Personal Happiness, Self-Fulfillment, and Homosexuality in the Church

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Personal happiness, self-fulfillment, and homosexuality in the church

With the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States and other countries, the Adventist Church must face the issue of how to relate to gay individuals. We need to examine our arguments when addressing how, or even if, gay persons who are in a sexual relationship with a same-sex partner fit into the life of the church.

Research by the Archives, Statistics, and Research Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists indicates that a growing number of church members in North America agree that a practicing homosexual could be a member in good standing and might even serve as a leader in the congregation. The research found that 49 percent of those in their 20s who were current or recent graduates from college or university would accept persons who practiced a homosexual lifestyle as members of the Adventist Church; 21 percent would approve of such persons serving as leaders in the church.

Many families in the church are directly affected by this issue as loved ones reveal their homosexual orientation and practice. A number of students at our denominational schools have indicated same-sex preferences. How, then, can we, with faithfulness to the Word and compassion to those involved, confront the question of practicing homosexuals in the Adventist Church?

A shift from theology to philosophy

Jeffrey Stout asserts that up to the time of René Descartes, much of the thinking in the Western world was based on the idea that God exists and that He has revealed Himself and His will to humans. Therefore, theology was the queen of the sciences, and all other disciplines had to align with her. “But in Descartes’s work, theology has already become the handmaiden of philosophy, reversing the Thomistic order of things. . . Descartes argues that questions about God and the soul ‘ought to be demonstrated by philosophical rather than theological argument.’” This shift in foundation allowed ideas from the Enlightenment, including rationalism and individualism, to have a powerful impact on Christian thinking and belief.

In contrast, when we deal with Christians engaging in same-gender sexual activity, we must be founded on biblical theology and have a Christian worldview as our beginning point. If we make philosophy, such as rationalism or individualism, or psychology the foundation, we may come to wrong conclusions.

Philosophy of hedonism

For example, hedonism is an individualistic philosophy based in the idea that pleasure comprises the highest good in life, and therefore, pain should be avoided. Although hedonism did not begin with Epicurus, he is considered the father of this line of thought. In this belief system, “pleasure is the ultimate goal of action, and the yardstick for determining an action’s moral worth.” Hedonism, as a philosophical approach to life, does not condone unbridled pleasure-seeking, though the modern use of the word has taken on that connotation. Nevertheless, the core concept says that pleasure is the ultimate good in life and can make an action or practice morally acceptable.

This philosophical framework seems to undergird some of the arguments given to permit gay Christians to practice same-gender sex, the idea being that, because heterosexuals have the right to marry and attain relational and sexual fulfillment, it is unfair to deny this to homosexual brothers and sisters as well. This approach seems to assume an absolute right for Christians to happiness and self-fulfillment, as the individual deems is best; the argument buttressed at times by appeals to scientific research, which indicates that gays and lesbians are happier when
married to their partner. So hedonism, supported by research, is the starting place that leads to the acceptance of same-gender sexual practice.

In response, it might be helpful to consider the parallel plight of a heterosexual man (or woman) whose spouse can no longer engage in sexual activity because of disease or permanent injury. How would he find sexual fulfillment? Does he have a basic right to fulfill this need, despite his marriage vows and the law of God that prohibits adultery? The argument often is that we cannot expect gay persons to simply live a celibate life and never find sexual and emotional fulfillment. How would hedonism guide the heterosexual whose spouse cannot meet his needs? Does he have the right to divorce, or find a lover, in order to find self-fulfillment? The answer, based on this philosophical foundation, would seem to be “yes.” But, to be consistent with biblical theology, would it not be better to encourage persons in both situations to be faithful to God’s design and law for relationships and sexual activity?

The Bible and hedonism

The Bible denies a primarily hedonistic approach to life for the believer. Jesus says in Luke 9:23 that His disciples “must deny themselves and take up their cross daily.” In Philippians 2, Paul describes how Jesus did not attempt to reach his full potential and self-fulfillment as God, but willingly limited Himself in obedience to the Father. Moses turned away from the pleasures of Egypt and denied himself the potential of ruling one of the greatest nations on Earth in order to be faithful to God.

However, there is a confluence of theology and hedonism when the Christian continues to learn to enjoy doing God’s will. “I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8). The key point here is that the believer’s happiness is based on doing what God has asked her to do, not on what she has self-determined would be the best way to fulfillment. There are legitimate ways to seek happiness and self-fulfillment, and the Christian remains free to pursue them. Serving others, friendships, relationships with family, wholesome hobbies, and vocations that God has called us to can all bring great joy and happiness to our lives.

Ellen White concurs. “Let us never lose sight of the fact that Jesus is a wellspring of joy. He does not delight in the misery of human beings, but loves to see them happy.

“Christians have many sources of happiness at their command.” Yet, this happiness is not our primary goal. Personal happiness and self-fulfillment cannot be sought at the expense of violating our relationship with Jesus, fidelity to His Word, or the best interest of others.

So the life of the believer is neither total joy and happiness nor nothing but pain, loss, and suffering. Both are the lot of Christ’s followers. The goal is not to eliminate all pain and suffering; nor is it to seek happiness and pleasure as the highest good. Rather it is to find fulfillment in serving God and loving others with agape love, whether that brings happiness or pain, or both.

A path forward

So, does the Bible allow for a person with same-gender attraction to act on that attraction by marriage and a sexual relationship to a person of the same sex? A number of passages strongly indicate that it does not. The Seventh-day Adventist position supports Scripture. Official statements from the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary,
for example, state that same-gender sexual behavior and marriage are not acceptable. These statements are not intended to harm those with same-sex orientation but, rather, to guide the church and its members in regards to what—according to the Bible, and not hedonism—acceptable lifestyle practices. Like the heterosexual whose spouse cannot meet his or her needs, the homosexual believer is called to give a higher value to the teachings of the Bible on marriage and sex than to the individual’s need for self-fulfillment. This is a very difficult choice, and individuals and families suffer much because the easier and seemingly more desirable way forward is not that which Jesus would call us to.

All of us, no matter our sexual orientation, must give up the fulfillment of certain desires for the kingdom of God. This is the path that Jesus trod before us, and He lovingly implores us to follow Him. Jesus died for us, rose again, and ministers for us at this moment in heaven above. Our names are written in the Lamb’s book of life. And someday soon our Lord will return and take us to a place where there is no more sorrow, or tears of sadness, or emotional or physical emptiness. His promise is sure.

Conclusion

We must honestly look at our thinking. Am I giving theology or philosophy the highest place? Is my love for friends and family members pushing me to displace theology with a philosophy that would allow a practicing homosexual to be a member and leader in the church? Emotions are part of the mix, as they should be. But the difficult choice includes putting the will of God above mine. The Gethsemane prayer is probably the most difficult one to genuinely lay before God.

I would suggest that the Seventh-day Adventist Church encourage its members to deny hedonism as the basis for addressing gay marriage. By keeping the teachings of the Scriptures as the foundation, we can together build a church faithful to God’s Word and, in that faithfulness, a church that ministers effectively to all.

3 We certainly would not exclude philosophy and psychology from influencing our thinking; but they should not be foundational.
5 Ibid., 523.
6 Ibid.
8 All Bible references are from the New International Version.
10 Cf. Genesis 2:24; Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:24–27.

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