

Don't Blame Me, I Can't Help It

Dr Jon Garvey compares some of the arguments used to defend homosexuality with the Bible's teaching on original sin

The Bishop of Oxford has changed his mind about the age of consent for homosexual acts. He now wants to see it lowered to sixteen. What has persuaded him is evidence from various bodies that sexual orientation has been determined by that age, and that therefore it is unjust to forbid its expression.

The evidence is dubious in itself, but the more significant point is that this reasoning, which basically underpins the whole debate about homosexuality, ignores altogether the most relevant Christian doctrine. The argument of the *Gay Christian Movement*, which has gradually persuaded more and more even in the Evangelical wing of the Church, is that since homosexuals are born that way, they cannot help what they do. How can they be blamed for what they cannot help? Indeed, to blame them is to blame God for making them that way, so why not rather acknowledge his creation as good and celebrate homosexuality along with heterosexuality? For some strange reason, this argument isn't applied to paedophilia.

All too often, the conservative response has been, 'since the Bible says it's sin, they *must* be able to control it.' But in fact the Bible teaches that, without Christ, we *can't* fully control sin, and yet we are still responsible.

A burglar tried to break into an old lady's flat to mug her. Reaching through the letterbox to remove the safety-chain, he suddenly realised his arm was stuck at the elbow. Hearing his struggles, the lady woke up, saw him there, and told him to go away. When the only response was a string of expletives, she picked up the nearest thing to hand, which happened to be her walking stick, and started belabouring him with it. 'Clear off!' she shouted, 'I don't want you in my flat!'

'I can't,' he replied, 'Can't you see I'm stuck?' When the police took him away, bruised and bleeding – caught literally red-handed – his defence was that it wasn't his fault they'd found him there since, being trapped, he wasn't free to do what was right. Rather the woman was to blame for causing him actual bodily harm. The court took a different view, as you would expect.

The Bible teaches that when our first ancestor, Adam, sinned freely, he and his whole race became guilty. God's punishment was to trap them in that sin, so that without him they would be unable to escape. As Romans 1 says, God *gave them over...* 'in the sinful desires of their hearts' (v24), 'to shameful lusts' (v26), 'to a depraved mind' (v28). The fact that we cannot escape no more exonerates us, or makes God responsible, than it did our burglar.

We read in Genesis 3 that physical death resulted from that one act of sin, that Eve's body was changed so that childbearing was painful, and that even the natural order was corrupted so that the ground became hard to cultivate. So why should any Christian be surprised that people are apparently conditioned to sin by their upbringing and environment, or even that there is a genetic predisposition to certain sins? Do we think our genes are exempt from the corruption of the fall?

The Bible's ethics were never intended to make us good. 'Rather, through the law we become conscious of sin' (Rom. 3.20). In other words, our utter inability to live as God commands should *not* cause us to praise God for creating us sinners and then go on sinning with a clear conscience. Instead, belaboured by the law's walking stick, it should lead us to despair of our ability and realise just how

desperately we need a Saviour. Isn't that the whole gospel?

Politicians have the difficult task of legislating to make society work despite the sinfulness of most of its members. So there is no law against adultery because very few would be left to guard the overflowing jails.

But bishops are consecrated to uphold the gospel doctrines. Article 9 of the Bishop of Oxford's own church says that, 'Original sin... is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man [*i.e.* including their inherited, *genetic* nature]... Man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God's wrath and damnation.'

Sadly it is not only bishops who ignore the doctrine of original sin. It's so rarely understood or taught that it comes as a shock to many believers. To secularised individualists like us, the thought that we're by nature slaves to sin (Rom. 7.14) strikes at our pride. We demand the right to a free vote on our sin. If God has actually *given us over* to sin (Ps. 81.12) he's worse than unjust – he's undemocratic. And that would never do.

We're not alone in our distaste. In the fifth century, a monk called Pelagius felt the same way. Only then, all the bishops of the world-wide Church condemned his views, rather than supporting them on the *Today* programme.

But are we ourselves innocent of the Pelagian heresy? Although the teaching's quite clear in the Bible (read particularly Rom. 5.12-21), it's not just liberals but charismatics too who 'will not put up with sound doctrine' but instead, to suit their own desires, 'gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.' (2 Tim.4.3). **PT**