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Homosexuality and Love

Some time ago a community pastor approached me, asking in an almost desperate tone of voice, “What should the Christian approach be to homosexuality?” I sat with growing discomfort as he presented his problem to me. The church organist had been arrested by a detective on a charge of sodomy. While the first reaction of the congregation had been to dismiss him from his position, the pastor had prevailed upon the majority of the ruling elders to support him in his time of need. Christian love and acceptance were stressed in a letter to the whole congregation. Two elders resigned and one other family left the church in “righteous” indignation. But, on the whole, the pastor was convinced that the congregation had been helped to grow significantly in the understanding and living of their faith.

As the church considered this matter, there was little or no doubt in the pastor’s mind as to what was “the Christian approach.” The problem arose after the immediate struggle. Now the organist was back at work and under the care of a somewhat pessimistic psychiatrist. Things were going well in the church, except for one thing: the organist was happy with his homosexuality! Now that it was publicly known, he felt quite free to talk about it as a “preferred way of life.” He often remarked to the pastor that what he would really like was a “few days of loving.” The pastor, in turn, was generally his best nondirective self. But it had finally gotten to him. He found himself becoming quite angry. Even Christian love and acceptance seemed to have been stretched too far. It was at this point that he raised the question with me.

Out of this encounter, this paper has grown. I had been able to be of very little help to the pastor. Although I had talked with a number of homosexuals in my work, I had not taken the opportunity, as a hospital chaplain, to think through their dynamics or the Christian faith as it is particularly related to their problems. I had heard many of the clichés of the heterosexual world: “You can never help a homosexual;” “Most psychiatrists won’t attempt to treat homosexuals;” “The only thing you can do for them is make them happy with their way of
life;” and “Everybody has something of the homosexual within his make-up; it is just that some have much more than others.” With these as my background, I found myself mouthing things I knew I had no real information about.

My attempt to find out more about homosexuality has taken two slightly different paths. First, I turned to the written materials on homosexuality and on its relation to the Christian faith. Secondly, I sought a homosexual patient at the hospital with whom I entered into a psychotherapeutic relationship. I had enough time with this patient to give me some “clues,” some indications, as to how his case fitted into the several theories about homosexuality. Since then, work with several other homosexuals has confirmed my experience with him. It is largely due to these relationships that my thinking has taken the direction that it has.

A working definition of Christian love

It seems reasonable to begin our thinking about the relation between homosexuality and Christian love by arriving at a definition of Christian love. But it is evident that there are many definitions of love, and many different understandings of Christian love. I am unwilling to accept any division between love and Christian love. If we are to talk sense, we must remain consistent in our use of language. They are not two different entities. Rather, the second is just an extension of the first. I shall attempt to explain what I mean.

In his book *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm points out that, while there are many forms of love, there are four basic characteristics in all of these forms. They are: 1) care, 2) responsibility, 3) respect and 4) knowledge. In the loving relationship, these four characteristics are always in operation. Love, then, is not something that one either has or has not. It is not a thing that we obtain or have given to us. Rather it is a quality of relationship. Any relationship that displays these four qualities at all levels may be said to be love or a loving relationship. It is understood as an adjective, not a noun.

It must also be understood that the relationship must include all four qualities in order to fit the definition of love. Fromm has pointed out that each needs the other to be truly characterized as love. For example, he writes: “Responsibility could easily deteriorate into domination and possessiveness, were it not for a third component of love, respect.”

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