate the rights of same-gender couples to marry and enjoy all the legal advantages given to heterosexual married couples. We also advocate religious

ceremonies to bless such unions. We advocate full and complete equality of treatment, civil and religious, for persons of homosexual orientation.

The Rev. ARCH B. TAYLOR Jr.
Louisville 40206

'Repetition of the myth'

I write to comment on your recent Forum pro and con articles, "Can Sex Orientation be Changed?" What little credibility Gayle Spears, past president of the Kentucky Psychological Association, might have had was destroyed by her repetition of the myth "that 10 percent to 15 percent of adults are primarily or exclusively gay or lesbian." This claim, according to Tom Stoddard, former head of Lambda Defense Fund (*Newsweek*, Feb. 5, 1993), was made for political purposes. Stoddard maintained that "10 percent connotes increased political clout, economic clout, and a sense of normalcy." Six recent studies, as reported by *The New York Times*, show that only about 2 percent of men had engaged in homosexual sex, and that only 1 percent considered themselves exclusively gay. That's one myth down, two more to go: "Homosexuals are born that way," and "Once gay, always gay."

Moral questions have to do with the rightness or wrongness of one's actions, regardless of the source or strength of one's desires. Whatever I may attribute to my genes, my parents or my culture, none of them can force me to turn a glance into a fantasy, a fantasy into a flirtation, or a flirtation into a sexual act.

We cannot justify our behavior by an appeal to our nature. A comic, no-good husband in a Woody Allen film said to his wife: "Sure I beat ya', that's my way. It don't mean I don't love ya'." Whatever the causes, we cannot escape moral responsibility by claiming that "This is just the way I am." We could just as easily apply the "just that way" defense to a number of social problems (violence, substance abuse, racism, pedophilia, etc.) that may involve deeply ingrained (even biologi-

cal) causes, but we do not, because we recognize that an explanation for the behavior is not a justification for the behavior.

The attempt to portray homosexuality as "natural" gets us nowhere. "Natural" may refer to something that happens repeatedly in the world, e.g., spiders eat insects — in which case we assign no moral judgment to it. But as a moral category, "natural" refers to something that is in accord with God's intention. Actions are good or bad. We know that people sometimes kill and eat other people. But the fact that cannibalism happens does not make it natural, in the sense of conforming to God's will.

This whole argument about "orientation" is misleading. For many people, the word has come to imply an inevitable, and therefore justified, behavior. Many think that orientation indicates what a person "is." So the argument goes: "We must act according to who we are." The fallacy lies in the equation of sexual orientation with "being." Regardless of what Freud and most advertisers may think, the desire for sex is neither central nor necessary to anyone's "being." No death certificate has ever listed the cause of death as "lack of sex."

The Rev. JOSEPH K. HAMILTON
Louisville 40220

Letters to the editor are welcomed. They should be addressed to:

Readers' Forum
The Courier-Journal
P.O. Box 740031
Louisville, Ky. 40201-7431
Our e-mail address is:
cjletter@louisv02.gannett.com
Letters can also be faxed to us at:
(502) 582-4290.

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