

Ethics for Gay Christians?: The Seventh-day Adventist Experience

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church, like many conservative denominations, has officially rejected homosexuality and its members who practice homosexuality. *The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual* states that "...homosexual practices, and lesbian practices are among the obvious perversions of God's original plan" [1990: 147]. To what extent does this church help its homosexual members with the ethical issues that they confront as they attempt to live Christian lives?

The Church tells these members firmly that such conduct is sinful, and that they must change their orientations if they are to be accepted by God:

By means of the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit, all may be freed from the grip of sinful practices as they are restored to the image of the Creator [*Church Manual*, 1990: 147].

It was the first Church to fund a ministry, the Quest Learning Center and Homosexuals Anonymous, whose declared purpose was to help homosexuals become heterosexual. However, this endeavor ended disastrously when it was revealed that its head counselor had been sexually molesting young male counselees [Lawson, 1987]. Nevertheless, the Church's message has remained firm: if you cannot change your orientation, you must practice celibacy. When David Larson, an ethicist at the Church's Loma Linda University, prepared a paper on homosexuality at the request of the Biblical Research Institute, which operates out of church headquarters, and urged that the Church nurture gay relationships as the best option available, his paper caused outrage and was summarily rejected [Larson].

In taking this stance, the Adventist Church assumed that it had no members who were practising homosexuals: they had either changed orientations or were living in celibacy. It consequently avoided addressing the ethical issues that a member striving to live as a gay Christian would encounter. Adventist books dealing with sexual issues have generally followed this lead.

However, homosexual Adventists have typically found the advice of their church impossible to follow, and live their lives as practicing gays and lesbians. These - or some of them - have come together for mutual support in an organization named Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International, Inc. They sense that the Church's position is rooted much more in the anti-gay prejudice dominant in American society than in Scripture, for there was no understanding of a homosexual orientation in biblical times, or in the writings of the Adventist prophet, Ellen White, who ignored the issue. (The White Estate, the guardian of Ellen White's writings, wishes she had addressed the issue, and has attempted to find and index out-of-context quotations that can be made to say what they wish she had said.) Consequently, these homosexual members have been inclined to conclude that either Adventism (and, often, therefore also Christianity) is so biased that it is not relevant to them, or that the Church (and therefore also Christianity) does not speak to the ethics of gay relations and behavior, so that they are on their own in working out an ethic for gay Christians.

The purpose of this paper is to (1) encourage gay and lesbian Adventists to consider the relevance of their Christian faith to their lives and to communicate with one another about it, and (2) to draw Adventist ethicists and theologians into this discussion in a way that might help throw light on the ethical dilemmas faced by their lesbian and gay sisters and brothers, and thus begin to fill this yawning gap. I do not expect,

or desire, unanimity here, but rather to raise consciousness concerning the issue on both sides and to result in material becoming available to those in need of it.

I have recently completed a paper which reviews the history of the response of Christian (including Adventist) missions to polygamous converts wishing to be baptized and join the church and, in particular, examines current Adventist practice in Africa [Lawson, 1994]. This research showed starkly how positions adopted by the church can be culturally rather than biblically based and work to the tremendous - disadvantage of the people effected. (In this case, western missionaries typically imposed the monogamy they were accustomed to, even though the Bible nowhere takes a clear position against it, by insisting that male converts divorce all but one of their wives, even though polygamous marriages were legal in these societies and Jesus took a clear position against divorce, with the result that women were often left destitute, separated from their children, and embittered with Christianity because it had broken up their families.) Another instance where the biblical example is now rejected because of cultural changes is marriages between partners whose ages are greatly disparate: men in biblical times were often much older than their wives, who were often barely pubescent at the time of marriage. (Perhaps the most striking such example is the Virgin Mary and Joseph. Documents treated with authority in the early Christian Church depicted Joseph as unusually old and Mary as very young [].)

If gay Christians have no Christian ethic available to bring to bear as they construct their relationships and sexual practices, they are left with the norms of the gay and lesbian community. But here there is so much diversity as to provide no guidance. It would be the same if a heterosexual were left to consider the variety of practice among his/her kind in looking for ethical guidelines. I have, to illustrate my point, isolated ten different kinds of gay relationships, although in fact there are many permutations and combinations of these, so that the scene is much more varied still:

1. Monogamy: a committed, sexually exclusive relationship, entered into with an expectation or hope of "until death do us part."
2. Serial monogamy, type 1: because of the irretrievable breakdown of a monogamous relationship, there is a "divorce" and, sometime later, a second monogamous relationship is entered.
3. Serial monogamy, type 2: frequent, short-lived, sexually exclusive affairs.
4. Open relationship: the partners are emotionally committed to one another, but they leave room for each to have incidental sexual encounters.
5. Committed friendship: the partners usually share the same domicile, and care deeply about one another, but (almost) all sex is transitory, with others. (Typically this evolves after a monogamous or open relationship becomes sexually boring.)
6. Long-term polygamy: stable long-term multiple (usually separate) partners. [I think this is rare in practice.]
7. Long-term sexual buddies: typically fairly limited relationships, likely to have more than one at a time.
8. Serial promiscuity: many fleeting sexual contacts, usually with strangers, one at a time.
9. Group sex, stable group: groups that get together for sex fairly regularly. Members pass from 1:1 situations to groups interacting together and back again.
10. Orgy: short-term group sex.

Sexual practices also vary enormously. For example, among gay males they can be limited to simple voyeurism (partners watch one another masturbate); they may include "loving contacts" - some or all of massage, kissing, mutual masturbation, fellatio, intercourse; some or all of these may be ritualized in sadomasochistic ways; etc., etc.

Since I am not a lesbian, I would not presume to attempt to categorize lesbian relationships or sexual practices. However, I feel sure that lesbians would arrive at a fairly similar list of relationship possibilities. Research results would probably show a somewhat different distribution among these categories for lesbians and for gay males.

Does Christian ethics, once it distances itself from cultural biases, have anything to say about these options? In the heterosexual Christian community monogamy has been the ideal. However, marriage - failure has become so widespread that the church has been forced to countenance divorce and remarriage and to attempt to draw up guidelines concerning how to handle them and how they can impact church membership. That is, it has accepted serial monogamy type 1, although it is not seen as the ideal. (African Adventists, however, were disparaging of this among their American brothers.) Similarly, premarital sex (serial monogamy, type 2, and serial promiscuity, etc) has been increasingly overlooked or easily forgiven, especially once the members marry. On the other hand, the church finds it more difficult to countenance adultery (open relationships, committed friendships), prostitution (a variation perhaps on open relationships, although it can also be premarital), and "swinging", especially when it is post-marital (serial promiscuity).

Should the same ideal and "second-best" mores apply similarly to gay and lesbian Adventists? A consideration of the ubiquitous incest taboo may suggest that the homosexual and heterosexual situations are not necessarily parallel. The Bible bans incest, as does, so anthropologists say, every human society. This is usually explained functionally—the need to avoid genetic problems, even though the exact rules vary from society to society (so that patrilineal societies regard some relationships as incestuous, while matrilineal societies would have a rather different list). If this is the reason, how important would it be to insist on this taboo among homosexuals, who cannot breed with one another? Indeed, there are a surprising number of stories of teenagers who discover their homosexuality with their brothers.

Similarly, then, if a key reason to support monogamous relationships, according to anthropologists, is to ensure that care and socialization is available for infants and children, is this the ideal relationship for non-breeding homosexuals? Some psychologists would say yes, because of the need for personal security and stability. Does the culture-free Christian ethic have anything to say here?

Some in the gay community would argue that all is ethical as long as what happens is consensual; others that it is only essential to try to avoid hurting someone [these are not the same]. In these times, avoiding the transmission of AIDS would be included in the latter; but there are also spiritual, emotional, economic, etc., hurts. Is either of these the embodiment of the "golden rule"? Is this rule the bottom line when working out the application of the Christian ethic? If so, how is it best applied?

I have tried to ask questions without implying answers. I invite your comments - let us begin to dialogue about the relevance of our faith here. But first, please set out to detach yourself as best you can from your cultural biases.

References

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