

# How might we respond in debates among Christians on homosexuality when told to love the sinner but hate the sin?

Robert C. Dykstra  
Princeton Theological Seminary

*Robert Dykstra is a Presbyterian minister and Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary. Before coming to Princeton in 1997, he served churches in Illinois and Minnesota and taught pastoral theology at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.*

*From the book*

**Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues**

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

In most every charged discussion among Christians on homosexuality, someone will rise to insist that the church's proper response is to *love the sinner but hate the sin*. This pithy saying draws from among the most potent words in the theological lexicon – sinner and sin, love and hate. Yet seldom does it further conversation or foster new insight or accord. More often it has the effect of closing down debate, in the way of the bumper sticker that declares, “*God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.*”

The injunction to *love the sinner but hate the sin* is heard so often as to lead many people to assume that God said it – that it is found in the Bible or was spoken by Jesus. Rather, the expression, or one very much like it, was penned several hundred years later – in the fifth century – by St. Augustine, the church father and bishop of Hippo. *Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*, “with love for humankind and hatred of sins,” Augustine wrote in a letter chastising a group of nuns upset with their newly-installed prioress (Letter 211).

The particular sin he was enjoining these women to “hate” at that point in the letter where the now-familiar injunction occurs was their own looking men directly in the eyes with desire in their hearts. In the same letter, he likewise condemns their sins of hoarding secret caches of food and clothing received from relatives or friends, that is, of not sharing all things in common in Christian community. Further, he decries their not fully covering their hair with a headdress and their desire to bathe more often than once a month.

Religious women looking men in the eyes, receiving new clothes, uncovering their hair, wanting a bath: it's no wonder that given its origins contending against activities like these, Augustine's

directive *to love the sinner but hate the sin* continues to be conscripted, however unwittingly, in attempts by some in the church to keep sexuality in check today. Yet even they would notice that somehow the church's collective wisdom concerning sinners and sin has changed over time.

Certainly Christians today would affirm the importance of paying attention to sinners and to sin in their lives, relationships, and churches. We would do well to love sinners, including ourselves, and to hate sin, in which we all persist. In a similar way, most of us look back with gratitude or relief to moments in our own lives when a friend or mentor was willing to take the risk of confronting, challenging, or correcting us when we may have been losing our way. We therefore have reason to assume that many, even most, contemporary Christians would be inclined to agree with Augustine, at some basic level, on the need to love the sinner and hate the sin.

On another level, the vast majority of Christians today would take exception to at least some of what Augustine reckons in his letter as sin. The circumstances and nature of what constitutes a particular sin – apparently even those sins that relate to what we now might recognize in the broadest sense as sexuality – appear to have changed considerably since the time of his letter. We would see in a very different light issues concerning the number of baths allotted to nuns or, more tellingly, what we might understand as their struggle to appropriate their physical bodies and sexuality into their religious vocation. This gives us pause as we try to sort out and fill in the blanks of sinner and sin in our own current conversations around sexuality. How confident are we of getting our loving and hating just right? Will we know when we have loved or hated enough?

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In *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge* (1993), Patricia Beattie Jung and Ralph F. Smith point out that while some Christians see homosexuality as the vilest example of *sin* or *depravity*, others see it less severely, as an *affliction* akin to alcoholism, with abstinence the only sufficient response. The authors go on to note that still other Christians view homosexuality simply as a difference, one of countless signs of the diversity of God's creation, more like being left-handed. Smith and Jung recognize that our sexuality touches the depths of our mystery as persons much more than does being right- or left-handed. But they observe that in terms of the systemic qualities of a world organized around the norm of

heterosexuality, the analogy to left-handedness proves apt: “[W]e clearly arrange our world in favor of right-handed people. We only recently stopped advocating efforts to reorient people. We have gravely distorted our understanding of left-handedness by false myths for centuries” (see pp. 21-31).

Those who press for the full participation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Christians in the life of the church may find themselves *agreeing* with their critics on the value of loving sinners and hating sin. They nonetheless *disagree* with them on who or what in a specific case are sinners or sins. They remain skeptical, at a time when sexuality is viewed by many to be inseparable from who they are as persons, of anyone’s faring well in actual efforts in this regard to distinguish *sinner* from *sin*.

Instead, at the point in conversations on sexuality when someone announces that one must love the sinners but hate the sin, the purported “sinners” in this instance, no doubt like the recipients of Augustine’s letter, experience themselves not only as unloved but unheard. They sense that the discussion is effectively declared closed.

It is instead to suggest that we as individuals, and the church as a collective body, would be wise to exercise great discretion and modesty in our claims to know, for every time, place, and circumstance, just who is and is not a sinner or precisely what is and is not a sin.

To acknowledge a change in perspective on what specifically comprises sin from Augustine’s time to our own is not to say that there are no longer any moral truths or that there is no such thing as sexual sin. Neither does it mean that those who favor the full inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Christians reject the principle of loving sinners and hating sin. It is instead to suggest that we as individuals, and the church as a collective body, would be wise to exercise great discretion and modesty in our claims to

know, for every time, place, and circumstance, just who is and is not a sinner or precisely what is and is not a sin. When we are told, or tell others, to love the sinner but hate the sin, it would prove worthwhile to recall Jesus’ own injunction to remove the log from one’s own eye before attempting to take the speck from a neighbor’s (Luke 6:42b). Honest self-scrutiny may be our last, best hope for a reconciling vision.

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The Covenant Network of Presbyterians  
2515 Fillmore St - San Francisco - CA - 94115  
415 351 2196 (v) - 415 351 2198 (f)  
[www.covenantnetwork.org](http://www.covenantnetwork.org)