

LOVE THE SINNER, HATE THE SIN?

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Like every family that walks into a church for the first time, the family who walked in the doors that Sunday morning was cautious. They were unsure what to expect from this church. Would the people be friendly? Would the music be good? Would the preaching be interesting? Would their children like the kids' ministry? Would the coffee taste like dishwater?

This particular family, however, had more than the usual questions on their mind. They were a same-sex couple, married for close to a decade with two young sons. They were eager to learn about Jesus, but their experience with churches so far had been less than welcoming. Their marriage was legal in the eyes of the law and in the opinions of their non-Christian friends, but it was not accepted in the church. To their credit, they kept trying to find a church home, but they were becoming less and less optimistic that they would be successful.

How can this be the case? How is it possible that people who are sincerely seeking the truth of the gospel feel rejected by a church—any church? And yet, scenarios such as the one envisioned are real.¹

It is clear that culture's views toward questions of sexual orientation and gender identity are changing. Canadians live in an age that accepts and embraces non-binary gender identities and increasingly fluid categories of sexual orientation, despite the fact that a minority of Canadians identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.² The pressure to embrace these cultural norms is immense, leaving little to no room for disagreement without being labelled as intolerant, stifling the opportunity for healthy dialogue.

In this context, the church faces a significant challenge. How should those who believe that the biblical norm for human sexuality involves marriage between a man and a woman respond to those who identify as members of the LGBTQ community? How should they respond to a co-worker or family member? How should they respond to a same-sex couple that walks through the doors of their church?

¹ This specific story is not hypothetical.

² The term "minority of" was chosen as a reflection of the difficulty involved in accurately measuring the LGBTQ community. One poll, taken in 2012, found that 5 percent of Canadians identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Kathryn Blaze Carlson, "The True North LGBT: New Poll Reveals Landscape of Gay Canada," *National Post*, July 6, 2012). However, according to the BC Ministry of Education, 19 percent of BC high school students identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or not exclusively heterosexual and 1 percent identify as transgender (<https://news.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-sogi-in-schools>, accessed Dec. 3, 2018). Given the fluidity of the categories and the reliance on self-reporting, it may not ever be possible to obtain an accurate percentage.

The response most often given in conservative circles is to love the sinner, but hate the sin.³ On its face, this phrase seems like a reasonable response because it appears to encapsulate God’s view of sinners and sin as it has been revealed in Scripture. Yet despite its ubiquity in Christian parlance, it is likely that few Christians could articulate what loving the sinner but hating the sin would entail.

The danger of proposing a simplistic spiritual-sounding truism in response to a complex and nuanced cultural issue—one in which the biblical view of sexual purity is quickly being seen as antiquated at best and a violation of human rights at worst—is enormous. It is time, therefore, to examine carefully the concept of loving the sinner but hating the sin, and this paper intends such an examination.

In order to determine the validity of the “love the sinner, hate the sin” approach, two points must be established. First, it is necessary to determine God’s view of sinners and sin. Does he love the sinner? Does he hate the sin? Second, it is necessary to ask whether and to what extent Christians have been deputized to convey God’s view of sinners and sin. Have Christians been given the mandate to convey God’s love for sinners? Have they been given the mandate to convey his hatred of sin?

Defining Terms

Before addressing the above questions, however, it is necessary to define the four key terms: sin, sinner, love, and hate.

Sin

The New Testament writers describe sin in several ways. First, sin is an act of wrongdoing against God—a departure from the divine standards of uprightness.⁴ Sometimes sin is easy to identify because certain behaviours are clearly articulated as

³ The origin of this phrase belongs to St. Augustine. In his letter 211, Augustine writes to the nuns of a certain monastery, rebuking them for the dissension that had begun as the result of a leadership succession, and laying down rules for their behaviour. One piece of instruction concerned the discipline of nuns who were accused of giving sensual looks to men during their journeys outside of the monastery. “Moreover, what I have now said in regard to abstaining from wanton looks should be carefully observed, with due love for the persons and hatred of the sin, in observing, forbidding, reporting, proving, and punishing of all other faults” (Schaff, Philip, ed. *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin with a Sketch of His Life and Work*. Vol. 1. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series [Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1886]). It remains unclear how the phrase came to be so closely associated with homosexuality in particular.

⁴ For the Hebrew, see *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) s.vv. “חַטָּה” “חַטִּי” (hereafter BDB). For the Greek, see *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000) s.v.. “ἁμαρτάνω,” “ἁμαρτία” (hereafter BDAG).

sin in the New Testament.⁵ These behaviours are always a violation of God’s standards because they violate some aspect of his holy character.

At other times, sin is more difficult to identify, particularly as it pertains to sin in the life of a disciple of Jesus. The question of the appropriateness of eating foods once considered to be unclean is an example of this. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it is unclean. ... For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (14:14, 23).⁶

Second, sin is used conceptually to define an inner attitude—a problem of the heart—that leads to specifically sinful actions, and the spiritual state of a person before God as the result of those actions. This meaning is especially prominent in the Old Testament,⁷ and appears regularly in the New Testament as well.⁸ Sin, then, is not simply the act of transgression itself, but also the underlying hostility from which the act was wrought and the state of guilt that results.

Third, sin takes on something akin to an evil persona in the New Testament, and especially in the Pauline corpus. It is a slave master (Rom. 6:6), the vehicle of death (Rom. 5:12), the overlord of the flesh (Rom. 6:12-14), the hostage-taker of the disciple’s intention to obey (Rom. 7:11ff.). Sin is the evil force present in the world that compels humans to commit evil against God and each other, and it is a cruel master, paying only the wages of death.

With respect to the current discussion, only the first definition of sin is in view. The inclusion of the definite article indicates that a specific sinful action is the target of hate, not a sense of guilt or an evil force.

Sinner

Having defined “sin,” the next step is to define a “sinner.” While it may seem logical to define a sinner as a person who commits sin, the biblical data lead to a different conclusion.

⁵ “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9-10, ESV). All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Cf. also James 4:17 (“So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin”). An increased knowledge of God’s character leads to an increased responsibility for the disciple to act in keeping with his character.

⁷ “... many of the Hebrew words for sin allude to it in such a way that the translation ‘guilt’ seems to be justifiable or even necessary. ... the Hebrews never attained to any sharp terminological distinction between sin and guilt ...” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964] s.v. “ἁμαρτία” [hereafter TDNT]).

⁸ This usage is common in the Johannine corpus (John 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11; 1 John 1:9; 3:5), but it appears also in Paul (cf. Rom. 3:20; 1 Cor. 15:17) and in Hebrews (4:15; 9:28).

Biblically, “the sinner is the man who does not allow God supreme authority over his life and who withholds from him total dedication and obedience.”⁹ Old Testament examples of sinners include Pharaoh, a number of the kings of Israel and Judah, and pagan tyrants like Nebuchadnezzar. New Testament examples of sinners include Herod, Judas Iscariot, and those responsible for the execution of Jesus.¹⁰

It is important to note, however, that there is rarely a linkage between the term “sinner” and the specific actions of a person or a group.¹¹ When the term “sinner” is used, it “identifies a spiritual state that is understood without having to be defined.”¹²

It is also clear from Scripture that a person’s status as a sinner is not a permanent state. Sinners can be redeemed. Even a person whose life before their conversion is characterized by deep antipathy toward God and his kingdom—a person such as the apostle Paul—can become a saint.¹³ Because “sinner” characterizes a spiritual state that is outside of the kingdom of God and opposed to his divine will, a follower of Jesus—one who is within the kingdom of God and aligned with his divine will—is not a “sinner,” but rather a saint.

That is not to imply that saints do not commit sin. They do. In fact, they are in a constant struggle to bring their sin to heel because the desires of the flesh are set against the desires of the spirit, and vice versa. As a result, the disciple of Jesus will commit sinful actions despite his or her desire to obey the commands of God (cf. Gal. 5:17). The journey toward sanctification in the life of the disciple of Jesus is always incomplete on this side of eternity. The presence of sin in the life of a believer does not, however, result in the person being characterized as a sinner.

Love

We move now to love. What is love biblically? The New Testament¹⁴

⁹ TDNT, s.v. “ἁμαρτωλός.”

¹⁰ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) s.v. “Sinner.”

¹¹ The exceptions to this principle include the people of Sodom in Genesis 13:13 (“Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord”), the Amalekites in 1 Samuel 15:18 (“And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’”), the people of Zion in Isaiah 33:14 (“The sinners in Zion are afraid...”), and the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet in Luke 7:37, 39 (“and behold, a woman of the city, who was a sinner . . . ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.’”). In first-century Jewish culture (cf. the example from Luke’s gospel above), the term “sinner” appears to have been applied to those who were ethnically Jewish, but whose occupations, for example, prevented them from maintaining cultic purity. They were, therefore, deemed to be withholding total obedience to God and were seen as “sinners” (BDAG, s.v. “ἁμαρτωλός”).

¹² *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “Sinner.”

¹³ Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:8-9.

¹⁴ The focus in this section is on the New Testament’s description of love, primarily because a paper of this length cannot devote sufficient depth to an examination of love in the Old Testament. The term that most frequently describes God’s love for people is the Hebrew *hesed*; however, the significance of *hesed* is “varied and disputed” (*Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994]

envisions two forms of love: *phileo* (Gk. φιλέω) and *agape* (Gk. ἀγάπη).¹⁵ *Phileo* describes a special interest or close association with someone or something, particularly a natural affinity toward those who belong to the same group (i.e., the same family or the same nation).¹⁶ The Pharisees, for example, loved (*phileo*) people to see their public displays of piety in prayer (Matt. 6:5) the place of honour at feasts (Matt. 23:6), and the intricate public greetings they received (Luke 20:46). *Phileo* is also used to describe the love the Father has for the Son (John 5:20) and for his people (John 16:27).

Phileo love is noble, but it is also dutiful. That is not to imply that it is detached, but that it is expected.¹⁷

Agape love is different. It connotes a warm affection characteristic of intimate relationships, but not limited to them. *Agape* love is not dutiful. Instead, it is “a love which makes distinctions, choosing and keeping to its object...a free and decisive act determined by its subject...[and] the love of the higher lifting up the lower, elevating the lower above others.”¹⁸ *Agape* love is more than a feeling of affection: it is “a giving, active love on the other’s behalf.”¹⁹

It is this kind of love to which Jesus refers in response to the question about the greatest commandment. He declares that the greatest commandment—the two commandments upon which depend all the Law and the Prophets—are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength,” and to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt. 22:38-39).

Hate

The final word requiring definition is “hate.” Like love, the concept of hate is expressed in the New Testament with multiple Greek words; however, the primary word of interest for this study is the word *miseo*, (Gk. μισέω) which is used as the

s.v. “ἐλεέω, ἔλεος” [hereafter TLNT]; see also BDB, s.v. “טִּיַּן”). Interestingly, the LXX does not use the Greek *agape* or *phileo* to translate *hesed*, but rather *eleos*, a word that “refers to a ‘feeling,’ namely, the feeling of one who is moved by the sight of another’s suffering and in a way shares in it” (TLNT, s.v., “ἐλεέω, ἔλεος”). The Old Testament concept of God’s love is inextricably bound up in the concept of the covenant relationship between God and his people; it is “the ultimate foundation of the whole covenant theory” (TDNT, s.v. “ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη, ἀγαπητός”).

¹⁵ The cognate verb is ἀγαπάω. The Greeks had two additional words for love: *storgē* (στοργή), which characterizes a sense of tenderness of the kind that parents display toward their children; and *eran* (ἐράν), which “expresses above all unreasoning passion and desire . . . the desire of the wolf for the sheep” (TLNT, s.v. “ἀγάπη.” See also TDNT, s.v., “ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη, ἀγαπητός”).

¹⁶ TDNT, s.v. “φιλέω.”

¹⁷ TDNT, s.v. “φιλέω.”

¹⁸ TDNT, s.v. “ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη, ἀγαπητός.”

¹⁹ TDNT, s.v. “ἀγαπάω, ἀγάπη, ἀγαπητός.”

opposite of *agapeo* in the New Testament, and which occurs in the LXX along with its cognate noun, which does not occur in the New Testament.²⁰

The semantic range of *miseo* is much broader than the English word “hate,” stretching from disfavour or disinclination to the much stronger sense of detesting someone or something.²¹ Jesus uses *miseo* to describe the enmity between people (Matt. 5:43); to describe the hostility that would face the disciples after his death and resurrection (Luke 6:22, 27); and to describe the choice the disciple makes to prioritize obedience to God over above all other things (Luke 14:26). *Miseo* is also used to describe the exercise of divine election that belongs to God in the context of his office as Lord and Judge (Rom. 9:13), and political enmity (Luke 19:14).²²

God’s View of Sinners and Sin

With the above definitions in mind, what can be determined from Scripture with respect to God’s view of sinners and sin?

Love the Sinner

Does God love sinners? Based on the above data, showing love for sinners would entail a conscious choice to take action (love) with respect to those who are outside the kingdom of God (sinners). It would be purposeful love that pursues the best interest of the other, which, in this case, would be repentance that would lead to transformation and new life in Christ.

It is clear from the pages of Scripture that this is exactly God’s approach to sinners. His love for sinners is the central theme of his work in human history. Although he had no obligation to do so, God acted to establish a covenant with the nation of Israel, telling Abram, “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7). Despite the fact that the nation frequently failed to maintain their responsibilities within this covenant, God remained faithful to them.

God’s pursuit of sinners—those outside of his kingdom—continued in the person and work of Jesus. Out of his deep and abiding love for sinners, Jesus left behind his glory. He “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in

²⁰ The other Greek words that fit into the semantic range of the English word “hate” include βδελύσσομαι (*bdelussomai*; translated “abhor” in the ESV; 1 time), ἀποστύγῃω (*apostugeo*; translated “abhor” in the ESV; 1 time), ἐξουθενέω (*exoutheneo*; translated “despise” in the ESV; 11 times), and καταφρονέω (*kataphroneo*; translated “despise” in the ESV; 9 times) (cf. corresponding entries in BDAG). Each of these words describes both an attitude toward someone or something and the resultant actions that stem from that attitude.

²¹ BDAG, s.v. “μισέω.”

²² A lengthy discussion of the many facets of *miseo* can be found in TDNT (s.v. “μισέω”).

the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).²³

In the context of his earthly ministry, Jesus’ love for sinners was demonstrated most powerfully in his willingness to share fellowship with them, specifically around the table. In the first-century cultural context, sharing a meal was an important indicator of friendship,²⁴ and Jesus’ willingness to extend friendship to sinners put him at odds with the Jewish religious leaders, who regularly grumbled about it, both under their breath and to Jesus’ disciples.²⁵

Jesus was known as a friend of sinners, and his friendship with sinners was purposeful: the point was to call them to repentance (Luke 5:32). Jesus accepted sinners “in their totality as He found them, and not just in accordance with certain appealing or repellant aspects.”²⁶

Moreover, Jesus’ love for sinners compelled him to obey the Father’s will to surrender his very life as a ransom for many, paving the way for reconciliation between God and man. God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), and God “shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

God loves sinners; even more, God desires sinners to repent of their sin, and he has provided the means through which that repentance can lead to new life by the broken body and shed blood of Jesus.

Hate the Sin

What can be said of God’s view of sin? Does he hate sin? Based on the above data, one would expect to see a strong aversion to, vehement dislike of, or active disdain (hate) toward any action that is in violation of God’s holiness (sin).

The biblical data support the assertion that God does, in fact, hate sin. Sin is anathema to holiness, and God is perfectly holy. Moreover, his hatred of sin results in him extracting righteous vengeance upon it.

God’s vengeance against sin begins in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve’s sin cause God to pronounce curses upon them and cast them from the

²³ In the context of Philippians, Paul uses this description of Christ’s humility to argue for a humble attitude that Christians should have toward one another. It is not, in that sense, a theological explanation of Christ’s work on behalf of sinners. It is, however, an assertion about the steps that Jesus took to redeem sinful humans—an act of humble love that illustrates his desire to pursue sinners even in their sin.

²⁴ “It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era. Mealtimes were far more than occasions for individuals to consume nourishment. Being welcomed at a table for the purpose of eating food with another person had become a ceremony richly symbolic of friendship, intimacy, and unity” (*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992] s.v. “Table Fellowship”).

²⁵ See note 11 above.

²⁶ TDNT, s.v. “φιλέω.”

Garden. God's vengeance against sin was made manifest against the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which he punished because "their sin is very grave" (Gen. 18:20).

While God's love for sinners caused him to make a covenant with the people of Israel, his hatred of sin comes through in the context of the giving of the Law, with its detailed instructions regarding how the people were to make atonement for their sins.²⁷ Further, the punishment that Israel would face for continued disobedience toward the requirements of the covenant are spelled out in specific detail in Leviticus 26:14ff., further reinforcing God's holy hatred of sin. The purpose of the covenant was not to produce outward obedience, but inward transformation. God proclaims his disdain for empty religious practices in Amos 5:21ff.²⁸

In the New Testament, God's hatred of sin remains clear. The unrepentant will face judgement, not on earth, but in eternity.²⁹ Jesus' eventual glorious return to earth will be a day of rejoicing for his people, but also a day when he will inflict "vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thess. 1:8). His punishment of sin will be eternal.³⁰

Summary

In summary, the biblical data provide a picture of God's nature and character that shows his fierce love of sinners and his equally fierce hatred of sin. God does, in fact, love the sinner and hate the sin. Importantly, however, his love for sinners is not greater than his hatred of sin; it is abundant, but it is not eternal. His love for sinners is an act of patience toward humanity rooted in his desire that none should perish, but that all should reach repentance (1 Pet. 3:9). It is a withholding of his divine prerogative to punish sin for eternity.

Humans as Agents of Love and Hatred

²⁷ See especially Leviticus 4-5; however, instructions regarding atonement occur throughout the Pentateuch.

²⁸ "I hate, I despise your feasts, and take no delight in your solemn assemblies." The language God uses here is "as sharp and cutting as possible" (David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989], 191-192).

²⁹ See Jesus' response to the crowds who "told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" in Luke 13:1-5. Jesus rejects the prevailing notion that calamity only befalls the disobedient, arguing that "judgement will overtake people, whether Galilean or Jerusalemite or of some other origin, unless they repent" (Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997], 514).

³⁰ That is not to say that God does not exact any form of judgement in this age, as there are examples, especially in the book of Acts, of his judgement being enacted in immediate ways (cf. Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, Herod in Acts 12, and Elymas in Acts 13). Importantly, these immediate judgements were not a replacement for the eternal divine judgement that is still to come at the end of this age.

With God’s love for sinners and hatred of sin firmly established, we turn now to the second facet of this examination: to what extent has God deputized Christians to convey his love for sinners and his hatred of sin? Put differently, it is appropriate for God to love the sinner and hate the sin, but is it appropriate for the Christian to do the same?

Conveying Love for Sinners

It is easy to find support for the idea that Christians have been deputized to convey God’s love for sinners; in fact, the life of the disciple of Christ is to be characterized by love for all people, whether they are brothers and sisters in Christ or unbelievers. Showing God’s love to sinners—to those who are outside of the kingdom and disobedient to the will of God—means following the example of Jesus and of the early church and proclaiming the good news of the gospel with empathy and compassion, calling sinners to repentance and new life in Christ.

Such was the example set by Peter on the day of Pentecost. Faced with a crowd of people whose hostility to the message of the gospel had recently resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus, Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, nonetheless delivered a stirring gospel presentation that left no doubt regarding the moral culpability of the Jewish people: “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36).

In response, the people gathered asked, “Brothers, what shall we do?” to which Peter responded, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38).

Despite the hostility and the risk to his own safety, Peter showed God’s love for sinners through his clear presentation of the truth and his clear call to respond with repentance.

The mandate to convey God’s love for sinners was also present in Paul’s ministry. Upon his arrival in the city of Athens, Paul beheld the many statues dedicated to pagan gods, and “his spirit was provoked within him.” He was irritated by the idolatry of the city,³¹ but his love for sinners allowed him to use what he had seen to create a contextually-sensitive gospel presentation that called them to repentance.³²

Paul’s love for sinners produced in him a deep empathy toward them. “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:22). Paul’s

³¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 300. See also BDAG, s.v. “παροξύνω.”

³² “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:16).

motivation was to share with everyone the life-changing power of the gospel and the promise of eternal life in Christ.

It is clear that the Christian has a strong mandate to convey God's love toward sinners by proclaiming the truth of the gospel to the effect that they would repent of their sin and find new life in him.

Conveying Hatred of Sin

So far, we have seen that God loves sinners and hates sin, and that Christians have been deputized to convey God's love for sinners. One question remains: is there mandate for the Christian to convey God's hatred of sin?

There is biblical evidence that such an attitude toward sin is appropriate for the disciple of Jesus. In Romans 12:9, Paul states, "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." His command³³ here is unequivocal, and the verb he uses is a strong one indeed.³⁴ Moreover, the rationale for such a strong response to sin is rooted in the call to sanctification: as a disciple of Jesus grows in conformity to him, the result will no doubt be a decreased tolerance of any action that is in violation of his standards. The Christian will "regard evil with horror," knowing that it is "the enemy of all that leads to Christlikeness."³⁵

It is entirely appropriate for disciples of Jesus to hate sin; however, further examination of the context of Romans 12 gives cause for caution with respect to how hatred of sin is to be directed. Paul here is describing the sanctification of the individual believer and the outworking of this sanctification in the context of the community of God's people. The church is one body with many members, and the healthy functioning of the church in fulfillment of the mission of the gospel requires each part to function correctly.

Each of Paul's commands in this context reinforce the need for personal sanctification in order to achieve the healthy functioning of the body of Christ. He instructs the Romans to utilize their gifts in the service of the body, to allow love to be genuine, to abhor what is evil, to hold fast to what is good, to love one another with brotherly affection, to outdo one another in showing honour, to be fervent in spirit, to serve the Lord, to rejoice in hope, to be patient in tribulation, to be constant in prayer, to serve the needs of others, and to seek to show hospitality.

³³ All the verbs in verses 9-13 are participles, not imperatives; however, they carry the same imperatival force. ("The technical discussion on the use of participles does not change the meaning of the text, for it is clear that Paul is giving commands" (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1998], 664).

³⁴ It should be noted, however, that Paul does not use *miseo*, but rather *apostugeo*. *Apostugeo* is a strong word, but a rare one, occurring only here in the NT (Schreiner, 664; BDAG, s.v. "ἀποστύγῶ").

³⁵ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 237.

The implication of Paul's instruction is clear: yes, Christians are to hate sin, but first and foremost to hate it in their own lives, knowing that their persistence in sin undermines the viability of the body of Christ. Our call is to give our attention to our own sanctification, knowing that sin has no hold on the redeemed of God who have been set free from their slavery to sin in order to become slaves to the righteousness of God. And because sin is a heart issue, the ability of the Christian to eliminate it from his or her life comes only as a result of the transformation brought about by the Holy Spirit.

A Christian's hatred of sin is also appropriately expressed with respect to the sin that is evident in the lives of his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus instructed his disciples to rebuke a brother or sister who has sinned (Luke 17:3). Paul's instruction in this regard is myriad. The writer to the Hebrews instructs his readers to "consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (Heb. 10:24), an effort which would likely require keeping one another away from sin. James instructs his readers regarding their responsibility to bring back sinners from their wandering (Jas. 5:19-20), which would likely require a rebuke of their sin. Peter instructs the elders of the church to shepherd the flock, which requires exhortation and rebuke of sin. John instructs his readers to be diligent to be found in him without spot or blemish (1 John 3:14), which would require the community of God's people to identify and rebuke sin.

Importantly, hating the sin of those in the community of God's people has, as its end goal, repentance. Hatred of sin is not intended to be punitive, but restorative, and all in the service of the mission of the gospel.

We have seen that it is appropriate for the Christian to hate sin in his or her own life, and in the lives of his or her brothers and sisters in Christ. What should the attitude of the Christian be with respect to the sin that is present in the life of a person who is not part of the community of God's people—a sinner?

It is at this point that the idea of loving the sinner but hating the sin encounters resistance, for there is no sense in which the Christian is given mandate to convey God's sense of holy judgement and vengeance toward sin in the lives of those who are outside of the kingdom. Jesus forbade hatred among his disciples (Luke 6:27), and the NT authors describe hatred "as bondage to darkness and the old aeon."³⁶ Literal hatred has no place in the life of the disciple of Jesus.³⁷

Summary

In light of the above evidence, the difficulty with counselling Christians to love the sinner but hate the sin becomes clear. While it is true that God loves sinners and

³⁶ TDNT, s.v. "μισέω."

³⁷ Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 253.

hates sin, the Christian has only been deputized to convey his love for sinners, not his hatred of sin, especially to those outside the Christian community.

It is difficult enough within the context of human fallenness to convey God's love; it is even more difficult in that context to convey God's holy hatred of sin. Any attempt to convey God's hatred of sin inevitably leads to the Christian violating the supremacy of the command to love. Insistence on hating the sin compromises an empathetic and compassionate approach to the proclamation of the gospel.³⁸

With respect to questions of sexual orientation, the belief that Christians can and should love the sinner but hate the sin has resulted in a toxic situation that has pitted them against the LGBTQ community. What comes across is the hate, not the love, and one does not have to look far to find examples of this toxicity in action.

One such example is the contentious debate that raged in both Canada and the United States over the legalization of same-sex marriages. Conservative Christians, for the most part, were vocal in their opposition to allowing same-sex couples to marry, with *Focus on the Family* stating that they had “never had an issue this big”³⁹ to deal with. From the perspective of LGBTQ groups, the right to marry was a question of equality and human rights, and by standing in the way of equality the church conveyed a message of hatred and enmity, not love and compassion.

A more recent example can be found in the opposition to the introduction of concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) into British Columbia schools, specifically through a program known as SOGI 1 2 3. In response, a group of evangelical leaders in British Columbia has come together under the banner of “The West Coast Christian Accord,” which “is a document designed to unify like-minded leaders and churches to form a coalition from which a united stand can be mounted” to address “a day and age when long-held, traditional beliefs, convictions, and lifestyles are rapidly changing.”⁴⁰

While this coalition's approach certainly conveys a zeal for God's holy hatred of sin, it lacks equivalent zeal to convey God's love for the sinner. What is heard

³⁸ One study found that those who hold to a “love the sinner, hate the sin” mentality are more likely to show prejudice toward homosexual behaviour, and, although the exact nature of the effect has been difficult to measure, the authors concluded that “‘Love the sinner, but hate the sin’ might be seen instead as ‘Love only sinners who conform to our worldview’” (Heather K. Mak and Jo-Ann Tsang, “Separating the ‘Sinner’ from the ‘Sin’: Religious Orientation and Prejudiced Behavior toward Sexual Orientation and Promiscuous Sex,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* [47:3, Sept. 2008], 390. Mak and Tsang's work built on a previous study. See C. Daniel Batson, Drew M. Trenton, and Jason T. Vollmecke, “Quest Religion, Anti-Fundamentalism, and Limited versus Universal Compassion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* [47:1, March 2008]).

³⁹ Evelyn Nieves, “Family Values Groups Gear Up for Battle Over Gay Marriage,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 2003 (A06). <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A4132-2003Aug16.html> (accessed Dec. 6, 2018).

⁴⁰ <https://westcoastchristianaccord.com/about/> (accessed Dec. 6, 2018).

instead is a message of intolerance and enmity, and the hostility between the Christian and LGBTQ communities only becomes further entrenched.

A Way Forward

The fact that Christians have been deputized to convey God's love for the sinner but not his hatred of sin to those outside the Christian community leads to an important question: what would be an appropriate response to the changing cultural norms surrounding sexual orientation?⁹ The question is applicable both to individual Christians and to congregations, but the focus of this section will be on the latter.

First, it is time for churches (including individual congregations, denominational groups, and ecclesiastical bodies like the West Coast Christian Accord) to end attempts to legislate morality or to insist that our culture conforms to biblical priorities. Whether Christians like it or not, Canadian culture is increasingly recognizing and normalizing non-binary gender identities and a broad spectrum of sexual orientations resulting from a belief that one's biological sex is unrelated to one's gender. Such beliefs are not wisdom, nor do they align with the Bible's teaching about human sexuality, but they are the cultural milieu in which Christians find themselves.

It is folly for the church to attempt to persuade secular culture that the immorality so regularly presented as being in the public interest may, in fact, lead to unintended damaging societal consequences. After all, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14).

Further, when it comes to matters that are imposed by law, such as the introduction of SOGI elements in the BC school curriculum, the Christian must consider very carefully the clear biblical call to honour the right of governments to rule over their people (cf. Romans 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). Such a command would have been much harder to obey in the first century context where the Emperor was worshipped as a god, yet it is the challenging call of the gospel to obey the Emperor, irrespective of whether he makes rules that reflect Christian values or not.

That is not to say that the church has no role in speaking prophetically into culture if that is truly what it is doing. Too often, however, especially when it pertains to questions of sexual orientation, the church's goal is not to speak prophetically but to insist that the biblical worldview is enshrined in the law of the land. A prophetic voice is one that focuses on the need of the individual to repent and experience the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, not on the need of cultural institutions to safeguard Christian morality through legislation.⁴¹

⁴¹ A further exploration of the nuances of such a prophetic voice would be fertile ground for future research.

Second, the church has a responsibility to address the fear that underlies much of the Christian response to questions of sexual orientation and help Christians see members of the LGBTQ community as human beings created in God's image and worthy of dignity and respect.

There exists a pervasive belief in something known as "The Homosexual Agenda," which is "a self-centered set of beliefs and objectives designed to promote and mandate approval of homosexuality and its ideology in society, along with strategies to implement such."⁴² Those who believe in a "Homosexual Agenda" also claim that it is "the biggest threat to the rights of free speech and religious freedom today."⁴³

To be sure, there are groups within the LGBTQ community who are driven by an agenda to bring about change by normalizing acceptance of homosexuality, transgenderism, and all manner of other sexual orientations and gender identities, and Conservative Christians tend to fear such cultural changes.⁴⁴ What remains unproven, however, is that normalizing the acceptance of homosexuality, for example, will bring about the ruin of society, which is what appears to be the presupposition of many.⁴⁵

The conviction that there exists a pernicious "Homosexual Agenda" results in the inevitable conviction that every member of the LGBTQ community is an agent of that agenda, not human beings marred by the effect of sin but nonetheless deserving of dignified and respectful treatment as image-bearers of God. Instead of being treated with love, members of the LGBTQ community will find themselves treated with suspicion by disciple-makers, and such suspicion impedes the ability to express compassion and empathy and hinders the proclamation of the good news of the gospel of Jesus.

Further, to cast homosexuality as the greatest threat to religious freedom is to ignore the fact that homosexuality is not a new phenomenon. It has existed for

⁴² https://www.conservapedia.com/Homosexual_Agenda (accessed Dec. 6, 2018).

⁴³ https://www.conservapedia.com/Homosexual_Agenda (accessed Dec. 6, 2018).

⁴⁴ One study found that religious opposition to the legalization of same-sex marriage was predicated more in the fear of change than in the opposition to equality. See Jojanneke van der Toorn, John T. Jost, Dominic J. Packer, Sharareh Noorbaloochi, and Jay J. Van Bavel, *In Defense of Tradition: Religiosity, Conservatism, and Opposition to Same-Sex Marriage in North America* (Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 43 no. 10, Oct. 2017: 1455-1468).

⁴⁵ See Dr. Ronnie W. Floyd, *The Gay Agenda: It's Dividing the Family, the Church, and a Nation* (Green Forest, AR: New Leaf Press, 2004); Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, *The Agenda: The Homosexual Plan to Change America* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2005); Dr. S. A. Newton, *Born Gay No Way: The Secret Homosexual Agenda Exposed* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Alan Sears and Craig Osten, *The Homosexual Agenda: Exposing the Principal Threat to Religious Freedom Today* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003).

millennia⁴⁶ and will likely continue to exist until the day when Jesus establishes his eternal kingdom. Any threat that exists today is the same one that has existed throughout human history, and is a threat that the good news of the gospel is more than capable of overcoming.

Third, it is important that pastors and other Christian leaders work to create church environments where sinners feel welcome. It is possible to proclaim the truth of the gospel, and specifically the Bible's instruction regarding sexual purity, in a loving and compassionate way, not affirming sin, but instead calling sinners of all stripes to repentance and new life in Christ.

If pastors and church leaders truly desire to see sinners come to repentance, they must understand that the kind of hostility that results from the felt need to hate the sin always compromises a sinner's ability to hear the conviction of the Holy Spirit. By treating members of the LGBTQ community with dignity and respect, pastors can and will gain a hearing for the gospel.

Further, when the Holy Spirit's conviction comes and repentance ensues, the church will have the privilege of helping sinners do the hard work required to undertake a complete transformation of their lifestyle to the glory of God. The issues that a same-sex couple would face on the path to obedience will inevitably be deeply challenging, but this is where the church can be the church, offering support and encouragement along with practical assistance.

Can Christians envision a future in which the hostility between the church and the LGBTQ community characteristic of the current moment has been set aside? Can they envision a future in which members of the LGBTQ community feel safe walking in the doors of a church? Can they envision a future in which they can tell story after story of the Holy Spirit's transformational work in the lives of sinners?

That future is possible, but only insofar as Christians put aside their conviction that they are responsible to hate the sin and focus instead on showing the abundant love of Jesus to all sinners, calling them to repentance and new life in Christ, and allowing the Holy Spirit to write a story of transformation and hope to the glory of God.

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⁴⁶ The earliest recorded instance of homosexuality is Genesis 19:5. Homosexuality was also practiced in the Roman Empire, which is why Paul addressed it in the context of his instruction surrounding sexuality in 1 Corinthians 6 and his instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1.

Carroll, Mark. "Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin?" Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research. www.nimer.ca (retrieved [Date Accessed]). Peer reviewed.