

But God Made Me This Way!

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[*Tabletalk* 21:3 (Mar., 1997), 8-11.

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Homosexuals today commonly claim that they cannot help being homosexual. Homosexuality, they argue, is innate: perhaps genetically determined, in any case so deeply ingrained in their very being that it is, for them, an inescapable condition. Therefore, they conclude, church and society should accept homosexuality as natural and normal. Surely, they insist, it is unfair to condemn people for what they cannot help doing.

Indeed, those homosexuals who want recognition as Christians interpret the “inescapability” of their condition theistically: “God made me this way.” How can Christians, then, condemn a condition that God himself created?

This question comes up in many areas of discussion other than homosexuality.

The rapid progress of genetic science has led to lively discussions concerning whether some behavior patterns are innate. Some years ago, it was learned that an abnormally high proportion of boys with a double “y” chromosome engages in anti-social or criminal behavior. Does this discovery imply that criminality, in some cases, at least, is an innate and inescapable condition? What then? Should we abort children who have this genetic combination? Should we test children early for this condition and take special pains to steer xyy boys into constructive paths? Should we seek ways to change the genetic makeup of such children?

Later came the discovery that a certain gene is associated with a relatively high percentage of alcoholics. And still more recently, Simon LeVay, a gay activist and neuroscientist, published a paper in *Science* (253:1034-1037) arguing that there are some minute but statistically significant differences between heterosexual and homosexual men in the size of the “INAH-3” region of the anterior hypothalamus, part of the brain. Some have argued that this discovery tends to establish what gay activists have long been saying, namely that homosexuality is an innate condition rather than a “choice,” that it cannot be helped, and therefore it should be accepted as normal.

I am not competent to evaluate LeVay’s research. I do think that we are wise to suspend judgment until LeVay’s work is corroborated by others who are more

objective on the question. However, we should note as others have that there is an unanswered “chicken and egg” problem here: how do we know that this condition (or perhaps the larger unexplored physical basis for it) is the cause, and not the result, of homosexual thought and behavior?

And of course we must also remember that these discoveries were made through studies of the brains of people who were exclusively homosexual, compared with brains of people who were presumed to be exclusively heterosexual.¹ But there is a wide spectrum between these two extremes. The exclusively homosexual population seems to be between 1% and 3% of the population (the widely used Kinsey figure of 10% is now largely discredited). But many more people have bisexual inclinations, and still others are largely heterosexual but willing to enter homosexual relationships under certain circumstances (experimentation, prison, etc.) Is there a genetic basis for these rather complicated patterns of behavior? Neither LeVay nor anyone else has offered data suggesting that.

But let’s assume that there is an innate physical basis for homosexuality, and for alcoholism, and indeed for general criminality. I suspect that as genetic science develops over the years there will be more and more correlations made between genetics and behavior, and that will be scientific progress. What ethical conclusions should we draw?

For one thing, we certainly should not draw the conclusion that gay activists want to draw, namely that any “innate” condition must therefore be accepted as natural and normal. Innateness has nothing to do with normality. Many diseases, for example, are genetically determined. But we don’t consider Tay-Sachs or Sickle-Cell Anemia to be “normal” or desirable conditions, let alone to possess some ethical virtue. Nor do we consider alcoholism or “xyy” anti-social behavior to be normal and natural. Rather, we do all we can to fight them. Genetic discoveries, indeed, open up more possible weapons for this fight. Some have suggested, indeed, that the discovery of a “gay gene” would give us the opportunity, through abortion or genetic manipulation, of eliminating homosexuality (or at least one impulse toward homosexuality) from society altogether. That is precisely what gay activists don’t want to hear.

Further, we must keep these discoveries in perspective. Not everyone who has the xyy gene becomes a criminal, and not everyone with a genetic risk factor for alcoholism actually becomes an alcoholic. Similarly, it is quite unlikely that a “gay gene,” should it exist, would actually *determine* people to be homosexual. Although studies of twins do show a correlation between genetics and homosexuality, half of all twin brothers of homosexuals are heterosexual. So the data suggest something less than genetic *determinism*. Indeed, they suggest that it is possible for someone to resist patterns of behavior to which he is genetically predisposed. Genes do determine eye color, sex, blood type and so on; but patterns of behavior, although influenced by genetic make-up, do not seem to be

¹ I am not sure that this presumption was adequately verified in the experimentation.

controlled by it. The typical behavioral differences between males and females, for example, have a genetic basis; but (as feminists are quick to point out) that genetic basis does not exhaustively determine how we will behave in every situation. Women sometimes behave in ways more typical of men, and vice versa. Genes may impel, but they don't compel.

Indeed, other sorts of influences are often more compelling than genetic inheritance. A unsigned editorial in *National Review* (Aug. 9, 1993, p. 17) points out that "the effects of childhood brutalization can restrict one's freedom far more than does a physiological preference for sweets; and many purely biological impulses pale in strength before the smoker's need of a cigarette." So if we excuse homosexuality on the basis of genetic predisposition, we should equally excuse all acts resulting from environmental influence and from bad choices in the past. Whether a compulsion has a genetic basis is ethically irrelevant.

Nor do we in other cases excuse acts committed on the basis of genetic predispositions. One who has a genetic propensity to alcoholism cannot *excuse* his alcoholism on that basis; nor can an xyy man excuse his criminality. These conditions do not force people to do anything contrary to their desires. In that sense, they do not compromise moral freedom. They do create moral challenges, venues for moral temptation. But that too should be seen in perspective: all of us have moral "weak spots," areas where we are especially vulnerable to the Devil's enticements. These areas of temptation have many sources; heredity among them. Others would be environment, experiences, and our own past decisions. Thus some have a particular problem with temptation to alcohol abuse; others, because of their early training, personal taste, or social attachments, are not often tempted to commit that particular sin. But these will certainly have other areas of temptation. This is true even for those who are most mature in the Christian faith: such maturity opens one to the temptation of spiritual pride. Thus the person whose special moral challenges have a genetic component is not in a totally unique situation. We all face such challenges; they are never entirely under our control. For all of us, this world is a spiritually dangerous place. Truly, "your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour" (I Pet. 5:8). But thanks to God's grace, we may "resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (verse 9).

Would a genetic basis for homosexuality eliminate the element of "choice?" Certainly not. A person with a genetic propensity for alcoholism still makes a choice when he decides to take a drink, and then another, and then another. Same with an xyy male who decides to punch somebody in the nose. If we assume the existence of a genetic propensity for homosexuality, it is true as we said that those with that makeup face greater temptation in this area than others. But those who succumb to the temptation do choose to do so, as do all of us when we succumb to our own besetting temptations. Homosexuals certainly choose not to remain celibate, and they choose to have sexual relations. They

are not forced to do this by their genes or by anything contrary to their own desires.

Is it possible for a homosexual to repent of his sin and, by God's grace, to become heterosexual? Christian ministries to homosexuals claim that this is possible and that it has happened, though they admit that this is a particularly difficult sin to deal with. (Sexual orientation is something that goes very deeply into human personality, and we have an instinct to keep it relatively private. That instinct is a good one, but it does make counseling in this area especially difficult.) Gay activists claim that this is impossible, and they dispute alleged "ex-gay" testimonies. Indeed, some people who have professed deliverance from homosexuality have later returned to homosexual relationships. And many "ex-gays" have candidly admitted that they continue to experience homosexual attraction, attraction which they now perceive as a moral and spiritual challenge. Pro-gay advocates argue that this lingering homosexual temptation proves that homosexuality is ineradicable.

I believe on faith that God can deliver homosexuals, because Scripture teaches that His grace can deliver his people from all sin. (See especially 1 Cor. 6:9-11.) I haven't done first-hand research on the results of various ministries to homosexuals. It would certainly not surprise me to learn that many people who struggle by God's grace to overcome their homosexuality still experience homosexual temptations. People who have been addicted to alcohol often face continuing temptations in this area long after they have stopped drinking to excess. Similarly those who have overcome the impulses of hot tempers, drugs, or heterosexual promiscuity. If that were true in regard to repentant homosexuals, it would not cast the slightest doubt on the power of God's grace to heal such people. Recurrent temptation is a problem for all of us, and will be until glory. One may not judge the fruits of Christian ministries on a perfectionist criterion, namely the assumption that deliverance from sin must remove all temptation toward that sin in this life.

The bottom line is that the genetic element in sin does not excuse it. To see that, it is important to put the issue into an even wider perspective. Christianity forces us again and again to widen our angle of vision, for it calls us to see everything from the perspective of a transcendent God and from the standpoint of eternity. Such perspective helps us to see our trials as "light and momentary" (II Cor. 4:17) and our sins as greater than we normally admit. From a biblical perspective, the difficult fact is that in one sense *all sin is inherited*. From Adam comes both our sin and our misery. We are guilty of Adam's transgression, and through Adam we ourselves inherit sinful natures. If a genetic predisposition excuses sodomy, then our inheritance from Adam excuses all sin! But that is clearly not the case. Of course, Reformed theology construes our relationship to Adam as representative, rather than *merely* genetic, and that is important. But Adam represents all who are descended from him "by natural generation;" so there is also an inevitable genetic element in human sin.

Is that fair? Consider that Adam contained all the (genetic!) potentialities of all of us, and lived in a perfect environment save one source of temptation. None of us could or would have done any better. And, American individualism to the contrary notwithstanding, the human race *is* one in important senses, and God is right to judge it as a single entity. The bottom line, of course, is that we are His creations. He defines what is “fair,” and he has the right to do as he pleases with the work of his hands.

In this broad context, however, the argument that one sin should be declared normal on the basis of its genetic component or because of some other kind of “inevitability” is entirely self-serving.

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