

From 1986: Is AIDS God's Judgment on the Homosexual?

Note: This article originally appeared in the July 1986 issue of Charisma magazine as the outbreak of AIDS continued to spread. While much has changed in the 29 years since, including the legalization of gay marriage in the U.S., God remains steadfast and continues to call us to love those in the gay community.

A Christian running for mayor in a Texas city is asked about his plans for the control of AIDS. Thinking his microphone is turned off, he wisecracks, "One of them is to shoot the queers."

"AIDS: God's Curse on Homos!" proclaims a banner trailing from a plane flying over a parade for homosexual rights in an Ohio city.

A Christian publisher writes: "Why not isolate the fast-lane [homosexual activists] to Alcatraz, Fire Island, or some other lovely island and let them practice their sexual pluralism to their hearts' content? Since AIDS is nearly 100 percent fatal, the island could well be reclaimed in a few years!"

A preacher describes AIDS victim Rock Hudson as a "wasted worm," a "whited sepulchre," "scum."

Expressions of contempt mark many Christians' reactions to the homosexual liberation movement and the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) epidemic. Is it time we stepped back from the battle over homosexuality and reassessed how well we are responding to the crisis? Have we locked ourselves into an emotional indictment of those involved in the homosexual phenomenon?

On the one hand, the growing public health disaster of AIDS is

forcing all of us to pay more attention to the issue of homosexuality. As a result of it, some people's opposition to homosexuality has become strident, almost hysterical.

On the other hand, AIDS confronts those who engage in homosexual practices with a sobering danger. It forces them to closely examine their way of life. And for those who contract AIDS, the sickness means one last chance to consider what they have done with their lives and where they stand with God.

AIDS may be leading some Christians to speak harshly at the very moment when conducting ourselves more prayerfully and thoughtfully might help in advancing God's redemptive purposes for those living a homosexual lifestyle—who in some cases may now be more receptive to God's call to repent.

If we wish to measure how well we are serving God's purpose in the current homosexual crisis, we might ask ourselves: Is the way we are bearing witness to scriptural moral standards weakening our ability to speak of Christ's mercy? The danger is that we are making such a *defensive* defense of the biblical prohibition against homosexual practices that we are undermining our ability to offer the Good News of forgiveness to those who are breaking the prohibition.

If you were a homosexual, would you listen to the gospel from someone who had just finished gloating over your imminent demise from AIDS?

It is no wonder that we are having difficulty achieving a balanced approach to the homosexual phenomenon.

The homosexual movement has gone beyond homosexual living and has snarled its defiance at traditional sexual standards. So-called liberationists, those active in pursuing rights and respect for their lifestyle, have claimed that homosexual inclination is no more abnormal than left-handedness. They want to bulldoze every cultural pattern that interferes with full acceptance of homosexual lifestyles. They insist laws

against homosexual practice must be repealed and “homosexual rights” ordinances adopted.

It is difficult to maintain a loving attitude toward folks who are determined to overturn standards of decency. We and our children have to live in this society. What goes on in the schools that our children attend and on the TV programs we watch in our homes is understandably a matter of great concern to us. We feel threatened, and some of our feelings show up in harsh reactions.

Our attitudes to other people with problems might likewise become nasty if those people attempted to legitimize their behavior. If bank robbers lobbied to repeal larceny laws, we might feel less inclined to support prison reforms—and more inclined to press for longer sentences.

A complication in the case of homosexuality is the revulsion many of us feel toward homosexual acts. Can we find a more fitting word than the biblical term “abomination” for any type of sex between two men? The homosexual movement talks about “civil rights” and “lovers” and even “monogamous troth relationships.” But the behavior behind the rhetoric is degenerative and sometimes cruel.

Disgust is emotional dynamite. It is one thing to calmly debate whether marijuana should be decriminalized (note: And it has in some states). It is another thing to stay cool when someone asserts that high school sex education classes should portray same-sex acts as an alternative mode of intimacy.

The apostle Paul points out that sexual wrongdoing involves our bodies—our very selves—in a way that other kinds of wrongdoing do not: “Escape from sexual immorality. Every sin that a man commits is outside the body. But he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). The close connection between the person and the homosexual act makes it difficult for us to love the sinner while hating the

sin. We find it easier to reject both.

Scorning both sin and sinner becomes an especially great temptation when some homosexual activists accuse us of wrongdoing by our “homophobia.” They claim that if we would rid ourselves of our “irrational fear” of homosexuality and stop persecuting the homosexual “community,” the social disorders of homosexual living would clear up. But, as one prominent Christian psychiatrist has pointed out, revulsion against homosexual acts is socially useful. It safeguards those who are tempted to experiment with homosexual practices. The activist’s accusation that it is “homophobia” rather than homosexuality that is unloving turns nature upside down.

We face, then, a very difficult challenge. We are called to stand for the natural sexual order in society, as laid out in the Bible, at a time when many individuals are disregarding that order and even seeking to overturn it. But we are also called to love those who sin against the natural sexual order by their homosexual practices—to love even those who want to overturn it.

If we carry out only the first part of our responsibility we make ourselves witnesses to the law but not to the gospel. The Christian response to the homosexual phenomenon has to go beyond adherence to the biblical standards of sexual behavior. It must also speak of God’s forgiveness and His desire to make us new creatures in Christ

It is not a question of our fudging on moral standards. God’s standards for sexual behavior are set, once and for all. They are the standards He built into us when He made us human. God’s principles for sex fit the way He made us. It is never “pastoral” or compassionate to give approval to homosexual practices under any conditions, even as the lesser of two evils.

Nor do we need to retreat from our attempts to have the

natural sexual order recognized in law, education and the media.

Nor do we need to “repent” of feelings of repugnance toward unnatural sex acts.

But we do need to be loving in the way we stand for biblical moral principles in theology and pastoral care. We need to support public decency in ways that communicate respect for the dignity of every human being. (Isn't the value of every human life the basic reason for our opposition to abortion and the starving of handicapped newborns?) And we need to find ways of supporting gospel outreach to men and women with homosexual problems.

The issue of AIDS immediately arises. Isn't AIDS God's judgment on homosexual living? Shouldn't we be glad that God is judging wrongdoing?

Despite the pronouncements of many Christian leaders, there are considerable reasons for concluding that the AIDS epidemic *is* an expression of God's judgment on homosexual practices. The Bible does not indicate that God has ceased to reveal His judgments in human history against people's wrongdoing, and the constant teaching of the Old and New Testaments, as understood throughout Christian history, is that homosexual practices are seriously offensive to God.

The book of Job and the New Testament clearly state that all or even most sickness is not punishment for sin. But the Bible does not rule out the possibility that some sicknesses are punishments. To one man whom He healed, Jesus said, “... Sin no more lest something worse happens to you” (John 5:14).

It can be argued that some sicknesses are the direct consequences of wrongdoing. For instance, alcoholics suffer degeneration of the liver and nervous system. In such cases, God is allowing the person to experience the bitter fruit of his or her wrong choices. He is leaving the person to

experience the natural results of abandoning His ways. The pattern is vividly described in the first two chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans. Sexually transmitted diseases—which AIDS largely is— follow the pattern.

The fact that AIDS does not afflict only active homosexuals or only the most active homosexuals does not mean that the epidemic is not a judgment sent by God. God will exercise absolute fairness when He ultimately judges each individual man or woman on the basis of his or her own actions. At that point, no one will be punished for anyone's wrongdoing except his own. But when God executes judgment in this present age, His judgments sometimes fall on whole societies. When they do, many members of the society may suffer. When Jerusalem fell in 487 B.C., Jeremiah suffered along with the most arrogant intriguers at court.

If AIDS is a judgment from God, it is such a terrible judgment that none of us should feel cheerful about it. Unless a cure is found soon, AIDS is headed toward becoming the largest epidemic killer in the United States in this century.

According to a recent *Washington Post* story, researchers now believe that the incubation period for the AIDS virus can be as much as seven years—not just a few months, as was thought at first. During this period, the virus apparently entrenches itself in blood cells that play a role in fighting infections. Every time the body has to fight off an infection these cells are activated, and the AIDS virus multiplies. After repeated infections, the virus eventually destroys so many of these cells that the body's immune system collapses. The victim falls prey to some very ordinary infection, and dies. So far, according to Dr. Donald Abrams of San Francisco General Hospital's AIDS clinic, AIDS is "a disease that is 100 percent fatal."

Experts estimate that some million Americans are already infected with AIDS. While public health officials once

predicted that only a small fraction of these people could expect to develop AIDS, researchers at an international AIDS symposium in January, attended by the leading experts, heard estimates that between 30 percent and 40 percent will eventually succumb (that would be 500,000 to 700,000 people).

Because infected persons can carry the disease for years while remaining apparently healthy, AIDS continues to spread. Since the beginning of the decade, when the disease appeared in the United States, the number of AIDS cases has doubled every year. The National Institute of Health expects a cumulative total of 200,000 cases by the end of 1988.

AIDS victims often start out young and healthy, and so take a long time to die, according to Dr. Marcus Conant, the University of California dermatologist who first recognized the outbreak in San Francisco. Thus health care facilities will be stretched beyond capacity. This grim prospect faces not only San Francisco but other urban areas with large numbers of homosexually active men.

If AIDS is an expression of God's "severe mercy," the enormity of the epidemic should move us to pray that God would help all of us to hear whatever He may want to say to us through it. In one sense, we may be glad that by allowing the spread of AIDS God is showing that He will not be mocked forever. But the dimensions of the AIDS crisis facing us should put a healthy fear of God in our hearts rather than an easy self-congratulation at watching "the homosexuals get theirs."

We may well ask whether God is not trying to say some things to all of us through AIDS. It is reasonable to think that God is communicating more than His wrath at homosexual practices. AIDS may also be interpreted as an expression of God's judgment on a society whose values and lifestyles have contributed to the rise of the homosexual phenomenon.

After all, homosexual inclinations do not develop in a vacuum.

While much about the genesis of homosexual problems is not understood, there are some observable patterns. Homosexual inclinations develop typically in children growing up in families with certain characteristic disturbances. For example, the majority of men with homosexual inclinations had dominating mothers and physically or emotionally distant fathers.

Our whole society contributes to such unbalanced families. Family life does not receive the protection or social support that it once did. American culture does not provide men with many effective models for playing a strong, loving role in their families. Our culture encourages men to be irresponsible and uncommitted to their families, putting personal achievement and pleasure first.

If, by permitting the AIDS epidemic, God is judging the homosexual movement's values and way of life, it is worth noting that those values and lifestyles are representative of much of our society. In its driven sexual promiscuity, the homosexual rights movement epitomizes our society's endless search for self-gratification. In its rejection of family life, the movement represents our generation's preference for individual self-actualization over self-sacrificing service in family and society. In its confusion over sexual identity, the homosexual rights movement carries to extremes our society's rejection of biblical notions of manhood and womanhood. If we view AIDS as a word addressed by God only to "the homosexuals out there," we will miss God's very serious correction to all of us who have stretched out our hands to any of these aspects of modern culture.

If we must learn to stand for biblical moral principles in ways that are not contemptuous or merely self-interested, we must learn to interpret God's judgments in ways that are not harsh or complacent. God has made known His principles for human living out of love, because they are the best way for people to live. Similarly, He executes His judgments in this

world out of love to warn and correct us so that we will turn to Him in repentance. How can we interpret His moral principles and judgments to our contemporaries in a life-giving way?

Helping to make the churches effective in evangelism and pastoral care to homosexuals is a big task. But each of us can make a contribution.

We can examine our own lives in light of biblical principles for sexual morality and in light of God's judgment of the values of our secular culture. Do we need to repent of sexual wrongdoing? Do we need to make changes in our lives?

We must purge our speech of contempt for people with homosexual problems. Repugnance toward homosexual acts is different from scorn for people with homosexual problems or lifestyles.

Also, we must reorient our preaching on homosexuality from a fire-and-brimstone emphasis to a salvation emphasis. Fire and brimstone is a real consequence of homosexual practices not repented of, and we should say so. But the main reason for saying so is in order to offer the message of grace and hope.

We can educate ourselves about the problem. Learn to look at homosexuality realistically and to see the difficulties faced by people who experience the problem. Becoming better informed will help in creating a less judgmental atmosphere in the church, opening the way for us to grow in love and wisdom in this area. We should support effective outreaches to homosexuals.

Each of us can pray that God will help men and women hear His call to repent of homosexual living. Pray that He will give pastors and special ministries wisdom for dealing with homosexuality. Pray that God will make the church a place of repentance, faith, healing and support for men and women with homosexual problems.