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HOMOSEXUALITY: IT'S NOT A SIN
THE CHRISTIAN EDUCATION OF A BAPTIST MINISTER

Author:

CHRIS AYERS, SPECIAL TO THE OBSERVER

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If anyone had told me 25 years ago that in 2004 I would no longer view homosexuality as a sin and that some of my best friends would be homosexual, I would have told them they were crazy. Learning to love, though, requires a willingness to challenge long-held assumptions and to let experience shape one's theological stances.

My journey has been a long one. That's why I say it has been an education. And I call it a Christian education because what I have learned has been learned primarily in the context of the church and has been made possible by wonderful Christians who happen to be gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Let's start at the beginning. I was in the fifth grade and noticing girls, but I also noticed that a male classmate, unlike me, did not appear to be noticing them. My classmate was pretty much a loner. He kept to himself and was the object of more than a few verbal abuses delivered by his classmates. School children can be cruel.

While in middle school, I learned my family suspected we had a relative who was gay. He was a cousin, a fairly attractive person with a good bit of money and a nice sports car. He was handsome enough not to have any trouble finding a woman but did not date - not a woman, that is. If you are fairly attractive, have a big wad of money in your pocket, drive a red MG and don't have a woman something's up, the way we figured it.

About the same time that we suspected there was a homosexual in the Ayers clan, a male friend of mine was dating a girl on the school basketball team who reported to him that her coach was a lesbian. We spoke of the coach as being a predator who was trying to make young heterosexual females into lesbians. We believed the woman should be fired immediately. She was horrible! She was disgusting!

During the middle school/high school years - what I call the testosterone years for males - my male friends and I tried to prove our masculinity. To do that we had to demonstrate we were more manly than someone else. And so we found easy targets. We regularly called other males "homosexuals" as a way of shaming them, calling them inferior.

The first crack in my cemented perspective came my freshman year at UNC Chapel Hill. Tim, who was a friend who lived across the hall from me, and I attended a Bible study in my dorm led by a guy named Rick. Soon I stopped going because I began to believe Rick was gay. As it turned out, Tim also was gay.

Slowly my beliefs about homosexuals began to change because of Tim and Rick. The two of them taught me that the things I had believed about gays were myths. Tim and Rick are good people, not perverts, not weirdos, not predators, not sick people. Tim and Rick are human beings with a deep faith. They are Christians. They are people with lives marked by integrity. I could not and can not argue with their lives.

Getting to know wonderful Christians who happen to be homosexual is the single most important factor that changed my mind, that transformed me. My experience has been like that of William Sloane Coffin, who writes, "What did the most to help me battle [my homophobia], more than the accumulation and analysis of the evidence available, was to spend time with gay people. Familiarity bred only respect, never contempt."

My Christian education on homosexuality continued when I became the pastor of Wedgewood Baptist Church in Charlotte in 1989. From homosexuals I heard sad, heart-breaking stories.

Some people believe homosexuals choose to be homosexual. What I have witnessed are homosexuals choosing to deny their sexual orientation, some even going so far as marrying a person of the opposite sex and having children; some, tragically, even going so far as to commit suicide.

Homosexual Christians do not need churches that force them to live a lie. They need love, acceptance and affirmation. Saying homosexuals should be tolerated is not enough. Saying homosexuals are welcome in a church just as all sinners are welcome is not enough. Saying gay and lesbian clergy can be clergy as long as they are celibate is not enough. It's time for the Church to be honest about biblical interpretation. It's time for the Church to boldly tell the world homosexuality is not a sin.

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The Rev. Chris Ayers is pastor of Wedgewood Baptist Church, 4800 Wedgewood Dr, Charlotte, NC 28210.

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