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## Opinion: On homosexuality, can we at least talk about it?

Contributed by David Gushee  
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Because I hold a tenured professorship in Christian ethics at Mercer University, I am one of those rare souls who can talk candidly about this hot-button issue. And these days I'm finding it hard to avoid the nagging and unsought conviction that this freedom now demands responsible exercise.

Methodology is everything. Starting points are everything. Glen Stassen and I wrote a widely read book in which we argued that truly Christian ethics focuses relentlessly on Jesus Christ. It starts there, it dwells there, it ends there. All statements about Christian morality -- all statements about anything -- must fit with the Jesus we meet in the Gospels. Jesus is where God meets the world, and thus where any who bear his name must meet the world as well.

Jesus taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves. He defined neighbors to include everyone. Absolutely everyone. He sharpened that definition by calling us to attend to those regarded as the last, the least and the lost. The most rejected, the most hated, the most abandoned, the most feared, the most loathed, the most despised, the most mocked -- these are the people to whom Jesus most directs us to offer our love.

I go to press conferences sometimes and talk about what Christians ought to stand for in society. Two times in recent months I have finished one of these press conferences and been approached quietly afterwards. Both times a young man has handed me a business card and gently said something like this to me: "Please do not forget about me and people like me." They were homosexuals. They were seeking Christian love. They were asking for some help.

In my doctoral dissertation I studied Christians who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. I discovered that in that horrible drama there were essentially four categories of behavior: victim, perpetrator, rescuer and bystander. Most instances of mass evil involve a small number of direct perpetrators killing a large number of hated victims in the presence of a much larger group of acquiescent bystanders, and resisted by a tiny number of rescuers. Scalded by that research, I have vowed with God's help to be a rescuer kind of Christian.

In light of the hatred, mockery, loathing, fear and rejection directed at homosexuals in our society -- and in our churches -- I hope to God that I am not and never have been a perpetrator. But I fear I have indeed been a bystander. I am trying to figure out what it might mean to be a rescuer.

There are always very, very compelling reasons to be a bystander. Mainly these revolve around self-interest. You live longer when you are a bystander. People like you more. And even if you entertain nagging questions of conscience about your inaction, in the end it is easier to stay out of it. And so the hated group keeps getting thrown under the bus.

There are dozens of such particular flashpoints related to the issue of homosexuality. Christians, their churches, their denominations and their institutions are arguing about everything from homosexuality's causes to whether active gays can be church members or leaders to even whether gay couples can appear alongside other families in church pictorial

directories.

I want to begin a dialogue in this column by simply calling for the rudiments of Christian love of neighbor to extend to the homosexual. And the place to begin is in the church -- that community of faith in which we have (reportedly) affirmed that Jesus Christ is Lord. I call for the following Christian commitments:

- The complete rejection of still-common forms of speech in which anti-homosexual slurs ("queer," "fag") are employed either in jest or in all seriousness
  
- The complete rejection of a heart attitude of hatred, loathing, and fear toward homosexuals
  
- The complete rejection of any form of bullying directed against homosexuals or those thought to be homosexuals
  
- The complete rejection of political demagoguery in which homosexuals are scapegoated for our nation's social ills and used as tools for partisan politics
  
- The complete rejection of casual, imprecise and erroneous factual claims about homosexuality in preaching, teaching or private speech, such as, "All homosexuals choose to be that way."
  
- The complete recognition of the full dignity and humanity of the homosexual as a person made in God's image and sacred in God's sight
  
- The complete recognition that in any faith community of any size one will find persons wrestling with homosexuality, either in their own lives or the lives of people that they love
  
- The complete recognition that when Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, that includes especially our homosexual neighbors, because the more a group is hated, the more they need Christ's love through us

There is more to be said. But this is at least a place to start.

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