

The Christian love/hate relationship

Tolerance of sin is a sign of indifference—even hatred—but not compassion

Christianity teaches that we should love sinners but hate their sin.

Christians often describe this as a paradox. But loving the sinner and hating the sin can be accomplished if the two issues are taken

separately. Questions of public morality—such as the current controversy over homosexuals in the military—raise this issue.

Non-believers find this idea incomprehensible at best. Today they frequently attack it as “intolerance.” If Christians really loved someone, the argument goes, they would accept him as he is, without condemnation. Sometimes non-believers even attack this idea with religious language: If God created someone this way, what right do mere mortals have to try to change them?

Both views miss the point.

A few months ago a friend of mine died of a terrible, wasting disease, at the ripe old age of 34. Eric's death could hardly be called a shock: he had been slowly deteriorating for three years. The disease filled his body; it was a part of him, and if I truly loved my friend, I should therefore also love the disease. Right? Hogwash. The disease destroyed his ability to work or to play. His medication interfered with his sense of taste, so he could not even enjoy a meal. Toward the end he did not have the strength to get out of bed. And in the end it destroyed his life.

How would you react if I told you I wasn't very concerned about my friend's illness? Surely your only possible conclusion would be that either I did not understand the seriousness of the disease or that I did not really care very much about my friend. No, I hated the disease. I hated it to exactly the same extent that I loved my friend.

The disease Eric died of was AIDS. There is no mystery how he caught it; he was openly homosexual. His homosexuality was part of him, so if I truly loved my friend, I should also love, or at least accept, his homosexuality. Right? Hogwash.

His sin destroyed his relationships with other men. He never knew what it meant to love and be loved by a woman. And in the end it eternally separated him from God. How should you react if I told you that I was not very concerned about his homosexuality? Your only reasonable conclusion must be that either I did not understand the seriousness of his sin, or that I did not really care very much about my friend. I hated his homosex-

uality. I hated it to exactly the same extent that I loved my friend.

Sin destroys. It prevents us from achieving our full potential as human beings. The more I love a person, the more I must hate his sin. I rarely get very concerned about the sins of strangers, not because I am “tolerant,” but because I don't care about them very much—they are strangers. But when my own young daughter shows a hint of rudeness, or ignorantly repeats a vulgar word she has heard, I am instantly concerned. I love her so much that even the smallest sin marring her life disturbs me deeply.

Sometimes I feel a perverse pleasure in seeing someone whom I believe has wronged

me suffer financial or health problems. (That's an un-Christian attitude, of course, and I try to fight it, but I am not without sin.) It is exactly the same perverse pleasure I feel when I see someone I dislike ensnared in sin, like when politicians I strongly disagree with are disgraced in scandals brought on by their own errant behavior. I am secretly glad they have sinned precisely because I want to see them ruined.

Tolerance for sin is not a sign of love and acceptance. Tolerance for sin is a sign of ignorance, apathy, or hate. Loving the sinner while hating his sin is not a contradiction; it is not a paradox. It is the only logical response.

—JAY JOHANSEN

SOUL FOOD

Loveable sinner? Officially-reinstated Navy Petty Officer Keith Meinhold at a homosexual-rights rally. [AP]

