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What About the 'Gay Gene'? An Honest Look at the Evidence

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Homosexuality, they have argued, is thus a "natural" condition and is not morally significant. This argument appears regularly in political discourse and public debate, and many people just assume that the claim has solid scientific evidence behind it. Not hardly. With the issue of homosexuality front and center in our national debate, an honest assessment of the scientific research is in order.

A report published in the April 23, 1999 edition of Science refuted earlier claims by scientists who have discovered the so-called "gay gene." That's right–these claims were put to rest over five years ago. Why do so many influential people still contend that we now "know" that homosexuality is caused by genes?

Back in 1999, clinical neurologists George Rice and George Ebers of Canada's University of Western Ontario reported that they had failed to find a link between male homosexuality and chromosomal region Xq28, a link which had been claimed by other researchers. The Canadian results were supported by work at the University of Chicago which, according to Science, "does not provide strong support for a linkage." Rice stated that the cumulative evidence "would suggest that if there is a linkage it's so weak that it's not important."

Two of the most significant scientists pressing this case are Dean Hamer of the National Cancer Institute and Simon LeVay, a neuroscientist formerly with the Salk Institute. Among those arguing for a biological basis of homosexuality, Hamer is the establishment expert. LeVay is the passionate evangelist. In fact, LeVay has left the task of scientific research to others, and now works as a homosexual activist. He sees the biological case as essential to overcoming claims that homosexual behavior is sinful. "A genetic component in sexual orientation says 'This is not a fault, and this is not your fault.'"

The case for a biological cause gained credibility in 1991 through research by Michael Bailey which studied patterns of male homosexuality among identical twins. The case was strengthened in 1993 when Hamer and colleagues claimed to have identified a specific genetic link to male homosexuality, and to have isolated the link to the X chromosome. Both studies received international media attention and coverage. Rice and Ebers undertook their study to see if these claims could be confirmed. To the contrary, they found no link in the Xq28 region which could function with any significant influence. Ebers stated that "there is no hint or direction of the initial observation." Hamer defended his research, but conceded that the new studies do indicate that at least some cases of homosexuality are not linked to the X-chromosome. He called for yet more research involving hundreds of homosexual twins.

Hamer knows that the research can be a two-edged sword. In 1997 he warned, "The trick will be to make sure that sexual orientation is included on a list of 'normal' traits rather than on a list of diseases and disorders." He acknowledged that deciding "which list sexual orientation belongs to is a social judgment, not a scientific one." Homosexual activists downplayed the research study but appeared to retreat from any claim of a biological basis for homosexuality.

David M. Smith, speaking for the Human Rights Campaign, a homosexual-rights political organization, told The Washington Post that, "In the final analysis it should not matter whether there is a biological basis or there is not." This is quite a shift from the group's established strategy. Responses to the study are predictable. The argument that homosexuality is matter of biology rather than morality is too useful for the homosexual community to abandon it altogether. Some remain convinced that research will eventually prove this case. Conservatives will welcome the research as "proof" that homosexuality is freely chosen and that biology plays no significant part in the homosexual condition. Both sides had better be careful lest the scientific evidence should eventually build against their case.

Conservative Christians believe that homosexual behavior is sinful, not because of scientific evidence or the absence of a biological basis, but because the Bible is so clear in its condemnation of all homosexual acts, and even of homosexual desire (Romans 1: 27). The Rice and Ebers study does reveal the weakness of the biological argument put forward by homosexual activists, but evangelicals must be cautious in denying the possibility of any biological factors related to homosexuality.

Both serious and ludicrous arguments are now put forth claiming a genetic basis for, among other things, alcoholism, gambling addictions, violent behavior, and even excessive television watching. All of these represent efforts to remove social stigma and to classify sinful behaviors as normal, or at least understandable. Dean Hamer has moved on to argue that belief in God is linked to a "God gene."

The flight from moral responsibility is a hallmark of the modern age. We hope for modern science to heal our diseases and excuse our sins. The Bible will not allow this evasion. Our sinful behavior, rooted in biology or not, is a matter for which we are fully accountable. After all, as the Psalmist confessed: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5).

The doctrine of total depravity reminds us that no part of ourselves is free from sin and its injury. That certainly includes our genetic code as well. As the church father Ambrose of Milan (340-397) stated, "Before we are born we are infected with the contagion, and before we see the light of day we experience the injury of our origin." In the end, the scientific evidence is not morally important, though it may be medically useful.

The church's witness to the biblical condemnation of homosexuality as sin is a crucial test of faithfulness, no matter where the biological research may lead. In the end, the church must take its stand on the Word of God–not on the latest genetic analysis.
