

Gay Christians? The Case for Merciful Intolerance

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Most of what I'm about to read to you was published in Touchstone magazine in 2015, under the title you see in the program ("Gay Christians? The Grave Danger Coming Out Poses to Christian Churches," Touchstone, January/February 2015, pp. 31–37). In the year or two before the article was written, there had been several books and articles written by Catholic and Protestant Christians openly identifying as "gay" yet professing to live within the traditional limits of Christian sexuality. Their books and articles were pleas for open acceptance of self-identified "gay Christians" by Christian churches.

There had also been, among the Orthodox, a lot written and said about an approach to dealing with "gays" that was, I would argue, more clinical than pastoral in that it focused almost exclusively on treating the patient, with little or no concern for protecting the flock. To treat a patient, you have to keep the patient in therapy; to protect a flock, you have to sometimes chase away the wolves.

This is the principal fault in the book, lectures, interviews, and articles on same-sex attraction by the late Fr. Thomas Hopko. If you google my name and Hopko's name, you will find on my personal blog (brianpatrickmitchell.com) a detailed critique of Hopko's teaching on the subject, so I won't say much more about him here.¹ He wasn't mentioned in my Touchstone article, but he was part of the reason the article was written. Hopko taught that we should be "incredibly merciful" to those suffering from same-sex attraction and "do whatever we can to keep people in the orbit of the grace of the Church," even to the point, he said, of communing people who live gay but not too openly.

Against which, my article in Touchstone argued that mercy does not always mean tolerance and that intolerance is sometimes more merciful in that it strengthens everyone's resistance to sin. Christian pastors must therefore sometimes practice "merciful intolerance" so as to save the flock from the wolves.

The article in Touchstone also argued for a broader, deeper understanding of heterosexuality, which is much, much more than merely a matter of carnal lust, and which is the

¹ "Thomas Hopko on Same-Sex Attraction: Speaking the Truth with Love? Or Half-Truths in Fear?" at <https://www.brianpatrickmitchell.com/2012/10/02/thomas-hopko-on-same-sex-attraction-speaking-the-truth-with-love/>, Oct. 2, 2012.

key to all of today's "gender issues." And so, regardless of what the program says, I am retitling my talk today "Heterosexuality and the Case for Merciful Intolerance." Now to the article in Touchstone—slightly shortened and very slightly revised.

Conflict makes people uncomfortable, so in mixed company, people watch what they say. Instead of speaking their minds on controversial issues, they will trim their opinions to fit those around them—sometimes out of charity, sometimes out of prudence, but often out of sheer cowardice.

Gays count on cowardice when they "come out." They know that announcing themselves as gay will silence most objections to gayness. The person who comes out dares others to disagree with him, challenging them to either accept him as gay or make him their enemy. Not surprisingly, the closer one is to someone who comes out, the harder it is to maintain one's disapproval of homosexuality. [Pew Research](#) reported in 2013 that people who knew a lot of gays were twice as likely to support gay marriage as people who knew none.

Coming out therefore poses a special danger to Christianity, but not in the way one might think. The greater danger is not from gays openly living the gay lifestyle while still claiming to be Christians. Most such gays will migrate to churches accepting of the gay lifestyle and thus leave other churches undisturbed. The greater danger is from Christians who profess to be both "gay" and chaste—Christians who openly identify themselves as "gay" on account of their attraction to members of their own sex, yet who accept their church's condemnation of homosexual relations as sinful.

In her book *Gay and Catholic* (Ave Maria Press, 2014) and in her 2014 article in *The American Conservative* entitled "[Coming Out Christian: How faithful homosexuals are transforming our churches](#)," self-styled "gay Christian" Eve Tushnet touts the benefits of coming out for both gays and churches.² Coming out, she writes, is a matter of —

honesty and integrity—no more "pronoun games," no more hedging and sudden silence when the conversation turns to romance or visions of one's future. The coming-out narrative transforms a source of shame and stigma into a freely accepted, simple truth, which no longer excludes one from the ordinary social world. Coming out allows deeper bonds to be formed: not only romantic relationships but deeper friendships, more honest familial ties, and more pointed and relevant relationships with spiritual guides such as confessors and pastors.

Make no mistake: "Coming out" does not mean confiding one's struggle against same-sex attraction in a close friend or pastor; it means openly declaring one's orientation to effect a fundamental change in one's church. The "gay Christians" Tushnet quotes say coming out makes churches more welcoming and Christ-like; it shifts the focus of pastoral concern away from what Tushnet calls "the ex-gay narrative" toward assisting gays in simply living with their desires without indulging them; gays can even witness to straights by demonstrating that celibacy is not only possible but required of all single Christians; so instead of the "prosperity gospel" and a

² Eve Tushnet, "Coming Out Christian," *The American Conservative*, Jan. 29, 2014, at <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/coming-out-christian/>, accessed Apr. 20, 2023.

“sentimental, Disney view of marriage,” more Christians will learn the lonely, painful way of the Cross.

There is, of course, some truth to this. There is nevertheless also a great danger, for openly “gay” Christians present churches with extremely difficult problems of both faith and discipline—problems that tend to undermine the faithfulness of whole communions.

What is a “gay Christian”?

The first problem is the term “gay Christian,” which can mean either kind of gay—the professed Christian who lives gay or the professed gay who lives Christian. This ambiguity complicates the discourse, causing considerable uncertainty about how each self-styled “gay Christian” sees himself or herself and about what his or her public plea for acceptance might ultimately entail for other Christians. Since those who call themselves “gay Christians” differ greatly in what they mean and want, traditional Christians are justified in objecting to the term on the grounds that it is likely to cause misunderstanding and lead people to assume that it approves more than it should.

The unavoidable ambiguity of “gay Christian” also hints at a more serious problem, one that challenges fundamental Christian beliefs about sin and human nature. Despite their different lifestyles, both kinds of self-styled “gay Christians” see gayness as so much a part of who they are that they have no choice but to admit it and embrace it. One embraces it by indulgence, the other embraces it by abstinence, but both believe they can be nothing but “gay.”

This belief separates them from those Christians who suffer same-sex attraction yet do not identify as “gay” and strive instead to live heterosexually as much as possible, in the hope of escaping same-sex attraction to some degree and perhaps even entirely. The “gay Christian” harbors no such hope, as Tushnet’s disparagement of the “ex-gay narrative” shows. The “gay Christian” resigns himself to living with his homosexuality, one way or another, and invites others to accept it as his personal norm. “I’m gay,” he says, “so stop setting me up with women.”

Many “gay Christians” are inclined to believe their homosexuality is genetically or otherwise biologically based. Some describe it as “ontological”—inherent in their being as God has made them and therefore nothing to be ashamed of, so long as they do not act on it. They “come out” so as to be themselves. In the language of the postmodern, tribalistic, identity-driven Left, “coming out” makes them more “authentic.” The “gay Christian” [Matt Jones](#), whom Tushnet s, writes on his blog:

A central part of my decision to be honest about my sexuality is the desire to foster authenticity. To be closeted usually requires a constant and exhausting self-awareness, a meticulous and intense image-management that can only be maintained through various forms of manipulation, half-truths, and, at times, outright deception.

The impatience expressed here with having to live according to heterosexual norms is remarkably similar to the impatience of nineteenth-century European Jews struggling to assimilate into gentile society after centuries of ghettoization. The Jewish experience inspired Sigmund Freud’s theory of the trifurcated psyche consisting of the natural, instinctual *id* (who we are deep down); the moral, aspirational *superego* (who we strive to be), and the resulting, mediating *ego* (who we end up being). It has also contributed to the revolt of the postmodern *id* against the constraints of Christian civilization, seen in the Sexual Revolution and in the

multicultural diversity movement. In both, the claim is made that people cannot be expected to live according to Western, Christian, European, American, middle-class, bourgeois, heterosexual norms, because that's just not who they are "authentically."

Therein lies the problem, for the sexual attraction of men for men and of women for women cannot be said by Christians to be in any sense normal or "authentic" without corrupting Christianity's understanding of human nature. Orthodox Christianity has always taken a fundamentally positive view of human nature, believing that God did not make man to sin; that sin is therefore not natural to man but something man introduced on his own; and that, although the first sin made sinning easier by alienating man from God, human nature, even in the fallen world, is still not naturally sinful. The proof of this is the Incarnation, in which the Son's assumption of human nature demonstrates that nothing naturally human is unworthy of God and that when reunited with God, man, too, can live sinlessly and even divinely like Christ. Healing is therefore always possible through Christ to those who truly believe.

Orthodox Christians often explain the relationship between human nature and human sin in terms of *logos* and *tropos*. Our *logos* is a matter of nature—what we are made and meant by God to become as human beings; our *tropos* is a matter of behavior—our way or mode of existence, including not just conscious acts but also thoughts, feelings, desires, and the conditions they create. Sexual distinction is a matter of both *logos* and *tropos*, involving both natural differences between the sexes and different ways of behaving consistent with those natural differences. Following Christ is the mode of existence most consistent with our *logos*, for we are all created to follow Christ. Sin, by definition, is a mode of existence inconsistent with our *logos*—behavior contrary to our nature, endangering our very being. Sin is therefore not ontological—not *what* we are, but a *way* we are.

For this reason, Christians have always insisted that we are not our sins, that we therefore need not sin, and that though we do often sin and therefore deserve to be called sinners, being a Christian means *not* being a sinner, for a Christian is an imitator of the sinless Christ, a repentant sinner who has "put off the old man with his deeds and put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him who created him" (Col 3:9–10, cf. Eph 4:22–23). It makes no sense, then, for someone to call himself a "gay Christian," since "gay" and "Christian" are contradictory modes of existence. The term "gay Christian" can therefore only be used rightly by Christians as an oxymoron—a figure of speech meant to point out an absurdity.

The Attack on Heterosexuality

To relieve homosexuality of its shame, some Christians have taken a different tack. Instead of treating homosexuality as an ontological category, they have borrowed the notion put forward by such unlikely allies as Michel Foucault and Gore Vidal that both homosexuality and heterosexuality are nineteenth-century constructs that fail to reflect the complex reality of human sexuality. "They are recent inventions that are utterly foreign to our faith, inadequate for justifying sexual norms, and antithetical to true philosophical anthropology," writes Michael W. Hannon in the journal *First Things*. In decrying what he calls "orientation essentialism" and "heteronormativity," Hannon has little good and plenty bad to say about heterosexuality. He associates heterosexuality with pride, characterizes it as "nothing but a particular brand of temptation to sin," and plainly denies that it is the "model norm for the evaluation of sexual deviancy"; instead, he says, our "model norm" as Christians is Jesus Christ, whom Hannon seems to regard as neither hetero nor homo on account of being entirely chaste.

Similar thinking appears elsewhere, among the Orthodox, in the argument that [homosexuality is not a vice because heterosexuality is not a virtue](#)—both, it is said, are unfortunate results of the Fall that are overcome by Christ, in whom there is “neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). For support, advocates turn to the philosophic speculations of a handful of Church Fathers such as St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Maximus the Confessor who tend to flatten sexuality into a two-dimensional concern for procreation and concupiscence, consistent with the generally anti-sexual perspective of Greek philosophy.

Some Christians today are returning to the dubious sayings of St. Gregory and St. Maximus, seeing that they serve two modern ideological objectives—the denial of both the distinction of male and female and the difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality. But these denials are impossible to reconcile with the broader Christian tradition, with its firm and fundamental scriptural basis for the distinction of gender, exalted view of marriage likening it to Christ and His Church, and many precepts and ordinances urging Christians not to shake off the sex that God has given them but to imitate God’s own distinctly male and female models of incarnate human perfection: Our Lord Jesus Christ and Our Lady the Ever-Virgin Mary.

All Christian societies up until the twentieth century cultivated and governed the sexuality of their citizens in four ways: (1) The sexes were actively differentiated by obvious and obligatory differences in dress and demeanor; (2) the sexes were segregated to protect individuals from sexual temptation, avoid unnatural competition and strife between the sexes, and, importantly, *reinforce individual identity as either male or female*; (3) the sexes were ordered consistent with both human nature and divine economy, according to which the man is the head and the woman is the body (1 Cor 11:3, cf. Eph 5); and (4) violations of these norms blurring the distinction of male and female—through cross-dressing, effeminacy in men or mannishness in women, usurping male headship, or carnal relations with others of the same sex—were condemned as unnatural and severely sanctioned. In sum, *hetero*-sexuality—which is to say, respect for the divinely ordained distinction of male and female—was the rule.

Christianity’s insistence on heterosexuality and condemnation of homosexuality as unnatural in all forms was a major change in the sexual ethics of the ancient world.³ Christians can therefore agree with Michael Hannon that homosexuality is not a natural category of human being, but they cannot agree with Hannon that heterosexuality is not our “model norm,” for God Himself has made man male and female and also blessed their sexual union. Human beings are therefore obliged to live as either a man or a woman—in a word, heterosexually—by distinguishing themselves as either a man or a woman in dress and demeanor, and by assuming the responsibilities incumbent upon their sex. Some men and women are also blessed with the opportunity and responsibility to express their heterosexuality through conjugal relations, but whether married or unmarried, all men and women are also obliged to express their heterosexuality celibately much if not most of the time, just as Our Lord did all of the time without ever ceasing to be a man, and as Our Lady did all of the time without ceasing to be a woman.

Thus, in Christian understanding, there is a human nature and a human way; and within both the nature and the way, there are two further natures and ways, one male and one female; and within each of these, there are still two more ways, two modes of heterosexuality—marriage and celibacy—and all of these natures and ways are blessed by God. Heterosexuality is therefore

³ See Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013).

not just the opposite of homosexuality; it is also the opposite of feminism and transgenderism. All three—feminism (to start with), transgenderism (to end with), and homosexuality (in between)—deny the divinely ordained *logoi* and *tropoi* of the human male and the human female.

Merciful Intolerance

With this understanding, the early Christian Church took a very different approach to dealing with the age-old problem of homosexuality than the approach now advocated by “gay Christians.” On one hand, the Church publicly condemned homosexuality in the strongest possible terms and denied that there could ever be such a thing as a homosexual Christian. On the other hand, it offered all Christians the opportunity to confess their sins privately, whether those sins were by word, deed, or thought; to receive confidential counsel, encouragement, and forgiveness; and to be reconciled after penance to Christ and His Church.

This biblical and traditional approach to sexuality edifies everyone, especially those afflicted by homosexual passion. Strong public sanctions against sodomy confirm the norm of heterosexuality, reinforcing the distinction of male and female and eliminating any uncertainty as to the proper sexual use of the human body. Intolerance of homosexuality actually strengthens those afflicted by homosexual passion in their struggle against temptation by impressing upon their consciences the enormity of the evil, giving them even more reason to “put off the old man with his deeds.” It teaches them self-control by minimizing opportunities for temptation and making indulgence unthinkable. It also encourages them to live heterosexually as much as possible.

For the young just beginning to experience same-sex attraction, this means struggling against the attraction, adopting the manners and courses of life appropriate to their sex, directing their romantic attentions toward persons of the opposite sex, and often even eventually marrying, begetting or bearing children, and otherwise living in every way as a normal (yes, normal) man or woman.

In their struggle to live heterosexually, early Christians were not alone. They had spiritual fathers and confessors in whom they could confide and to whom they were accountable. These father-confessors were responsible for administering and also protecting the healing power of the Holy Eucharist by ensuring that those who partook did so worthily, “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor 11:27). Exclusion from communion was the ultimate punishment for Christians. Serious sins like sodomy excluded the sinner from communion for many years, during which the sinner was forced to confront the consequences of his sin through the experience of separation from the Body of Christ.⁴ Excommunication was thus a severe mercy presenting the sinner with a plain, palpable choice of good or evil—the Savior or the sin.

For those who so deeply desired the Body and Blood of Christ that they truly repented of their sins through fully humble confessions, the choice of the Savior could be suddenly and

⁴ Canonical exclusions from Holy Communion for sexual sins “contrary to nature” such as sodomy, bestiality, and adultery (because it also harmed a marriage) ranged from three to 30 years, depending upon age and degree of repentance. In contrast, the exclusion for heterosexual fornication not amounting to adultery was three years or less. See Canons 7 and 62 of St. Basil the Great, Canon 4 of St. Gregory of Nyssa, and Canons 9 and 18 of St. John the Faster, Ecumenical Patriarch in late sixth century.

wondrously healing—like having one’s brain instantly rewired to erase habitual thought patterns inconsistent with life in Christ. Like any miracle, this was not something to expect, but it did and does sometimes happen.

The result of the Church’s *merciful intolerance* was a society largely free—if not of homosexuality—of homosexual suspicion. Boys and girls could be raised to be men and women, understanding and accepting the requirements of their sex and trusting all others to live accordingly. They could associate freely with members of their own sex without sexual tension and even form intimate friendships with their own sex without fear of it turning sexual. Men could walk arm in arm and women could exchange kisses without so much as a thought of homosexuality. Persons of the same sex could share houses or apartments without anyone thinking them gay. Friends could allow friends the benefit of any doubt, overlooking the possibility of homosexuality without condoning or excusing it. Men and women struggling privately against homosexual passions could therefore take part in society without prejudice; they could live up to their ordinations as men or women even while single; they could even know the joy of raising a family, experience the pleasure of heterosexual intimacy, and be slowly relieved and sometimes even quickly healed of their affliction—but *only as long as homosexuality was condemned publicly, homosexual passions were kept not secret but private, and homosexual acts were not tolerated.*

The Challenge of Coming Out

Today’s “gay Christians” defy this biblical and traditional Christian order when they “come out” and publicly profess their homosexuality, as if the old man is who they really are, as if change is not possible, as if Christ cannot heal, as if they cannot still marry and have children, and as if others are wrong to expect them to conform to heterosexual norms distinguishing the sexes in so many ways. By coming out, the “gay Christian” testifies to the world that all of these claims are true when they are all in fact false. Change is possible, Christ can heal, the old man is not who we must be, and people attracted to the same sex can and often do marry the opposite sex, raise children, and lead happy heterosexual lives in every overt way.

The testimony against these truths by publicly identified “gay Christians” is most damaging to the young. Many children go through a phase of infatuation with someone of the same sex, but very few such children get stuck in the phase by indulging the infatuation and consummating it carnally. Most recognize the infatuation as unnatural and immoral, and so they consciously resist it by denial, avoidance, and redirection. It is in this process of resistance and redirection that the heterosexuality of many children is confirmed and secured. But the will of such children to resist is undermined by public acceptance of homosexuality as an immutable aspect of one’s identity, and public acceptance of the immutability of their sexual identity is just what many “gay Christians” seek from other Christians. They have given up on the “ex-gay narrative” and are not just skeptical but dismissive and even contemptuous of change efforts. To children struggling against same-sex attraction, the public example of “gay Christians” says, “You might be one of us. You might just have been born our way. Don’t think you can change.”

The will of adults to live heterosexually, despite their homosexual passions, is also undermined by the alternative lifestyle proffered by “gay Christians,” who tout their chaste-gay narrative as both easier and more honest, more natural in the sense of being more appropriate to their person, and even more beneficial to other Christians. The truth is that even adults who have fully embraced an unchaste gay lifestyle can and do sometimes change enough to live happy heterosexual lives, but the hope of such healing gets short shrift in the chaste-gay narrative. So as

more Christians “come out,” fewer Christians will attempt change therapy or otherwise endeavor to live heterosexually, and more misguided Christians will lose hope and forsake their families to be “true” to themselves, even if it means cursing their children with the knowledge that Daddy or Mommy is gay.

The damage does not end there, however, because, in mixed company, people will watch what they say: Christians will self-censor their public and private comments about homosexuality so as not to offend known gays in their midst. That is just as “gay Christians” would have it. That is what they want. They do not want to hear “hurtful” things said about homosexuality. They especially do not want straights to express their revulsion from homosexuality. They don’t want straights to even *feel* revulsion from it. They want exactly the opposite: They want to desensitize straights to homosexuality so that gays and straights can feel comfortable together as if no difference existed between them. Thus the blogger [Matt Jones](#) writes:

LGBTQ people are often kept at a distance, which I guess is what makes it so easy for some Christians to fire away with their sniper rifles of “truth-telling.” So long as there is distance, beliefs can remain undisturbed and comfortable.

But I want those Christians to know that I brush legs with them as I slide into the row. I shake their hand or hug them as we pass the peace of Christ. I share the communion cup and broken bread. We are one body.

There is no distance.

In fact, Christians have been told to keep sexual rebels at a distance by no less an authority than the Holy Apostle Paul: “But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one, no, not to eat” (1 Cor 5:11; cf. 1 Cor 5:1–13, 2 Cor 6:14–18). The Fathers understood this to refer to both ordinary food and Holy Communion: The Apostle directs that fornicators be excluded from communion, not just for the sake of the Church but for their own sake as well—that they may be made to choose between the Savior and their sin. St. John Chrysostom explains:

For it is the part of humanity not to humor the sick in every thing nor to flatter their unseasonable desires. No one so loved him that committed fornication amongst the Corinthians as Paul, who commandeth to deliver him to Satan; no one so hated him as they that applaud and court him. [Homily 14 on 2 Cor. 7]

But note how Matt Jones characterizes this “tough love” on the part of Christians. Note his expressed desire to disturb and discomfort Christians so as to challenge their beliefs and silence their truth-telling. Note also his expansion of the category of supposed victims of Christian distancing: He faults his fellow Christians for keeping at a distance the whole LGBTQ crowd.

“Things Will Get Weird”

We have already seen where the failure to heed these words leads. Churches that put no distance between themselves and the world become more and more like the world. Pastors and

people unwilling to bear the reproach of the Joneses in their midst are cowed into silence. Sodomy becomes unmentionable. The word itself is forbidden as offensive. The church goes gay-friendly and attracts more gays—and fewer faithful. Accountability slides. The more comfortable gays feel, the bolder they become. The whole LGBTQ crowd finds a home, and those who object are shown the door.

Tushnet as much as promises this will happen in her book. In a final appendix on making churches more welcoming of gays, she first recommends coming out as a “huge way to change the culture.” Then, after a few more recommendations, she asks the question, what if people take a church’s welcome seriously? She ends the book with these words:

If our churches begin to change to welcome gay and same-sex attracted people, the changes won’t stop where the churches might predict they will or want them to. The churches won’t be exactly the same as before, only with more people. The churches themselves will change: new concepts of vocation, new questions, new challenges. Things will get weird. If you welcome someone, be ready for them to change you. That’s part of what love does to a person.

It takes perhaps a generation for a complete moral inversion to take place. You can’t keep what you won’t teach. Older members, taught that heterosexuality is normal and that homosexuality is a perversion, will give way in time to younger members, who have never heard homosexuality condemned in church, who instead have been taught by the world to hate the “haters” who condemn homosexuality, and who therefore will think they do God service when they persecute the faithful for bearing witness against it.

Thank you.

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