

# loses its credibility

By Oliver "Buzz" Thomas

What if Christian leaders are wrong about homosexuality? I suppose, much as a newspaper maintains its credibility by setting the record straight, church leaders would need to do the same:

*Correction: Despite what you might have read, heard or been taught throughout your churchgoing life, homosexuality is, in fact, determined at birth and is not to be condemned by God's followers.*

Based on a few recent headlines, we won't be seeing that admission anytime soon. Last week, U.S. Roman Catholic bishops took the position that homosexual attractions are "disordered" and that gays should live closeted lives of chastity. At the same time, North Carolina's Baptist State Convention was preparing to investigate churches that are too gay-friendly. Even the more liberal Presbyterian Church (USA) had been planning to put a minister on trial for conducting a marriage ceremony for two women before the charges were dismissed on a technicality. All this brings me back to the question: What if we're wrong?

Religion's only real commodity, after all, is its moral authority. Lose that, and we lose our credibility. Lose credibility, and we might as well close up shop.

It's happened to Christianity before, most famously when we dug in our heels over Galileo's challenge to the biblical view that the Earth, rather than the sun, was at the center of our solar system. You know the story. Galileo was persecuted for what turned out to be incontrovertibly true. For many, especially in the scientific community, Christianity never recovered.

This time, Christianity is in danger of squandering its moral authority by continuing its pattern of discrimination against gays and lesbians in the face of mounting scientific evidence that sexual orientation has little or nothing to do with choice. To the contrary, whether sexual orientation arises as a result of the mother's hormones or the child's brain structure or DNA, it is almost certainly an accident of birth. The point is this: Without choice, there can be no moral culpability.

## Answer in Scriptures

So, why are so many church leaders (not to mention Orthodox Jewish and Muslim leaders) persisting in their view that homosexuality is wrong despite a growing stream of scientific evidence that is likely to become a torrent in the coming years? The answer is found in Leviticus 18. "You shall not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination."

As a former "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it" kind of guy, I am sympathetic with any Christian who accepts the Bible at face value. But here's the catch. Leviticus is filled with laws imposing the death penalty for everything from eating catfish to sassing your parents. If you accept one as the absolute, unequivocal word of God, you must accept them all.

For many of gay America's loudest critics, the results are unthinkable. First, no more football. At least not without gloves. Handling a pig skin is an abomination. Second, no more Saturday games even if you can get a new ball. Violating the Sabbath is a capital offense according to Leviticus. For the over-40 crowd, approaching the altar of God with a defect in your sight is taboo, but you'll have plenty of company because those menstruating or with disabilities are also barred.

The truth is that mainstream religion has moved beyond animal sacrifice, slavery and the host of primitive rituals described in Leviticus centuries ago. Selectively hanging onto these ancient proscriptions for gays and lesbians exclusively is unfair according to anybody's standard of ethics. We lawyers call it "selective enforcement," and in civil affairs it's illegal.

A better reading of Scripture starts with the book of Genesis and the grand pronouncement about the world God created and all those who dwelled in it. "And, the Lord saw that it was good." If God created us and if everything he created is good, how can a gay person be guilty of being anything more than what God created him or her to be?

Turning to the New Testament, the writings of the Apostle Paul at first lend credence to the notion that homosexuality is a sin, until you consider that Paul most likely is referring to the Roman practice of pederasty, a form of pedophilia common in the ancient world. Successful older men often took boys into their homes as concubines, lovers or sexual slaves. Today, such sexual exploitation of minors is no longer tolerated. The point is that the sort of long-term, committed, same-sex relationships that are being debated today are not addressed in the New Testament. It distorts the biblical witness to apply verses written in one historical context (i.e. sexual exploitation of children) to contemporary situations between two monogamous partners of the same sex. Sexual promiscuity is condemned by the Bible whether it's between gays or straights. Sexual fidelity is not.

## What would Jesus do?

For those who have lingering doubts, dust off your Bibles and take a few hours to reacquaint yourself with the teachings of Jesus. You won't find a single reference to homosexuality. There are teachings on money, lust, revenge, divorce, fasting and a thousand other subjects, but there is nothing on homosexuality. Strange, don't you think, if being gay were such a moral threat?

On the other hand, Jesus spent a lot of time talking about how we should treat others. First, he made clear it is not our role to judge. It is God's. ("Judge not lest you be judged." Matthew 7:1) And, second, he commanded us to love other people as we love ourselves.

So, I ask you. Would you want to be discriminated against? Would you want to lose your job, housing or benefits because of something over which you had no control? Better yet, would you like it if society told you that you couldn't visit your lifelong partner in the hospital or file a claim on his behalf if he were murdered?

The suffering that gay and lesbian people have endured at the hands of religion is incalculable, but they can look expectantly to the future for vindication. Scientific facts, after all, are a stubborn thing. Even our religious beliefs must finally yield to them as the church in its battle with Galileo ultimately realized. But for religion, the future might be ominous. Watching the growing conflict between medical science and religion over homosexuality is like watching a train wreck from a distance. You can see it coming for miles and sense the inevitable conclusion, but you're powerless to stop it. The more church leaders dig in their heels, the worse it's likely to be.

Oliver "Buzz" Thomas is a Baptist minister and author of an upcoming book, *10 Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You (But Can't Because He Needs the Job)*.