

## **LGBT and the Church**

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This is not a topic I am anxious to address for a number of reasons. It is a hot-button topic, which often infuriates people from multiple perspectives. It has political implications, which isn't a lot of fun these days. But if you work at a faith-based institution of higher education in California, you can't avoid the topic. And if you are a church administrator anywhere in North America (or increasingly in much of the world), you can't avoid the topic either. To compound matters, scientific and biblical knowledge about the topic is increasing exponentially at the same time most people would prefer not to have their pre-conceived opinions on the subject challenged. So in many ways this blog project is a no-win proposition. But decades ago I made a commitment to God to speak the truth as I see it, without fear or favor, so here goes anyway.

Because of extensive conversations on the topic at my home institution, Loma Linda University, I have had to get up to speed on many issues related to LGBT. Recently I have been asked to consult with a number of Seventh-day Adventist Church entities at the conference, union and division level. These consultations have gone surprisingly well, and my contributions have been considered game changers for many. World church leadership is also seeking to make its way forward on this issue, maintaining faithfulness to the testimony of the Bible regarding sexuality, on the one hand, but also faithfulness to the Bible's call to exercise compassion for every human being as a "soul for whom Christ died" (see Romans 14:15 and 1 Corinthians 8:11). I have been asked, therefore, to offer my contribution to the discussion in this format and to be one of many voices helping the church find its way on this issue. I will express important principles that I have learned from attention to the Bible, science and experience. In doing so, I speak as an individual, I do not represent the position of Loma Linda University or any other organization. But I do speak as a committed Christian and a committed member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. I support its teaching on marriage and sexuality as the ideal that all should strive for within their capabilities.

There is a personal element in this topic for me. Back in the 1950s, when I was still in the single digits, an aunt moved into our home from another country, which had suffered greatly during World War II. She was "different," but a lot of fun, except for the smoking, which I didn't particularly care for. People quietly talked about 1945 and some really bad things that had happened to her then. She didn't particularly care for men, or for God, for that matter. Awhile after, my mom said that her "friend" would be coming over and also living with us. I was way

too sheltered to suspect anything unusual about the arrangement until I was a lot older. But I loved both women and I was sure that God loved them at least as much as I did. So when the gay and lesbian movement became public knowledge, I was not taken by surprise the way some of my friends were. When I moved to Loma Linda University in 2007, and became aware of the ferment on this issue in the State of California the following year, I was more than willing to learn all I could about the topic and help the University navigate some of these issues.

### Three Important Books on “LGBT” Issues

Three books, in particular, have been extremely helpful to me, two from the Seventh-day Adventist perspective and one from a dear colleague in the Methodist tradition. The latter book is *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, by Richard Hays (San Francisco: Harper, 1996). It was named by *Christianity Today* as one of the hundred most important religious books of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In it is a chapter where Hays wrestles with the Scriptures on this topic in full and fair dialogue with a gay friend. Hays’ commitment to God and the Scriptures is unassailable. I remember him responding to a question at a seminar in Loma Linda about whether he has changed his position since he wrote that book twenty years ago. He responded, “I wish I could.” His compassion for people caught between their personal experience and what the Bible teaches was clear. But he testified that he couldn’t get around what the Bible teaches. He said something to the effect that: “However one might exegete specific texts, the overall trend of the Bible is clear. Whenever the Bible speaks about sexuality within a traditional marriage, it is always positive, whenever it speaks about sexual alternatives, it is always negative.” Any person of faith approaching the issue honestly will find engaging the Bible on this topic in today’s world complex and sometimes heart-wrenching.

The second book I found helpful was the volume edited by my esteemed colleague, David Larson, and others; *Christianity and Homosexuality: Some Seventh-day Adventist Perspectives* (Adventist Forum, 2008). The book is generally considered to promote a more left-wing perspective than that of Hays or the denomination. But Larson explained to me the intention of the editors that the multi-author volume would provide a balance of perspectives that would include right, left, and middle. But some of the more right-leaning authors pulled out rather than be associated with other authors in the book, so the more conservative perspective in the book was there but relatively limited, giving the book a distinct, more radical flavor than the editors intended. While I found some of the perspectives extreme, I learned a lot from the book and recommended it to the members of the University Board as a good way to get up to speed on the issues.

In reaction to the above book, the Seminary at Andrews University set up a conference including many of the more conservative scholars who had bowed out of the earlier project and added significant names from conservative scholarship outside the Adventist Church. This resulted in another book, *Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church*, edited by Roy Gane, Nicholas Miller and Peter Swanson (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2012). It was expected that this conference and book would be very different from Larson’s. To my great

surprise, the two books seemed to agree more than they disagreed. There are certainly points of difference. But the points of agreement were considerable and, in my view, point the way forward for the church. Any conversation on this issue should begin with what all reasonable believers can agree on. One purpose of this blog series is to spell out some of those points of agreement and explore the best way for the church to move forward. I don't claim to offer a final word, but those who have heard me talk about these things have urged me to share them for the benefit of the church.

### Defining Terms

A few years back the American Academy of Religion had a "Gay and Lesbian Studies Group." Then more recently it became the "LGBT Studies Group." Then a couple of years ago it became the "LGBTIQ Studies Group." What was going on? Scholars of gay and lesbian studies became increasingly aware that human sexuality is a lot more complicated than just "gay and straight". So I thought we'd better define our terms before we get any further.

**Lesbian:** A lesbian is a female who is not only attracted to other females sexually (rather than males) but sees that attraction as a core personal identity. Lesbians do not apologize for their attractions and/or sexual preferences, they embrace them. A person could embrace the term "lesbian" even though she is not in a sexual relationship. She feels her sexual identity is a part of "who she is."

**Gay:** The term "gay" is applied to males who are not only attracted to other males sexually (rather than females) but see that attraction as a core personal identity. A "gay person" refers to someone who identifies with his sexual identity, whether or not he is in a sexual relationship. When people speak of gays and lesbians as a group, the term "same-sex relationships" is increasingly preferred to the term "homosexuality," which can have pejorative overtones in some contexts.

**Bisexual:** Here's where things can get a bit confusing. They are individuals who are more or less equally attracted to both sexes or, at different times, to either sex. They can "play it both ways." Some prefer to call this condition "pansexual" or "fluid" sexuality. Bisexuality is not the same thing as homosexuality, where a person is primarily attracted to the same sex, although it can easily be confused with it. Some prefer to think of sexuality as a continuum, with opposite-sex attraction at one end, same-sex attraction at the other, and bisexual in the middle. But bisexuals are not necessarily "50/50," the attractions may be fluid, likely more inclined toward one gender than the other.

**Transgender:** Things get even more complicated here. A transgendered person is "none of the above" although they may appear at various times to be "all of the above." Transgender means that the gender (and often sexuality) of brain and body are in conflict. In 99% or more of human cases, the gender of the brain is the same as that of the body. But in less than one per cent of cases, a person is demonstrably gender conflicted. The gender they identify with is not the one

that manifests itself physically. External gender is determined in the first three months after conception. Brain gender (whether a person considers themselves male or female) is determined 4-6 months after conception. I once assumed that people who cross-dress or pursue sex-reassignment surgery were “making it up.” But I now understand that male and female brains are not the same and can usually be distinguished by brain scans. So if someone is physically male but identifies as a female, it is not usually some imaginary condition, it is because that person’s brain was assembled differently than that of the typical physically-male person. Another term for this experience is “gender dysphoria.”

If a person’s brain is female and is attracted to males, but the body is male, it will appear as same-sex attraction, but is actually not so at the level of the brain. So this category complicates things for a church community that wants simple, “biblical” categories for dealing with relational situations. Later on, we will address the question of the degree to which the Bible anticipated these and other complications in the gender reality we are exposed to today.

**Intersex:** The term intersex is used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with an anatomy that doesn’t neatly fit the definitions of either male or female. In other words, in about one per cent of live births, the physical gender is ambiguous. One cannot tell by looking at the genitals if the person is male or female, or the person may have external genitalia for both or neither male and/or female. Or a person may have male genitalia on the outside, but female organs on the inside. To confine conversations about sexuality to heterosexuality or homosexuality is to ignore the tremendous complexity of possible conditions a person may find themselves in.

**Queer:** When I was small, “queer” was a derogatory term for people who were “different,” usually homosexual. Today the term is applied to all of the above, to sexualities and genders that don’t fit the typical mold. It is a “catch-all” category for anyone who doesn’t fit the standard experience of gender and sexuality. So scholars involved in studying any of the above realities sometimes speak of “queer studies.” As such, this is no longer considered a derogatory term but a category grouping together people who don’t fit the typical gender mold.

If all of the above is way more complicated than you wanted to know, please be aware that I have only scratched the surface. I believe the above definitions are helpful, but they are over-simplifications for the sake of communicating a basic understanding. There are many types of transgender people and many types of intersex conditions. Scientists are currently aware of some 36 genes that affect the gender outcome, both of body and brain. If any one of these genes develops or combines with others out of the “norm,” it can create noticeable differences from the typical male or female presentation. In some cases, several genes may develop or relate to each other in unusual ways. So the varieties of sexual and gender manifestation are far more numerous than we thought and much of that is not a “choice” that a person made along the way.

When it comes to faith and to church community, therefore, this issue requires the compassion and understanding of Christ toward those who seem “queer” to us. The natural reaction to “differentness” is rejection, but the gospel calls us to treat people in a way that is

counter to our natural, sinful reaction. The rest of this paper is an attempt to flesh out the above two sentences.

### **Three Levels of Homosexuality**

I use the traditional term “homosexuality” instead of “same-sex attraction” here because the latter is not broad enough for the points I am trying to make. What people call homosexuality actually comes in three different forms, each describing a larger group than the previous. Since people, particularly church people, often confuse these forms, and that leads to serious misunderstanding, it is important to be as clear as possible.

***Gay or Lesbian Identity.*** As noted earlier, in the narrowest sense homosexuality can be a matter of identity, not just a matter of orientation or attraction. To have a gay or a lesbian identity mean that a person who feels attracted to others of the same sex embraces that attraction as core to their identity. Gays and lesbians, in the technical sense, do not see themselves as primarily black or white, male or female, German or Hispanic; their core identity is wrapped up in their attraction to those of the same gender. It is “who they are.” They are not ashamed of their orientation, they can even be militant in promoting it. Homosexual people who embrace a gay or lesbian identity offer the biggest challenge to churches who embrace the New Testament understanding of the gospel (see my corresponding paper “LGBT and the Bible” in the “Articles” page of the Armageddon website). According to the New Testament, no one can serve two masters. Either Jesus Christ and the gospel are central to one’s identity or something else is. All are equal at the foot of the cross and all are likewise challenged to embrace Christ’s call for total and unlimited commitment. Promoting Christian commitment is not prejudice or “gay-bashing,” it is the same commitment all are asked to do, whether straight or otherwise. Your former core commitment may have been to a country, or an ethnic group, or your relatives, or you racial peers; all are called to make their one and only central commitment to the person and mission of Jesus Christ. Gays and lesbians are to be treated as equals at the foot of the cross, and they too are called to make Jesus Christ their one and only central commitment. On this matter there is no inequality and there can be no compromise.

***Homosexual Orientation.*** But gay and lesbian identity is only one aspect of the church’s dealings with homosexuality. Gays and lesbians truly sold out to their sexual identity are a relatively small group. There is a much larger group of people who are strongly and consistently attracted to others of the same sex. This is what we would call homosexual orientation or same-sex orientation. For them, the orientation to the same sex seems as natural as the typical heterosexual person’s orientation to the opposite sex. But orientation and identity are not the same thing. Full disclosure, when it comes to orientation, I am about as heterosexual as they come, but I don’t make that the center of my life or my theology. It is an aspect of who I am, but it is not core to my identity. While I once strongly identified as a German-American and as an awesome athletic specimen (in my dreams at least), my core identity is now centered in Jesus Christ and the unique picture of God I learned as a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. And I know people with a homosexual orientation who are just as committed to Christ

and the church as I am. They do not embrace their orientation in place of Christ or alongside Christ. It is something they feel that they did not choose and cannot change, so they seek to keep it submitted to Jesus Christ as much as I commit my heterosexuality to Him.

**Same-Sex Attractions.** There is an even larger group of people who do not have a homosexual orientation but may have on occasion felt a homosexual attraction. It is not uncommon for a heterosexual person at one point or another in their life to see someone else of the same sex and feel something stirring that they did not expect. As mentioned earlier, I am about as heterosexual as they come. But I can remember as a young person talking with one of my teachers. It was a friendly conversation, we were face to face about a foot apart, and he had this interesting moustache that moved when he talked. Suddenly, in the back of my mind I heard the words, “Kiss him.” I didn’t, but I wondered for a long time where that had come from and what it meant (more on that later). More recently, I spoke with a colleague in the medical school who specializes in psychology and asked him what percentage of heterosexual people have an experience like mine. “I don’t know any research on it,” he said, “but based on my counseling experience I’d say somewhere between 50 and 100%. What do these kinds of experiences mean and how does the whole homosexual spectrum fit into the biblical world view? Is it a choice? How should the church relate to people who disclose a homosexual orientation?”

### Emerging Conclusions

As I examine the Seventh-day Adventist literature on LGBT, I do see an emerging consensus on a number of challenging issues. My report is not the final word, by any means. But it is better to have an educated position on difficult topics than a knee-jerk or naïve position. I am open to further research and deepening understanding, but there has developed a strong political element in relation to this topic. There are many issues researchers will not touch because of their fear that the results may work against the political consensus, or that they may be ostracized by their research community. So the research needs to be attended to, but with a certain amount of healthy skepticism in a politically-charged research environment. Give appropriate deference to those who have spent their lives researching on issues of sexuality, but think for yourself, and don’t buy conclusions where the evidence seems suspect. And be very suspicious of any result that is clearly contradictory to Scripture.

Having said that, many ideas that claim to be based on the Bible are actually based on either selective reading or a distorted reading lens. One of my teachers loved to say, “It isn’t hard to have strong convictions on any topic, as long as you are willing to ignore some of the evidence.” On top of that, all readers of the Bible, including conservative ones, tend to read the Bible through a hermeneutical lens that can distort the outcome of their study. I have spoken to this latter point at some length in chapters three and four of my book *The Deep Things of God*. I refer you there for more detail (See the “Books” tab at the Armageddon website). Below I share some things that Seventh-day Adventists (and other conservative Christians) who are

knowledgeable on both the Bible and science are coming to agree on. I believe these kinds of agreements need to be the foundation of further study and practice.

One emerging consensus among educated Adventists (including both conservatives and liberals) is that one's sexual orientation in most cases is not a choice. The behavioral sciences have always debated the issue of nature versus nurture. Is a condition inherited (nature), or does it exist because of experience and training (nurture-- intentional and otherwise)? Is a homosexual orientation genetic or otherwise inherited? Or is it something that happens because of parental relationships, abuse, or certain family dynamics? Is it a choice or is it determined in some way? From my experience and understanding, these debates often swing back and forth between the two options, but most often the evidence leads researchers to "both/and" eventually. Most conditions can be traced to a combination of both inheritance (genes, etc.) and upbringing. And inheritance does seem to play a role in same-sex attraction and orientation. Be that as it may, even if homosexuality was solely a result of nurture rather than nature, Adventist understanding is that the character of a child is largely formed by the age of seven. And how many seven-year old children get to choose their parents?

So while the adoption of a gay or lesbian identity involves a choice, homosexual orientation is rarely, if ever, a choice. There are some exceptions, and we will address those below. This conclusion is very significant for the church. Regardless of how it happened, if orientation is not a choice in most instances, the church must be careful not to demand of people something that they are not capable of, even with prayer and fasting. If the science is correct, that would be like demanding that someone born without a leg produce a natural one before they can be accepted into the church. To require such would be abusive and cruel. At the same time, orientation should not be confused with identity. To accept a person with physical, mental, or emotional challenges is not the same thing as "condoning sin." To accept a person who is "different" through no choice of their own is not "condoning sin."

When I shared this consensus with an Adventist friend, he became upset with me. "To live with a homosexual orientation and not try to change it is to live in sin," he proclaimed, "I believe that it is a choice that people make, and wrong choices are sin." While I have not met a homosexual person who felt that they had a choice (many have prayed for years that God would change them), that story would not be convincing to him. So I simply asked my friend, "When did you choose to be heterosexual?" He had no answer. Where we stand on this issue determines to a great degree how we treat all kinds of people whose life and struggles are different from our own.

The best scientific research I have seen, at least from sources not biased against Scripture or religion, have concluded that a gay or lesbian identity is changeable. A person embraces a gay or lesbian identity by choice, it is not inherent. This means that a person can have a homosexual orientation but still embrace the gospel call to accept Jesus Christ as the Lord of one's life. Accepting Jesus as Savior and Lord is core to what it means to be a follower of Jesus, so this finding is very significant. There is no immutable barrier to LGBT people accepting the gospel and participating in the life of the church.

At the same time, research indicates that, in most instances, homosexual orientation is not a choice, but is ingrained into the person's being. So-called "change therapies" have had very limited success over a period of five or six years (there may seem to be a "change" over the short term, but it usually does not last). It is likely that where a change can be scientifically verified, the person was actually bisexual rather than homosexual, but these categories can be hard to separate clinically. If one's orientation is ingrained, and not subject to change, that is extremely significant for how Christians should treat LGBT people. To demand a change in inner thought processes and urges when such a change is unlikely or impossible is more abusive than godly.

How do we explain the presence of immutable characteristics that incline a person contrary to God's original creation design? From a biblical perspective, these are a consequence of human rebellion and sin, but not necessarily the individual's own rebellion and sin. Sin is not just a legal breaking of the law. Sin is a poison or an infection that is ingrained inside all human beings from birth, and distorts everything they do and everything they are. In this we are all on the same ground. We are all broken people whose brokenness may manifest itself in different ways, but from the standpoint of the gospel, we all start in a similar place. We are "out of compliance" by nature. That means "temptation" is not the same thing as sin. In a broken world, sexuality of all types can incline a person toward sin. In this the homosexual and the heterosexual are on the same ground. Both are broken, in the biblical sense, and both need the redemption that comes in Christ, and the support of the Holy Spirit. Sin and its consequences cannot be eradicated by effort, they require divine intervention, which will only be experienced in its fullness at the Second Coming (Rom 8:22-23; 1 Cor 15:51-54). Until then, we are all in need of compassion, understanding, and forgiveness.

This tells me that any Christian outreach to LGBT people must occur in full awareness of a common brokenness. If heterosexual Christians act as if they are morally superior to homosexual people, they are not only abusive, they are wrong from a biblical perspective (don't worry, we will be looking at the biblical texts themselves soon). They are like those Jesus describes as seeing the speck in another person's eye while missing the plank in their own (Matt 7:1-5, NIV). The biblical perspective on sexuality is not biased against gays, its analysis penetrates deep into all human self-deception and delusion. LGBT people are not exempt from the biblical analysis, neither are they to be singled out as uniquely lost or depraved in some way.

Another emerging conclusion is that bisexual and homosexual are not the same thing. If one thinks of orientation as a continuum with full heterosexuality at one end and full homosexuality at the other, bisexuality is a condition in which the person is somewhere between, attracted at times to the same sex and at times to the opposite sex. Most people are at one end of the spectrum or the other, but some are at various places in between. For church communities that like everything simple or "black and white," sexuality and its manifestations are more complicated than they would like. Add in intersex and transgender, and things are far more complicated yet. Bisexuals may have more choice in how they express their sexuality, but



bisexuality is also more a symptom of human brokenness than the result of a person's decision and action.

In this generation, people and human sexuality have proven to be more complex than we realized before. In the next section I turn to some of the biblical data to see what "word from the Lord" we can get to help manage the complexities of church communities today.

## The Biblical Data

### Jesus and Sexual Controversy

According to the gospels, Jesus is the clearest revelation of God the world has ever seen (John 1:14-18; 14:9). If we want a picture of how God views homosexuality in general and LGBT people in particular, it would be extremely helpful if Jesus offered a clear position on the matter. But a careful reading of the gospels shows that Jesus never said anything about any aspect of LGBT. No question on this issue was ever raised in His presence and no pronouncement from Him on the topic is recorded in the gospel records. But that does not mean that Jesus has nothing to say about human sexuality. There is a very significant dialogue He has with the Pharisees regarding divorce (Matthew 19 and parallels), and Jesus says a number of things in this passage that are pertinent to our topic. I will quote the passage with some highlighting of my own and then offer some comments:

<sup>3</sup> And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" <sup>4</sup> He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them **from the beginning** made them male and female, <sup>5</sup> and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? (**Gen 2:24**) <sup>6</sup> So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

<sup>7</sup> They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" (**Deut 24:1-4**) <sup>8</sup> 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. <sup>9</sup> And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

Matthew 19:3-9

Gerald Winslow notes that in this passage and several others the Bible lays out an ideal and a real. The ideal is grounded in creation. Male and female are physically and emotionally designed to bond to each other in lifelong unity. Forsaking all others, they will find undistracted joy in each other's company and in mutual sexual experience. They were designed over time to achieve ever-increasing intimacy and delight in each other. That is the ideal. But after the Fall (Genesis 3) there is also a "real." Hearts get hard. Children are abused. Husbands and wives cheat on each other. Some people get sexually greedy and exploit many. Divorces happen. Hearts get broken. Also, part of the real is that some people are attracted to the same sex.

Others suffer from dysphoria between body and brain. Some have incomplete sexual organs or organs from both sexes. Back in the beginning, God laid out the ideal. And the ideal remains in place. But in reality, things often go awry. Jesus states the ideal, but He also recognizes the real. Because hearts are hard, the creation ideal is rarely, if ever, achieved fully on this earth.

## **The Ideal and the Real**

Whenever the Bible speaks about divorce, the ideal and the real both come into play. Jesus states the ideal when He says that “in the beginning it was not so.” But when the real happens, when divorces occur, regulations are given that protect weaker parties in a destructive situation. So, Jesus was very strict in interpreting the ideal, but very compassionate in dealing with the real. In John 8:1-11, a woman is caught in the act of adultery. The ideal would seem to call for harsh condemnation and punishment. Instead, Jesus tells the woman, “I don’t condemn you, go and sin no more.” Jesus states the ideal in the most straightforward way (Matthew 19), but when confronted with the real, he is most gracious, compassionate, and surprisingly lenient.

The same is true of Moses. He states the ideal in Genesis 2:24. Man and women are joined together, not to be separated. But in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 he states the real. Since divorces happen, here’s how to minimize the damage. We find the same pattern in Paul. In 1 Corinthians Paul six times states the ideal, then introduces the real with “but if.” In some cases celibacy is the ideal (Matt 19:11-12), even in marriage (1 Cor 7:1), but because of immorality (7:2) Paul encourages married sexuality. The ideal is for the unmarried to remain so (7:8), but in the real world, marriage is generally to be preferred. The ideal for marriage is lifelong (7:10), but if someone leaves a marriage, there is a new ideal (7:11). Paul states the ideal as an absolute, but offers a backup plan for dealing with the real.

For Seventh-day Adventists, it is interesting that you will find the same pattern in Ellen G. White. She was very strict and uncompromising when stating the ideal (for example, no divorce, marry someone close to you in age). But when faced with real situations, she was very accommodating and even lenient. In one case, church members were dealing with a situation in which a couple divorced, and each married someone else in the church. The church leaders were demanding that the new couples divorce so the original pair could get back together again. When Ellen White was consulted about this situation she said, “Leave them alone, they have suffered enough.” Since Ellen White strongly advised that people marry close to their own age, some were stunned when she allowed her 41-year-old son to marry a 22-year-old girl. When confronted about the situation she retorted, “Best decision Willie ever made.” Individuals recognized as particularly close to God, therefore, consistently exhibited this pattern: state the ideal without compromise, but face the real with compassion and grace. The ideal is what the church teaches, and what it should teach. But the real requires much understanding and compassion.

It seems to me that this pattern is relevant to the challenges people face when it comes to LGBT, both those experiencing themselves as “different” and those dealing with them. LGBT conditions are among the many ways in which the creation ideal is not worked out in this life. They are part of the real. While the church must always uphold the ideal, it must also deal with the real. And in the real world there is great need for understanding, compassion, and grace, and not just for LGBT people. We have all failed to live out the ideal, so we are all in need of understanding, compassion, and grace. The church must be to others what every member of the church needs as well.

## It Is an Abomination

I turn now to what some have called the “clobber texts” of the Bible (Gen 19:1-15; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9-11). These are the ones people use to “clobber” anyone they perceive as different, particularly in terms of gender or sexuality. Two of these texts are in the book of Leviticus. “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is **an abomination**” (*tôêvah*-- Lev 18:22). Clearly this text is speaking to men, calling male to male sex an “abomination.” That is a very loaded and negative word in today’s English. A similar text is Leviticus 20:13: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed **an abomination** (*tôêvah*); they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.” Here the word “abomination” is combined with a death sentence. The immediate impression is that there is something uniquely reprehensible about same sex activity, at least male to male activity. But I note, first of all, that the text does not address same sex orientation, it addresses a specific activity, a sexual act similar to that of a man with a woman. And it clearly calls such an act an “abomination” (Hebrew: *tôêvah*).

In English the word “abomination” originated in the Latin and means a thing or an activity that causes disgust or hatred, detestable things or actions, something exceptionally sinful, vile or loathsome. The activity described in these texts is considered reprehensible. There is no getting around it. Read without context or nuance, it would seem to justify the kinds of hateful reactions toward gays that have arisen from certain extremist churches in the news. But is abomination an appropriate translation of the Hebrew in these texts? Or does the English term color the situation in ways that might surprise us?

## A Lot of Things are an Abomination

The Hebrew word translated “abomination” is *tôêvah*. *Tôêvah* is used in the Hebrew Bible for idolatry and practices related to it (Deut 7:25-26; 13:14; 27:15; Isa 44:19). It is also used for temple prostitution (1 Kings 14:24), child sacrifice (Jer 32:35; Ezek 16:20-22), adultery (Ezek 33:26), incest (Ezek 22:11) and illegal marriage (Deut 24:1-4). The word is also used for stealing and murder in Jeremiah 7:9-10 and is used in reaction violence and robbery, which are deserving of the death penalty (Ezek 18:10-13). So the English word “abomination” does not fall

far from the sense of the Hebrew. It refers to things and activities that are reprehensible, detestable, loathsome, and worthy of disgust. Upon first reading, it is hard to imagine allowing any LGBT person into the church. But texts read in isolation or out of context can be damaging and hurtful. This is also the case with the use of these texts in Leviticus.

The Hebrew *tô'evah* is used widely in the Bible for things that are not seen so reprehensibly in the modern context, and this needs to be taken into account as well. A crucial text is Proverbs 6:16-19: "There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are **an abomination** [*tô'avath*—same Hebrew word with a different grammatical ending] to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers." Here you find typical "abominations", like murder and evil, but also many "vegetarian" sins, widely practiced in church; looks of pride and superiority, planning actions that are wrong in God's eyes, gossip, and falsehood. Committing "abomination" is not reserved for sins that are considered especially reprehensible, the word is used fairly broadly for things we often tolerate in the church and can easily recognize in ourselves; taking advantage of someone in shopping or business deals (Deut 25:13-16; Prov 11:1), falsehood of any kind (Prov 12:22), eating anything that isn't "kosher" (Deut 14:3ff.—even clean meats today are not usually processed in the biblical fashion).

The takeaway is that using the "clobber texts" of Leviticus to single out homosexuals for disgust or hatred is to not tell the truth about God and His view of human failings. God does not arbitrarily pick out selected practices for special disgust or hatred, He is stirred up by every violation of the created order, including the ones that we consider "white lies" or "vegetarian" sins. We must avoid the idea that God is deeply offended by sin because He is not getting His way. God is offended by sin because violations of the created order introduce a poison into human society and relationships that harms everyone and everything. Sin is sin because it is destructive, often even self-destructive, harming all the creatures God has made. Things that are not ideal are reprehensible because of the collective impact they have had on God's creation. But the full picture of God is not summed up in these "clobber texts," they need to be read in the context of the One who said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father" (John 14:9). That same One also washed the feet of Judas the traitor, and not only Judas, but Peter, the lovable screw-up we can all identify with. Whatever we have to say to LGBT people, we need to say from a standpoint of common brokenness. I believe that to speak as if we are superior because of our orientation is to speak a lie and that is an abomination unto the Lord.

As we go through these difficult texts, we need to remember the biblical tension between the ideal and the real. The Bible is not shy about stating the ideal and the consequences of violating God's ideal. But it also shows the compassion of Jesus Christ for those mired in the real (John 8:3-11). The Bible balances the ideal with deep grace and compassion for those who violate the ideal, whether by inheritance or by cultivation. In all our

dealing with LGBT people we need to remember that we all are souls for whom Christ died (Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11).

## Paul and Homosexuality

The most explicit, and seemingly harshest, condemnation of homosexuality in the Bible is found in Romans 1. Here's the crucial portion:

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the **dishonoring of their bodies** among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to **dishonorable passions**. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are **contrary to nature**; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do **what ought not to be done**” (Rom 1:24-28).

Homosexual actions are here condemned as a “dishonoring of their bodies,” as “dishonorable passions,” as “contrary to nature,” and as “what ought not to be done.” Many take this passage as license to condemn those who are “different” in the harshest terms possible. If God pours out His wrath against homosexuals (Rom 1:18), we ought to do the same. But before we blindly follow that kind of reading, let's take a closer look at this passage in its context.

First of all, in Romans 1 the wrath of God is not poured out because of homosexuality. Homosexuality is not the cause of God's wrath, it is the outcome of God's wrath. Notice Romans 1:18: “For **the wrath of God is revealed** from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness **suppress the truth**.” The core reason that God's wrath is revealed from heaven is that human beings suppress the truth about God. Even if they don't have Bibles, nature itself is evidence enough that God exists and that He is powerful (Rom 1:19-20). And if that is true, then human beings should honor Him and be loyal to Him. But “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” (Romans 1:21). Instead of honoring God they became fools and made images of the created world to worship instead (Rom 1:22-23). So the core reason that God's wrath is poured out is human rebellion. Deep in their hearts human beings knew God, but they turned away from Him and lost their reason.

But what is the wrath of God? For Paul, the wrath of God is not God's violent response to human rebellion, it is His sadly turning away from sinners and allowing them to reap the consequences of their own choices. Three times in the following paragraph Paul says,

“Therefore **God gave them up**. . . to impurity. . .” “For this reason **God gave them up** to dishonorable passions. . .” “Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, **God gave them up** to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Why does God give them up? “Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25). Homosexuality is not the cause of God’s wrath, it is the outcome of God’s wrath. It is clear that Paul holds a very negative view of homosexual activity. It is contrary to the order of creation, and an evidence of human brokenness. But the core reason for the wrath of God is not homosexual activity, it is suppressing the truth about God, and refusing to be thankful for what we have all received from God. So homosexual activity is condemned in Scripture as a result of God’s wrath, not as the cause of it. When it comes to dealing with people who struggle with their sexual and gender identity, such distinctions are very important.

### **We’re All in This Together**

Previously, we noticed in Romans 1 that homosexual activity is not the cause of God’s wrath, it is one of the outcomes of it. This is a very important distinction when it comes to how Christians should treat LGBT people. This distinction is best illustrated by intersex conditions. We can probably all agree that intersex conditions are no more a person’s choice than being born with one leg missing, sterile, or without sight (see John 9:1-4 for a biblical example). We should not heap condemnation upon a person for conditions they did not create or desire. If it should prove (and both science and experience seem increasingly decisive) that a homosexual orientation or transgender condition arose from factors outside the person’s control, then condemning such a person for that condition is arbitrary and cruel. We all have some control, at least, over our behavior, but none of us chose to be born with sinful propensities and desires. Understanding the distinction between homosexual identity, orientation and attractions helps one to better understand how best to respond to people who are “different”, yet want to know Jesus Christ and be part of His church family.

Paul goes on in Romans 1 to list many other consequences of human rebellion and God’s response to it. “They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (Rom 1:29-31). The consequences of human rebellion include homosexual behaviors, but they also include many things one tends to excuse in church; envy, strife, deceit, maliciousness, gossip, slander, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, etc. Homosexuality gets central billing here as the “poster child” of human life lived at increasing distance from God’s original ideal for human relationships (verses 24-28), but it is one of many evidences of human brokenness (verses 29-31). Whatever we may say to LGBT people, we need to say from a standpoint of common brokenness.

But what if you have never shared a single bit of gossip, were never disobedient to your parents, and never indulged in envy, strife, deceit, boasting or any of the other vices listed in Romans 1? Would that mean you are fully justified in condemning people who have failed in these areas? Paul has a message even for you, in Romans 2:1-3: “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because **you, the judge, practice the very same things**. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. Do you suppose, O man- you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself-- that you will escape the judgment of God?” In this somewhat counter-intuitive text, Paul indicates that in the very act of focusing on the sins of another, a negative dynamic settles in on us as well. The sins of others brings out the worst in us. That is why confrontation, when it must happen, needs to happen with “tears in the voice” and with a strong sense of common brokenness. Until God brings us to that place, all our attempts to confront others over sexual misconduct will do more harm than good.

## Paul and Orientation

A big question that arises about Romans 1 and texts like 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 is: *Does Paul know anything about homosexual orientation as we understand it today? Does he speak to that issue in any meaningful way?* In his condemnations of homosexuality, is he including orientation in his description of sinfulness or just homosexual activity? There are two main answers to this question among Bible-believing Seventh-day Adventists. First would be the position stated by Richard Hays, Methodist theologian, and followed by Adventist theologians Ivan Blazen and Richard Rice. They argue, in the technical sense, that Paul has nothing to say about homosexual orientation, that his comments refer to homosexual activity. In that case, the Bible has nothing to say about orientation and people should be accepted in the church on the basis of their beliefs and behavior rather than on their orientation. This view would make room for LGBT people in the church, judging their fitness for membership on the same basis as any other member. In this view, one’s orientation has little or nothing to do with one’s salvation or one’s membership in the church, it is a reality that lies outside of direct revelation. The Bible would, in this case, have a lot to say about one’s beliefs and behavior, but not about orientation. This viewpoint assumes, of course, that homosexual orientation is, in most cases, not a choice, it is a consequence of genetic and environmental characteristics that set one’s orientation firmly well before the age of reason.

A second view of Paul is held by Andrews Seminary theologian Richard Choi. He argues that Paul has a lot to say about orientation. We all have an orientation to sin. That orientation may manifest itself in heterosexual tendencies to sin just as much as in homosexual tendencies to sin. We are all (except perhaps Christ) born with “desires” that move us to sin. These desires cannot be fully eradicated in this life, but need to be controlled by those who accept and follow Jesus Christ. In this view, Paul does address the issue of orientation, but not with the scientific preciseness we might today. He notes that we all have an “orientation” that leads us to do

things we would not want to do if we were in our right minds. I will spend a little more time on this view because it is less well known than the previous among Adventists.

Choi points to texts like Romans 13:14: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision for the flesh**, to gratify its desires (Greek: *epithumias*).” When we put on Christ, these “desires” (as Paul calls them) continue to afflict us, but we are not to “make provision” (Greek: *pronoian*) for them, we are not to exercise care and foresight in satisfying these desires. In the words of the NIV: “Do not **think about** how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” Another text Choi points to is Galatians 5:24: “And those who belong to Christ Jesus **have crucified the flesh** with its passions and desires (*epithumiais*).” This “orientation” to sin is something we have to do battle with every day. One further relevant text is Ephesians 2:1-3: “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, **carrying out the desires** (*epithumiais*) of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.”

Paul does not speak here about eradicating the desires of the body and mind. What characterizes the pre-Christian person is that they eagerly carry out the desires of the flesh, for them this is the natural way of life. We “did what we were told” by our orientation to sin. But when God made us alive in Christ by the power of His resurrection (Eph 2:5-6), we become his working project (Eph 2:10—Greek: *poiêma*) and this causes us to refrain more and more from carrying out our “desires.” These desires are not eradicated, they will be there until the second coming of Christ (Rom 8:22-23), but they are increasingly under control of the one who follows Jesus. They no longer control our behaviors the way that they did before. As any heterosexual Christian can attest, controlling the desires is a lifelong “battle and a march.”

I believe both views of Paul and orientation are correct in relation to their definitions of the term orientation. In the technical, modern-day sense, Paul does not address the issue of sexual orientation. But in a larger sense, he does address it. In our sexuality we all have an orientation to sin. And if we indulge that orientation, we will become more and more at home with that which is unnatural. We all need to do battle with the desires of the flesh (more than 90% of the Bible’s sexual warnings are directed toward heterosexuals). And whatever Christians or Adventists may say about LGBT issues, we need to say from a position of common brokenness. In our sexuality, we were all born “contrary to nature” (Rom 1:25), we all desire that which is not for our own good. And we all desire to “judge” others (Rom 2:1-3) so that we might not feel so bad about our own failings. To truly follow Jesus requires everything we have and there are no shortcuts. In addressing LGBT we can all learn something valuable about our walk with Christ.

## Consequences of “The Fall”



For Paul, God's ideal was exhibited in creation, the natural order of things (Rom 1:25). It was all "very good." Among other things, human beings were created in the image of God, reflecting His character, not only in their choices and actions, but in their very being. But with the Fall, God's natural order of things was marred and distorted. That distortion included the marring of God's image in human beings. So one of the consequences of the Fall is the sinful desires that plague us all. Another consequence of the Fall is the three levels of homosexuality mentioned in earlier blogs. Homosexual identity, homosexual orientation and homosexual attractions are all contrary to God's creation ideal. When someone experiences a homosexual attraction, it is not the way things were created to be. It would not be true to the Bible to say anything else.

But heterosexuals also experience attractions that are contrary to God's ideal. Whenever a married Christian is deeply attracted to someone other than their spouse, it is a sign of human brokenness, just as much as homosexual attractions are. In a fallen world we all struggle with desires and attractions that are contrary to God's ideal. We can follow Paul's lead and exercise control over them, or we can allow them to rule us and to do that which is not in our own best interests or in the interests of the other person for us to do. To act on sinful attractions not only works against God's ideal for us, it also defrauds others (1 Thess 4:3-8), not only the ones we are relating to but others they will engage with in the future. Any counselor will tell you that promiscuity fractures the personality (sometimes called "splitting off") and makes it harder for people to truly bond with a single individual in marriage. Acting on the sinful desires moves us further and further way from God's ideal, not the progression to which Christians are called.

The bottom line for Paul and the rest of the New Testament is this: Is our identity in Christ or is it in our sexuality? Promiscuous individuals (this includes engagement with pornography) find thoughts of sex consuming their whole lives, you can never get enough to truly satisfy. It doesn't matter if the sexuality is homosexual or heterosexual, if it is the central focus of our lives, we will not be identified with Christ. While the focus may seem to be on others, promiscuity is really an obsession with self and with trying to satisfy needs in a sexual way, needs that can only truly be satisfied in Christ. When you identify with Christ, He calls you away from this obsession with self to be focused on Him and learn from Him how to focus on others in a healthier way. So the core decision of the Christian life is to develop and maintain one's identity in Christ. Being identified with Christ will more and more wean us away from the focus on self that leads us to gratify the desires of the flesh.

What does all this have to do with LGBT issues? It tells us that, while LGBT people may be different from the rest of us, they are struggling with the same core issues. They too have a need for Jesus Christ. They too struggle with sinful desires. If we demand that they change their orientation, something most seem not able to do, even in Christ, the burden becomes exceedingly great and discouraging. It actually hinders their ability to overcome their sinful desires and maintain a life of Christ-like purity in relationship with others. When we appreciate

the commonness of our struggles we can team up with each other to obtain the best possible outcome in a very challenging world. But when we hide our own faults under a guise of moral superiority in relation to LGBT people, we do them a disfavor and make our own moral recovery less likely. Through a recognition of our common brokenness and our common call, we can find our way to our common destiny.

### **Why Can't They Just Pray It All Away?**

Many will be troubled by the recent direction of my comments. They assume that if LGBT people would only pray harder and completely commit themselves to Christ, their orientations would be taken away and they would become "normal" people. But there are some considerations we need to give attention to before applying these expectations in a real situation. First, in practice that happens rarely, if at all. I am aware of individuals who claim to have been "changed" by God and are now living a fulfilled, heterosexual life. I do not doubt their testimonies (although such testimonies are sometimes premature), and I am happy for them. But I know many, many people who never wanted to be gay and pray earnestly to be otherwise, but nothing seems to happen. I have heard their anguish, and know that God hears them too. In my experience as a counselor and in the scientific studies I have looked at (particularly those done by Bible believing Christians), orientation change is rare at best, and may simply reflect bisexuals, whose journey to change is considerably shorter than those with a full-bore homosexual orientation. In most cases, orientation truly seems as unchangeable as physical defects. If we would not encourage a one-legged person to pray for God to grow them a new leg, we probably should not encourage a gay person to pray for a new orientation. Orientation is not sin. It is a consequence of the Fall that is likely to be with us until the Lord comes.

There is a theological basis that explains this reality, at least to some degree. Seventh-day Adventists believe in the inspiration of Ellen G. White. In her book *Steps to Christ* (and supported by the Bible), she describes a loving God who desires relationships of love with the creatures He has made. But genuine love cannot be forced, it must be freely chosen and freely given. To be free to love, means to be free also to not love or even to rebel. A loving God so respects the principle of freedom that He allows His creatures to rebel against Him and He also does not interfere in the consequences of that rebellion.

So we all suffer from the consequences of sin. Many of those consequences are directly related to the choices we ourselves have made. But many consequences are related to the choices others have made (such as abusers, murderers, rapists, slave-owners and the perpetrators of the Holocaust). Not only so, there are consequences of sin that are collective to the whole human race; pollution, environmental disasters, birth defects and orientations that are contrary to God's original design. While prayer can certainly change our hearts and our attitudes, it does not often remove the consequences of sin. To do so would be a limitation on

human freedom, which would place a limitation on love. So we struggle for life and purity in the midst of our various orientations to sin. This reality is not God's ideal, but is a necessary real in the context of a cosmic conflict over the character and government of God. In this context, we can pray for miraculous recoveries and changes, but should not demand or expect them. We are called to serve God as best we can where we are. To place unnecessary burdens on LGBT people, whose lives are already incredibly hard, is to make their lives even more difficult than they are, and it makes the church an unsafe place for them to wrestle with their challenges.

### **LGBT and the Local Church**

In a sense, everything that we have covered so far is just an introduction to the critical issue. Doctrine is important, it provides a solid foundation for our thinking about the practical issues of everyday life. But on a controverted topic like this, what really counts is how these things are applied in the context of a local church. When you look into the eyes of real people, the theories that seem so clear in abstract may not be as useful as one had thought. I am grateful that, in the SDA Church, issues like church membership are reserved for the local church, which is closest to the situation. It is in the local church, where people are known truly and deeply, that decisions regarding faithfulness to Christ and adherence to the teachings of the church are best made. So let's explore how the insights of Scripture, science and experience play out in some local church scenarios.

First of all, there are seven levels of possible engagement with a local church, each more fraught with potential consequences than the one before it. 1) **Attendance** at church services and other events of the church community. What kind of belief or behavior might cause a local church to exclude someone from even attending? Certainly, if someone is known to be a serial killer or rapist, a church would need to protect its members by barring proximity to such a person. Under what circumstances should that apply to LGBT people? 2) **Participation** in church activities, such as leading games at a picnic, singing in the choir, involvement in Sabbath School activities, and playing instruments or leading the singing at worship. These levels of involvement raise the stakes over mere attendance. At this level there is real participation in a church community. 3) **Membership**. In the SDA Church membership is taken very seriously and individuals who are flagrantly violating sexual standards or promoting bizarre beliefs are likely to be denied baptism and membership. But what about an LGBT person who is celibate and clearly loves the Lord? Membership judgments in such cases should be made locally by mature Christians on the basis of the best biblical and scientific principles available.

4) **Local Leadership (unordained)**. This involves things like teaching Sabbath school classes, chairing the Social Committee, or using specialized skills to lead out in work bees or construction projects. One would not need to be ordained to hold such positions, but churches would normally want someone taking on such leadership to be a member in good and regular standing and highly esteemed by the church. 5) **Local Leadership (ordained)**. This kind of leadership involves offices like elder and deacon and clearly spiritual tasks like counseling, Bible

studies, home visitations, and leading in worship. Ordination to these roles certainly implies a strong mutual commitment between a local church and an individual. 6) ***Teaching in Church Schools***. Each level requires higher degrees of responsibility and includes more risk for the church, particularly in areas related to sexuality. Molding the minds of children is a sacred trust, not to be granted or entered into lightly. Normally, the choice of teachers in church schools is not solely a decision of the local church, higher church authorities (conference) are rightly involved as well. 7) ***Ordained Minister***. This is the highest level of responsibility and trust that any local church can participate in granting. Decisions regarding pastoral ministry are, therefore, made largely at higher levels, right up to the union (which is above the conference). Local churches can make decisions regarding who they wish to pastor their churches, but they choose out of a list of individuals who have already been vetted at higher levels. Having said this, one could argue that teaching in the church school might be a position of equal or even greater risk than the pastoral ministry.

What levels of involvement in local churches are appropriate for LGBT people in light of the biblical, scientific and experiential data available to us today? Certainly, all can agree that people with intersex conditions have done nothing to cause the condition (unless they have willfully mutilated themselves). An intersex person's beliefs and behaviors should be the only basis for determining their fitness for church engagement. Dealing with transgender persons could be much more complicated, as local churches may not have anyone who understands the various dynamics. I make no attempt in this essay to speak directly to that complicated issue, which probably affects less than one per cent of the population. In this series I am primarily addressing people with gay and lesbian identities, or homosexual and bisexual orientations. How shall local churches address LGBT individuals who desire participation and membership in SDA churches?

### **Local Churches and Less Common Orientations**

There are seven levels of deepening engagement any person can have with a local church:

- 1) *Attendance*
- 2) *Participation*
- 3) *Membership*
- 4) *Local Leadership (unordained)*
- 5) *Local Leadership (ordained)*
- 6) *Teaching in the Church School*
- 7) *Ordained Minister*

I think most people of faith would agree that attendance at worship services should be open to all, regardless of orientation or even identity. How can a person be expected to conform to a church's expectations when they are not even allowed to attend and learn what those expectations are? How much further down these levels of engagement should a church allow to LGBY people?

I will not be offering opinions of what a local church should do, those decisions are best made at the local level. Instead, let me lay out three of many possible scenarios that might confront a local church. I will use these scenarios to illustrate some of the challenges churches and LGBT people face in engaging each other. Churches will face more and more of these scenarios as LGBT people “come out of the closet” and confess both their faith and their circumstances in life.

The first scenario is a situation where a person in the local church has a homosexual orientation, but whose identity is clearly in Christ and whose behavior and beliefs are in harmony with the teachings of the church. Most churches I know would be completely comfortable with such a person attending and participating in church life. The challenge there comes at levels three to seven. If most members believe that a homosexual orientation is, in itself, sin and rebellion, they would not be comfortable offering membership or any deeper level of engagement. But if orientation is not a choice in most cases and the person’s life and beliefs are in harmony with the church, why should that person be treated any differently than a heterosexual person with the same beliefs and behaviors? To do so could open the church to charges of discrimination, like churches that would deny membership to Blacks, Hispanics or Asians, who likewise have not chosen the characteristics that make them a target. So the crucial issue here is how people of faith understand orientation. Traditionally, it was thought to be a choice, but if that belief is wrong, it can be grounds to justify abuse and discrimination, not things the church wants to be known for.

A second scenario is similar yet somewhat different. How should a church respond to a person who has a gay or lesbian identity, but it not “practicing” that identity in a sexual way at that point in time? As noted earlier, a Christian who embraces a genuinely gay identity is in a state of conflict between two masters. While many members of the church have similar conflicts, because of addiction, unwise choices, or Laodicean lukewarmness, their struggles will usually not be in the open in quite the way they are in a person of gay or lesbian identity. While such a person may believe and behave in harmony with the church otherwise, many in the church may choose to draw the line on membership or even participation. But a church that does so had better be prepared to draw some lines on heterosexual identity issues as well (a person addicted to pornography in secret is just as conflicted in their identity, yet may continue to function at any of the seven levels of church engagement). To make an issue out of gay or lesbian identity and not address the issue of heterosexual pornography seems like pure discrimination to me. The latter is just as much a spiritual identity crisis as the second scenario is.

The third scenario is a same-sex couple that is married according to the laws of the state. There is no hiding in the closet or secret relationship. How should the church relate to that? In the past, churches would not have faced this kind of issue, but now it is increasingly with us in many parts of the world. Should churches allow such couples to attend? To participate? If the same-sex marriage is the only issue in their relationship with the church, should a church consider membership or even leadership? Christians are law-abiding citizens. Does the approval of the state in this case change anything? In other words, does state

approval in such things matter? How much does it matter? Is it not better for people to be in a committed relationship than to be promiscuous? You may have a strong opinion on this from a distance. But when the issue has a face, it is the people with strong opinions (they would call them convictions) that often make things more difficult for all concerned.

Regardless of one's view on these matters, churches that attract LGBT people have difficult questions to answer and the type of person they are dealing with is a crucial part of that. There are so many possible scenarios and nuances of scenarios that engagement in the local church is a matter best decided by the local church. Higher levels of the church can wrestle with theology and larger principles (which I have tried to do in this essay), but the real challenge is how to wisely navigate the tension between doctrine and compassion with real people in a local church. When it is clear that a person knows and loves Christ, it affects how the church makes decisions regarding that person, and it should. But such decisions should never let go of the divine ideals. Those are the primary reasons to have a church in the first place.

### **Types of Sexual Expression**

When it comes to sexual expression and the Bible, there are many things that are perfectly clear (in terms of the ideal), but there are some things that are not so clear. Let's start with clarity on the positive side. First of all, sexual expression between a man and a woman in a healthy marriage is approved and even encouraged in the Bible. At its best, sexuality in the context of lifelong commitment is more satisfying because it deepens as the years go by (the ideal). It can lift a couple to the open gates of heaven in their love for each other. It was designed by God and is for our good. While Bible scholars continue to debate the meaning of the texts that address homosexuality, two things are clear in the Bible. Whenever heterosexual marriage is mentioned, it is always positive, approved by God. Whenever homosexual activity is mentioned, it is always in a negative context. Some might wish it were different, but we have to assume that the God who gave us the Bible knows better than we do how He designed us and how we can best function. A second, positive type of sexual expression is abstinence or celibacy. While such may not be advisable in some cases (1 Cor 7), where it is freely chosen and entered into as part of a person's commitment to Christ, it is a valid choice with no spiritual consequences. The person's sexual energies are diverted into the service of God and others. Churches know how to deal with people who exercise these two types of sexual expression.

The church also knows how to deal with many other forms of sexual expression. The Bible is clear that sexual promiscuity, whether heterosexual or homosexual, is destructive, with devastating consequences for the human personality and for the ability to truly bond with other people. There can be no compromise on this issue. Many of the troubles that bring people to psychologists and counselors are rooted in the fallout from promiscuity. We do people no favors at all when we condone promiscuity. The same goes for sexual violence, which adds to the sexual fallout the damage that comes from forcibly violating another person's body. Sexual violence is even more reprehensible than promiscuity. Churches also know how to deal

with bestiality, where human beings express their sexuality with animals. I can't imagine that being condoned in any religious community. But there is one type of sexual expression that is even more heinous than the others in this paragraph, sexual exploitation of children. The church is so concerned about this that in many parts of the world elaborate background checks are done before anyone can take responsibility for children. So the church has positive and negative clarity on many sexual issues.

But over the decades there have been issues in relation to sexual expression that fall into the middle between the clearly acceptable and the clearly unacceptable. These are often challenging and even painful. But local churches have to deal with one or another of them all the time.

### **The Gray Areas of Sexual Expression**

Over the decades there have been issues in relation to sexual expression that fall into the middle between the clearly acceptable and the clearly unacceptable. These are the "real" issues of the local church. And as time goes on the church has often felt the need to accommodate situations that are less than ideal. One example would be dysfunctional marriage. Certainly, a dysfunctional marriage falls short of God's ideal. And in a perfect world we probably wouldn't want a pastor or an elder to serve if their own marriages are deeply under strain. But we have come to realize that there are no ideal marriages and that all marriages suffer from the consequences of sin. So the church has come to accept the reality that many of its leaders will have less than perfect marriages. A dysfunctional marriage, therefore, is not the death sentence for ministry that it might have been in the past.

Another challenging type of sexual expression has to do with divorce. At one time divorce and remarriage almost guaranteed that one's service for the church was at an end. People were quickly censured and often disfellowshipped on that account. And many felt justified by Scripture in taking such a position toward the divorced. But as divorce has claimed a larger and larger percentage of church members, people have also noticed in Scripture that there is an ideal and a real. That God's messengers (Moses, Jesus, Paul, Ellen White) lay out the ideal in principle, but the same messengers, when confronted with specific situations, tended to be quite merciful. In light of this, many churches and institutions, right or wrong, have taken a more redemptive approach to the divorced and remarried, even allowing second chances to those who seem to have genuinely repented.

The church should never encourage divorce, except in dangerous situations (which are more common than people think), lifelong marriage is still the ideal. But there are situations where divorce is better than other options. As awareness of reality increases in the church, there is often a shift in what aspects of Scripture get noticed and thus "gray areas" can look different over time. Whether this is a work of the Holy Spirit or a work of apostasy is subject to

debate, but such shifts of understanding are evident in Scriptural narratives such as Acts 15. And such decisions are best made at the local level.

Another challenging area outside the western church is the problem of polygamy. What does a church do when a family presents itself for baptism and it becomes evident that the husband has more than one wife? Such a marriage is clearly contrary to the creation ideal, but was not uncommon among even the Old Testament saints like Abraham, Jacob and David. It is not an arrangement that should ever be encouraged in the church, the misery that polygamy causes is all too evident. But the practical issue is, how should the church relate to the various members of that family? Should baptism be refused to all unless they divorce? But if you consider that option, is it really OK for the church to be encouraging divorce? Should the women be baptized because they have only one spouse, while the husband is refused because he has several? Again, in many parts of the world, situations like this are very challenging and are best handled by those who know the people involved.

That brings me to the issue of the day. I think there is a general consensus among church leaders, at least, that LGBT people who choose a celibate lifestyle are welcome in the church and LGBT people who choose a life of promiscuity should not expect to be welcomed as members (people who try to do the right thing and fail from time to time are in a different category). But what should the church do about the reality of same-sex marriages? Isn't lifelong commitment an improvement over promiscuity? Is it better for people to die alone than to be in the comforting presence of someone who loves them and is committed to them? Is a violent or dysfunctional heterosexual marriage more desirable than a tender and gracious gay marriage? Should the laws and declarations of the state make a difference in how we look at things? What about a husband and father who undergoes a sex change but the marriage stays together? Do we now consider that a gay marriage? We would wish that things were less complicated. And in a simpler age it was easy to draw black and white lines in nearly all situations. But is that what Jesus would do?

At this point in history the church is unlikely to grant membership to people in same-sex marriages. But will that shift too as time and experience go by? My sense is that the younger generation is in a very different place on this issue than people of my generation. My generation largely grew up aloof from the struggles of LGBT people. We were told not to ask, and they were told not to tell. So it was possible to act as if there were no issues. But my children grew up with LGBT friends and had many frank conversations with their friends about gender and sexuality, even in the context of Adventist academies and colleges. It is easier to exercise compassion when an issue becomes a face. And my children early on were in a different place than I was raised to be. Adventists everywhere are learning their way into this issue. In all that I say or write about the topic, I want to leave room for where my children and grandchildren will sense they need to be. And I certainly hope they continue to ask what Jesus would do in our place. How would the God who stooped down to wash the feet of Judas react if He found out Judas was gay? Something to think about.



## **LGBT and Adventist Institutions**

There is no part of the church that finds these issues more challenging than the church's educational and health care institutions. In health care there is the assumption that all people will be treated equally regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or gender. But what is perceived as equal treatment often seems to challenge the church's biblical positions. In the educational arena you have large numbers of young people who grew up in a different environment on these issues than did those who are trying to educate them. Because of financial aid, accreditation, legal complications and state oversight, both health care and educational institutions are often hampered in their ability to apply a traditional approach to LGBT issues even if they felt it was the right thing to do. As an administrator at Loma Linda University (which combines the challenges of both types of institution) I have experienced these challenges first hand. And there is no "one size fits all" in most situations. Having said that, it seems to me that there are three core biblical principles that need to be carefully consulted whenever an institution faces specific dilemmas in these matters. The three biblical principles follow:

**1) Integrity/ Moral Purity.** The leadership, mission and values of SDA educational and healthcare institutions need to be unashamedly Seventh-day Adventist. This means that core values such as integrity and purity/self-control must inform where the institutions stand in matters of gender and sexuality. To abandon core Adventist teachings in relation to marriage and sexuality for the sake of political or economic advantage would be a violation of personal and institutional integrity. The SDA Church affirms the biblical ideal that marriage in God's eyes is between a man and a woman and that sexual activity between individuals who are unmarried falls short of God's ideal. As I have discussed earlier, such a position is defensible, both biblically and experientially. Institutions that identify with the SDA Church should continue to teach and practice the church's position regardless of legal standards they may be required to meet. But that is not the only biblical position health care and educational institutions need to affirm.

**2) Compassion.** The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) invites all who follow Jesus to show compassion to those who are marginalized or hurting. Compassion is at the core of the church's mission. This means that the policies and practices of the church's institutions must, as far as possible, express compassion for any who are hurting or disadvantaged. Many or most homosexuals did not choose their orientation, and people of God will sympathize with their unique struggles to achieve purity in a broken world. In the words of Rom. 13:10, "Love does no harm to a neighbor" (NIV). Likewise, the first rule of the health sciences and of education is to "do no harm." Compassion toward the other, even when we do not share the same values, is fundamental to the mission and values of SDA institutions.

**3) Legal Compliance.** Adventist health care and educational institutions cannot avoid engaging the realities of the real world. In any case, Romans 13 also teaches us that the governing authorities of this world "have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1, ESV). To resist these authorities is to resist "what God has appointed" (Rom. 13:2, ESV). The leaders of the state are God's servants for our good (Rom. 13:4). This means that actions of the state, even if they seem misguided or oppressive, may be used by God to teach us things we might not learn otherwise. So Adventist institutions need to comply with the laws of the land in which they serve, with the caveat of Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men" (ESV).

It seems to me that Adventist institutions should attempt to comply with the laws of the land to the degree possible in light of the first two principles. Exceptions to such legal compliance must be decided on a case by case basis in ongoing consultation with appropriate church leadership. The people of God, guided by the Holy Spirit, will seek to determine in the context of practical realities what it means to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17, ESV, cf. Matt. 22:21; Luke 20:25).

### **From Principles to Practice**

The three biblical principles outlined above are often in tension with each other when an institution faces real-life issues. People and relationships are messy things. Balancing biblical integrity with biblical compassion may seem easy in principle but they are not easy in practice. In everyday life, one often faces situations where it seems one has to choose between compassion and other biblical values. Jesus faced many such situations and overcame them with a brilliance that most of us don’t have (see John 8:3-11 as an example). And it gets much more difficult at the institutional level. The tension between integrity and compassion is quickly compounded when institutional policies and legal complications enter into the mix. Let me share three scenarios of how the three biblical principles could be applied to specific situations.

Suppose you have a top-ranked candidate for one of your graduate programs. But you do a little research online and in social media. And you find out that the prospective student has not only adopted a gay identity, but has been a leading and disruptive campus activist for LGBT issues at the undergrad level. Should you deny the student admission even though his or her grades and test scores are at the top of your prospective student list? Denying admission would not be a problem with the law in most places, since academic institutions are allowed a lot of freedom in terms of who they admit or deny to their programs. Compassion would not be an issue in this case, as the student would likely be able to get into a similar program elsewhere. So following the church’s teaching in denying admission to a gay activist would not be in tension with the other two principles in this case. But one program director I know well handled a similar situation in a different way. She invited the prospective student in for a personal interview. Among other things, she shared the institution’s values regarding marriage and sexuality and asked the prospective student whether abiding by these while at the school would be a problem. The student said “no,” was admitted, and behaved in a manner consistent with the institution’s values throughout the program.

Suppose an Adventist health care entity received an appeal from one of its nurses. The nurse discloses that she is legally married to a patient with late stage cancer being treated in the hospital. She requests that the hospital extend spousal health insurance benefits to the gay partner. The hospital could respond by firing the nurse (and terminating her own health care benefits), thereby also abandoning the dying spouse to minimal or no treatment. In many places firing the nurse would be considered discriminatory and therefore illegal. In some places denying insurance benefits to gay partners is also illegal. One could decide to do so anyway in the name of fidelity to the church’s values. But such an action would need to be weighed against the danger to the entire mission of the institution. Compassion in this case might be the biblical principle that breaks the impasse. As noted by Ellen White, when in doubt, err on the side of mercy. When thought through, it could be decided that extending insurance benefits to a gay spouse is probably not, in itself, a compromise of the church’s larger mission.

Obviously, decisions like this are not easy and are best made by people who both know the Bible and are also close to the situation.

Suppose a student in medical school approached the dean and informed her that he would like to undergo a sex-change operation. The church is at the beginning stages of its explorations of the complicated issue of transgender, where the gender of the body and the brain are in conflict. At this point the church recommends that the best approach to “gender dysphoria” is counseling in order to help the person deal with the inner conflict and accept the physical gender of his or her birth. Sex-change surgery is a radical therapy and many who undergo such therapy regret it later and may be even more prone to suicide than transgender people in general. But counseling does not always resolve matters and most Christians see a difference between restorative surgery and physical mutilation. So an institution may not wish to reject a decision in favor of sex-change surgery that is made thoughtfully and prayerfully in consultation with specialists. But it might be wise for the student to drop out of med school, spend a year dealing with the outcomes of the surgery and the psychological challenges associated with it, and then return to school in a different class so the change will be less awkward for the student and less disruptive to other students.

Every situation is a little different and all require a great deal of prayer, counseling and careful weighing of the three biblical principles that apply most closely to matters related to LGBT. By no means do I consider this series of blogs the last word. I have based my considerations on the best conservative biblical scholarship and scientific studies and also my own experience. It is my hope that opening such discussions with what thinking Adventists can agree on will provide a starting point for addressing areas of concern that are much less clear. There are many points at issue that faithful Adventists still disagree on. We have many things to learn and many, many to unlearn (CWE 33). But we need to be thinking intelligently about these issues and talking respectfully with each other. LGBT people are children of God twice over. They are children of God by creation and children of God by redemption. They are souls for whom Christ died (Rom 14:15). May the rest of us view them through the just and compassionate eyes of God.

### **Conclusion**

The church today cannot ignore issues related to LGBTIQ. How to relate to LGBT people is increasingly an issue for both churches and educational institutions. It is my hope that these reflections will be helpful for those wrestling with these issues, whether at the personal level, in local churches, or in church-related institutions. Jesus invites His followers to show particular compassion to those who have been marginalized. That certainly includes LGBT people.