

LGBT+ and the Bible

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Since many people today are struggling to understand the Bible's teachings in relation to LGBT+, I recently did some further study on this in consultation with some highly regarded spiritual and academic leaders in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Having said that, the reflections that follow are my own and represent my current understanding on an issue that seems settled to many, yet is very unsettled to many others. I begin with a summary of I consider the biblical ideal on sexuality and gender. To believe in Jesus Christ is to believe in the whole Judeo-Christian Bible (Luke 24:44-45; John 5:39-40), including both Old (Hebrew Bible) and New (Greek Bible) Testaments. Our understanding of the biblical ideal must be grounded in biblical principles while at the same time considering the realities of today's broken world.

The biblical teaching on sexuality and gender originates in the story of creation (Genesis 1-3). God created everything and everyone, and that creation was "very good" (Gen 1:31). In that context, the biblical ideal on gender is expressed in Genesis 1:26-27 for the whole human race. Human beings were created in the image of God. Being in the image of God expresses the extremely high value all human beings have in God's sight. In Genesis 1, the image of God is introduced in the context of male and female, God's original ideal regarding gender. God's ideal on sexuality is expressed in Genesis 2:24 as occurring in the context of a lifelong marital relationship between a man and a woman. From the creation perspective, sexual relationships outside of such lifelong male/female partnerships fall short of God's ideal.

These biblical ideals are not arbitrary decrees. They come from a loving Creator who desires our best good as human beings (John 10:10). Sexuality brings out the best (love, care, commitment-- cf. SoS 4:1-16) and the worst (lust, indifference, exploitation-- cf. 2 Sam 11:1-27; 13:1-33) in human beings. So expressions of sexuality outside the ideal can lead to destructive consequences. Without the stable foundation of a loving and intact family, children often grow up confused, alienated, and angry. A husband and wife, whose child is a living embodiment of their longstanding oneness, are the ideal guardians to which that child can be entrusted. Promiscuity of all kinds violates the ideal and results in consequences that can be clearly seen in society today. So the Seventh-day Adventist Church is on solid biblical grounds in opposing promiscuity of all kinds.

The biblical principles on gender and sexuality are re-affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6 (ESV—cf. Mark 10:6-9). In response to a question about divorce, Jesus said: “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female (referring to Genesis 1:27), and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’ (quoting Genesis 2:24)?” In this statement, Jesus re-affirms the Genesis ideal for both gender and sexuality. The ideal, therefore, is not limited to the beginning of human history, it continues to be valid for the ongoing Christian community. Sexuality brings out the best in human beings when expressed in the context of loving, trusting relationships that grow deeper and deeper over a lifetime.

The Bible and Human Reality

The biblical ideal articulated above is, in a nutshell, as follows: Human beings were created in the image of God (Gen 1:26-28). The image of God is introduced in the context of male and female, God’s original ideal regarding gender. God’s ideal on sexuality is then expressed in Genesis 2:24 as occurring in the context of a lifelong marital relationship between a man and a woman. From the creation perspective, sexual relationships outside of such lifelong male/female partnerships fall short of God’s ideal. And all this was re-affirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-6.

There is another side, however, to the biblical witness regarding sexuality. While Jesus does not directly address issues related to LGBT+, in Matthew 19:7-8 (ESV) He addresses the contrast between the ideal and the real in the human response to Scripture: “They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away (reflecting Deut 24:1-4)?’ He said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.’” With the entrance of sin into the world (Gen 3:1-13), the ideal remains in place (cf. Matt 19:9), but things often go seriously awry. The same Moses who articulated the ideal in Genesis 1 and 2, reports how quickly and deeply the human race fell from that ideal (Gen 4:1-24; 6:5; 9:20-23; 11:1-9, cf. many deviations from God’s ideals by the patriarchs). Under inspiration, he upheld the ideal while not ignoring the real. Even after the first advent of Christ, the church struggled to implement the ideal (note, for example, the series of “but ifs” in 1 Corinthians 7:1-40, cf. texts like Matt 19:12c; Rom 8:22-23; 1 Tim 3:2, 12; Tit 1:6). So, a biblical approach to LGBT+ issues must address the depths of the human condition at the same time as it seeks to encourage the ideal.

While the Bible does not directly address issues of sexual orientation, as we understand them today, it does indicate that all human beings have an orientation to sin (Rom 3:23; 13:14; Gal 5:24; Eph 2:1-3). In Romans 13:14, Paul does not say that sinful desires are eradicated at conversion, but that those who put Christ at the center of their lives will not “act out” (Greek root: *poieō*) those desires (Rom 13:14; Eph 2:3). Wrestling with our sin orientation is a lifelong process. We are, therefore, called to embrace God’s ideal for human sexuality “more and more” (1 Thess 4:1-7). This indicates that those seeking to follow Jesus will be at various stages

of the “more and more” at any given time. Attempting to enforce the ideal is, therefore, often an exercise in hypocrisy. The brokenness of human beings, as a result of sin, is a brokenness common to us all. It may take different forms, but a biblical approach will avoid an attitude of moral superiority toward anyone failing to attain the ideal.

The Bible and the Science of Gender and Sexuality

While the Word of God is the foundation of our understanding of God’s will, it does not address all the issues and challenges that a Christian faces in regard to human sexuality. We also gain insight into the realities of human existence through God’s other book, nature. We are encouraged in this approach by Scripture, which declares that God’s creation is a revelation of His handiwork, even in the midst of a broken world (Psa 19:1-4; Rom 1:20). Scientific study helps us understand the trauma that human beings experience as a result of sin. While what we learn from nature must be submitted to the clear teachings of the Scriptures, it can enlighten us particularly in areas where Scripture has not spoken, and it can help clarify issues where Scripture is not clear.

The best, current, scientific information indicates that many, if not most, LGBT+ people did not choose the orientations in which they experience life. While Seventh-day Adventists and other Christians are divided on whether or not LGBT+ is a choice, I feel compelled by evidence-based science to acknowledge that those who claim LGBT+ orientation have not necessarily chosen that condition (Jesus may have hinted at this possibility in Matthew 19:12). This evidence has major implications for addressing this issue. If LGBT+ is not a choice in even some situations, it would be cruel and judgmental to automatically assume that any given individual made that choice in some perverse sense. Where LGBT+ orientation is not a choice, sin does not reside in the orientation, it resides in how one responds to that orientation. I find the issues in this regard to be complex and real. And I deeply appreciate that church leadership through the years has given institutions like my own freedom to wrestle prayerfully with issues like these on the basis, not only of Scripture, but of the best scientific and experiential evidence available to us.

The Bible and Compassion

What can we learn from Scripture about how to treat those who do not meet the ideal (which includes every one of us at one time or another)? It is critical to begin by acknowledging that LGBT+ people (along with the rest of humanity, of course) bear the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). While the image of God may be marred in all of us, it is not fully eradicated by sin. To disrespect the image of God in anyone is to disrespect the One who created and sustains us all. But, more than that, LGBT+ people are “brothers (sisters) for whom Christ died” (Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11). When we disrespect anyone for whom Christ died, we disrespect the cross, and the high value God placed upon the human race there. We also look to the example of Jesus Christ, who in His earthly life treated sinners of all sorts with dignity and respect, including tax

collectors, whose very profession was offensive to followers of God at the time (Matt 9:10-12; Luke 15:1-2; 19:1-10). Jesus refused to look down on any sinner or condemn them (Luke 7:36-50), but invited them to re-orient their lives in relation to God's ideals (John 8:11).

To know someone is to love them. When we take the time to know and love LGBT+ people, they are no longer abstractions, they are human beings who want to be understood, respected, treated fairly, and loved like anyone else. LGBT+ people have been disproportionately affected by stigma, discrimination, and abuse. The church and its institutions, often motivated by fidelity to Scripture, have nevertheless caused significant harm to LGBT+ individuals. So, any outreach to them must begin with repentance and heartfelt confession, followed by careful listening to their life stories and their struggles. It is from a context of love and understanding, acknowledging the brokenness we have in common, that we earn the right to invite them to consider the advantages in a life of sexual purity and self-control (1 Thess 4:4-7; Rom 12:2). "Our neighbor is everyone who is wounded and bruised by the adversary. Our neighbor is everyone who is the property of God." *Desire of Ages*, 503.

Conclusion: Living in Light of the End

When you get to know and love people, it is a natural tendency to avoid conflict in your dealings with them. But while it may be convenient to do so, Adventist Christian communities can never abandon God's ideals because we look forward to God's eschatological restoration of the ideal in a glorious garden city, the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:1-5; Rom 8:19-25). While the ideal is not always achieved in Christian communities, we are called to display the ideal to the degree possible in anticipation of the new earth and the new humanity exhibited in the resurrected body of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-14; 2 Cor 5:15; Eph 2:3-7). Adventist Christian communities seek to uphold the ideal, while treating all who fall short of that ideal, whether by nature or by choice, as if they were the living embodiment of Jesus Christ in our midst. "Inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me (Matt 25:40, NKJV)." As long as human probation remains open, God does not abandon those he loves (Ezek 16:1-64; John 21:15-17), neither should we. I invite all who read these words to be faithful in loving others the way Christ has loved us (John 13:34).