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## The Credibility Question

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Is Christianity in America losing its credibility? Oliver "Buzz" Thomas obviously thinks so. In his view, Christianity is losing credibility because so many Christians believe that homosexuality is a sin.

He doesn't mince words. In an op-ed column published in USA Today, Thomas (a minister and attorney) set out his case:

*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.*

His argument is not subtle. He is confident that homosexuality is a natural factor and that it is foolish to suggest that it is sinful. Christians who persist in pushing the foolish case that homosexual behavior is sin are robbing the church of its "only real commodity."

You can quickly see how Thomas's logic works. The world will increasingly see Christians who insist on the sinfulness of homosexuality as foolish, repressive, and mean-spirited, costing the church (and the Gospel) dearly in terms of public opinion and credibility.

He suggests that the church will one day have to offer a public correction something like this:

*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.*

Clearly, this is a serious charge. We need to take a close look at his argument at two levels.

At the first level, his argument assumes that science has now proved that homosexuality is biologically determined. In his words, "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."

But science has “proved” no such thing. Yet, assume for a moment that it has. Let’s assume that some incontrovertible proof is offered that undeniably indicates that an orientation toward same-sex sexual desire is related to or established in biological factors. What then? Buzz Thomas is sure that biology determines destiny and eliminates the moral question. As he puts it, “Without choice, there can be no moral culpability.”

This argument cannot be sustained. Biological factors may play a role in any number of behaviors that are immoral. The human being is a complex of urges, desires, and “orientations.” Just consider where Thomas’s argument will take us. What if incontrovertible proof is offered that any number of sexual orientations are rooted in some manner in biological causation? What then? After all, the homosexual rights movement has already expanded and divided into separate categories including transsexualism, transgendered persons, etc. What if we discover that pedophilia, incest, polyamory and any number of other sexual desires are rooted in biological factors? Would that then mean that such behaviors were not sinful? Most persons, homosexuals included, would recoil at the suggestion.

But, if the existence of biological factors or causation means “there can be no moral culpability,” there is no way to avoid that conclusion.

As for Thomas’s use of the Bible, it is sloppy and reckless. He simply accepts the arguments of liberal critics that, for example, Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality was really just a condemnation of pederasty. This is just not a smart argument. Paul’s language does not allow this and it would defeat the entire force of Paul’s argument.

Beyond this, those who argue that Paul does not condemn homosexuality *per se* are in the intellectually indefensible position of arguing that the earliest Christians—those who inhabited Paul’s own world and used his own language—grossly misunderstood Paul, while postmodern Western academics suddenly get him right. Poor Paul, misunderstood for centuries, only to be rescued after 2,000 years by liberal theologians. How can that argument be made with a straight face?

Thomas is also sure that a reference to Galileo should suffice to show us the error of our ways. After all, Galileo was right—the universe is heliocentric not geocentric—and the Catholic Church, according to the popular account, wasted its credibility trying to argue otherwise. In reality, the case of Galileo was a convoluted historical event. But, in any case, no clear teachings of Scripture were ever at stake. The Bible never condemns belief in a heliocentric universe. It does condemn homosexual behavior.

Buzz Thomas is right to argue that Christians who insist that homosexual behavior is sinful do so because we believe the Bible to require this belief—something the Christian church in all its branches has accepted for 2,000 years.

This brings us to an even more important question. At the second level, Thomas’s point about credibility deserves a closer look. Credibility in whose eyes? Credibility related to which truth claims?

The claim that homosexual behavior is sinful may prompt a credibility crisis in the current cultural context, but this is true of any number of essential Christian teachings. The exclusivity of the Gospel? Atonement through the death of Christ? The veracity of the miracle accounts? The deity of Christ? Propositional revelation? All these represent credibility crises in terms of the contemporary intellectual climate.

Christianity has always faced a credibility crisis. Paul himself made this clear when he reminded the Corinthian Christians that the intellectual class sees the cross of Christ as “foolishness” while others see it as a scandal.

From the beginning, liberal theology has been a series of rescue attempts on the part of theologians who have sought to rescue the church from its credibility crisis in the eyes of the modern academy and culture. That project is a denial of the faith and a route to disaster. If you sincerely believe that Christianity must change its position on homosexuality, you will hardly be able to stop there.

The credibility crisis on the issue on homosexuality that really matters is the loss of credibility suffered by the church when it fails to tell the truth with love, recoils from homosexuals instead of reaching out with God’s love, and buries its head in the sand. This is the credibility crisis we must quickly address and where the Gospel is truly at stake.

Readers familiar with the recent history of the Southern Baptist Convention will recognize that Buzz Thomas was for many years counsel and staff member of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (now known as the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty), a group defunded over a decade ago by the Southern Baptist Convention, which formally disassociated itself from the BJCPA. Anyone wondering why the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention was necessary should find ample evidence in Buzz Thomas's article.

We discussed the credibility crisis on Monday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program*. Listen [here](#).

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