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Kelvin Onongha

Adventist University of Africa

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KELVIN ONONGHA
**SPIRITUALITY, SEXUALITY, AND
CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**

Introduction

Pivotal to the success of any organization is its leadership, and more so is this the case with Christian organizations. Little wonder that it has often been said, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” For persons appointed to administer denominational institutions, perhaps the most critical elements that shall determine their legacy are dependent upon their spirituality and sexuality. Because their mandate is not political and their paradigm is not worldly, for Christian leaders, therefore, the currency of their leadership ought to be spiritual. That which gives credence and substance to their leadership is not the position they have, the power they wield, or the charisma they possess; the foundation of their leadership base should be dependent on their relationship with Christ, the closeness of their resemblance to their Master.

Another quality intricately connected to the leader’s relationship with Christ and which affects the success of every leader is their sexuality. The most powerful leader Israel ever knew—Samson; the most glorious king the nation ever had—David; and the wisest ruler ever born—Solomon; all graphically demonstrate the significance of a leader’s sexuality. Spirituality and sexuality seem to be intricately related throughout religious history, for in ancient times and among many cultic religions, one of the pathways to the divine was through sex. In Tantric Buddhism and the worship of the Near Eastern god, Baal, sex played a vital role in worship. The presence of temple prostitutes in Bible times was supposedly to aid worshippers in experiencing a deeper union with the sacred.

Human sexual desire is regarded as a subliminal quest for intimacy with God. This is reflected in the quote attributed to G. C. K. Chesterton: “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is seeking for God.” Or, as Bruce

Kelvin Onongha is the Director for the Doctor of Ministry and MA Missiology programs at the Adventist University of Africa. He holds doctorate degrees in Mission and Ministry from Andrews University. He has served in various leadership positions in the church and academia.

Marshall (1945) expressed it, “The young man who rings the bell at the brothel is unconsciously looking for God.”

Sexuality and the Quest for God

Among the many great contributions of the Reformation is the notion that sex is not inherently evil, but that human sexual desires have their origin in God and are therefore good, and even holy. Throughout Scripture, the language of sexuality is apparent and unabashed from Genesis to Revelation. Theologian John Piper (2005) explains, “The language and imagery of sexuality are the most graphic and most powerful that the Bible uses to describe the relationship between God and His people—both positively (when we are faithful) and negatively (when we are not).” The deeply intimate union couples experience in sex, the delight and fulfillment it provides, have been employed by the Creator in describing the level of bonding He seeks with His creation. As David Jensen (2013) writes, “God creates us as subjects of [His] holy desire who desire communion with others and with [Him]. Human sexuality is one reflection of God’s intent to create beings for desire. The holiness of sexual desire, then, is best glimpsed within the larger narrative of God’s desire for us.” The problem, therefore, is not human desire or sexuality but rather, that this be seen as a divine design placed within people to lead them to aspire to a higher, deeper, intimacy with the One who is the Source of their existence and enjoyment. It is only when desire runs amok—wild and uncontrolled—that it dishonors God. Hence the statement, “As goes the leader’s sex life, so goes the church,” has credence in the ecclesiastical settings.

Biblical Sexuality and Knowing God

The first account of sex in the Bible is presented in a clinical, matter-of-fact manner: “Adam knew his wife and she conceived” (Gen. 4:1). This passage reveals a few noteworthy points that shall be the focus of this study. First, sex is a natural act ordained by God, not something to cause shame. Second, sex represents a deeper level of human relationships; an intimacy expressed as “knowing” (Heb., *yada*). Third, the fruition of this intimate knowing experience was pregnancy, resulting in the birth of a child.

In the days of the prophets, whenever God commissioned the prophets to take the Israelites to task for violating their covenant and becoming unfaithful to Him, often the language and metaphors employed denoted a marital relationship in which a partner (Israel) had been sexually unfaithful (see Jer., Ezek., and Hos.). Perhaps some of the most sexually explicit of such passages

are in the book of Ezekiel (see chapters 16 and 23). Prophet Hosea is instructed to marry an unrepentant prostitute (Ezek. 16:15 NIV), whose interactions with the man of God are correspondent with Israel's unfaithfulness with their covenant God.

The Song of Solomon is another biblical book with very explicit sexual imagery. It has been referred to as "pornography in the Bible." Bible scholars from patriarchal times have drawn allusions from the intimate relationship between the protagonists in the book and Christ and His church. The love stronger than death (Song of Sol. 8:6) alluded to in this book is illustrative of the love which motivated Christ to lay down His life on the cross.

Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians, acknowledges this sacred, mysterious, spiritual connection of the physical dimension of human sexuality and its demonstration of a vital, intimate connection with God (Eph. 5:31-32). In the one-flesh union denoted by the sexual act, the mystery of the deep, covenant relationship God seeks with humans is portrayed.

Paul also draws a spiritual connection to the sexual union, alluding that union to a similarity in the believers' relationship with the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:16-18). In other words, there is a deeper spiritual dimension to sex that God intended to use as a pedagogical device for humans.

However, human sexuality can so easily run amok. Divorced from God, it suffers from abuse. Sexuality unhinged from scriptural guidelines and divine parameters becomes a tool employed for selfish ecstasies, indulged upon in wild orgies in the hope that this shall result in fulfillment and satisfaction. Unfortunately, this goal is hardly ever realized. Social commentators have observed that contemporary society has discussed and debated issues regarding sex to the extent that it has become a science. The expectation is that the more that is known about sex, the more fulfilled partners will become. However, the hedonistic sexual revolution initiated by the emergence of magazines such as *Playboy*, as well as the Internet pornography industry, demonstrate that knowledge and exposure to sex never fulfill. Instead, they only lead to addictions, slavery, uncontrollable sexual appetites, and passions.

What, then, is the solution to these desires which, unbridled, can result in bondage and debasement? The answer can be found in the controversy that God has with the nation of Israel. Through His prophet Hosea, He suggests that because Israel does not know the Lord, the nation is overtaken by the spirit of harlotry, or whoredom (Hos. 5:3-4). Piper (2005, p. 30) wisely opines, "Sexuality is designed by God as a way to know Christ more fully. And, on the

other hand, knowing Christ more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality.”

Consequently, in an age steeped with sexual innuendoes and imagery, even in the full glare of public view, leaders need to learn and teach that the panacea for slavery to the deluge of immorality brought about by the sexual revolution is knowing God. As Piper adds,

God made us powerfully sexual so that He would be more deeply knowable. We were given the power to know each other sexually so that we might have some hint of what it will be like to know Christ supremely. Therefore, all misuses of our sexuality (adultery, fornication, illicit fantasies, masturbation, pornography, homosexual behavior, rape, sexual child abuse, bestiality, exhibitionism, and so on) distort the true knowledge of God. God means for human sexual life to be a pointer and foretaste of our relationship with him. (2005, p. 30)

A deeper walk with God, a more intimate experience of the Most High, is the craving and opportunity for Christian leaders and believers. This natural quest to fill the God-shaped void in the human heart was aptly described in the oft-quoted statement by Augustine, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee.”

Clergy Sexual Abuse

The wave of sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s did not leave church leadership unscathed. Among its ranks, various levels of brokenness are evident, from clergy sexual abuse to pornography and diverse forms of sexual addictions. *Christianity Today's* LEADERSHIP survey (1988), conducted among clergy in North America, revealed results that are instructive and even shocking. Approximately 12% of pastors surveyed admitted to having had sexual intercourse with someone other than their wife while employed in ministry. This survey also reported that 23% of ministers admitted to engaging in what they considered inappropriate sexual behavior with someone other than their spouse. There was also an average of seven women victims per congregation of clergy sexual misconduct.

Although studies like this may not have been conducted in the Adventist Church, there are enough indications that Adventist ministers are not immune to these situations. These shocking statistics are clearly indicative of the reality that, more often than some are willing to admit, ministers are merely creatures of their culture and environment than they are products of theological

conditioning. In other words, one may have sound theological moorings and still may experience deep struggles with their sexuality—and this goes for men and women.

There are multiple factors that contribute to clergy sexual misconduct. These include factors in upbringing, such as early exposure to sex, abuse, situational or environmental stresses, and educational gaps; these did not prepare the minister for handling personal feelings or behavior towards the other sex. While this discourse falls outside the scope of this paper, it suffices to state that the result of clergy misconduct leaves devastating effects in its trail, and innocent victims suffer as a result of this moral lapse. Because the effects of the moral lapse of pastors have such devastating tolls on their parishes, families, ministries, and communities, it is incumbent on leadership that such should be prevented.

Marriage and Holiness

One of the greatest and most dangerous accomplishments of the sexual revolution was the divorce of sex from marriage. Prior to this period, persons who sought to engage in sex first felt the need to get married. The contributions of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, and *Playboy* magazine founder, Hugh Hefner, were quite significant in precipitating the age of unrestricted sex. A common expression used in contemporary times is “casual sex.” However, as Lauren Winner (2006, p. 87) aptly noted, there’s nothing casual about sex. It is an intense, premeditated, holistic, and spiritual activity that creates a bond between couples more complicated and mysterious than secular persons would want to admit. The irony of the times is that just as presently sex is sought outside of the marriage relationship, spirituality is also sought by some outside of God. In both scenarios, the experience can only be unfulfilling.

Marriage and marital fidelity are essential qualities in the quest for holiness, or deeper spirituality. Holiness in biblical times entailed total devotion. Marriage, therefore, which implied total devotion and commitment to a specific partner could be considered a pathway to higher spiritual experience with God. Eugene Peterson (1992, p. 40) notes that, “Sex and spirituality are indeed interconnected because they deal with similar issues such as intimacy and ecstasy.” The implication of this is that leaders need to make intentional, consistent, memorable investments in their marriages. As Loron Wade (2006, p. 86) comments, “Such investments shall produce intimacy with God, and their spouses, and provide a safety net for marriage and ministry.”

Counsels to Leadership

In light of the consequential role sexuality has for a leader's spirituality and success in ministry, it is vital that much care and thought be devoted to responding to the challenges it poses. Among the proactive measures that need to be taken to avert the hazard accompanying a leaders' moral fall include: acknowledging the allure and power of human sexuality; awareness of personal situation/condition; acceptance of the need for help; make adjustments by providing structures and safety nets to prevent disasters in life and ministry.

Acknowledge the Power

One of the strongest drives known to humans is sex. This natural, powerful urge for procreation and pleasure is often unacknowledged among believers, and especially among Christian leaders. Commenting on this powerful drive, veteran pastor Robert Carlson (1987), observed, "I have learned how compelling the sex drive is. It exceeds rationality. As someone has said, 'When will and fantasy compete, fantasy always wins.' Erotic and romantic longings almost always win precedence over rational thought" (Carlson, 1987).

Unfortunately, not everyone acknowledges the force or allure of sex, and thus sets him or herself up for the slippery slope of moral lapse. If victory and fidelity must be attained in this dimension of human existence, then much more talking and education needs to be done. As quoted in *Christianity Today's* article (1988), a pastor pled, "We need to be talking about sex. The school does, and people on the street do, and TV does, but Christians don't. Address the issue! Just don't tell me to act like I don't feel these things."

While human sexuality is powerful, and even sometimes seemingly uncontrollable, the grace of God to overcome is even more powerful. Perhaps never more than now, living in a sex-obsessed age, do Christians need to turn to Paul's great epistle to the Romans, which resonates with relevance and meaning to people struggling with inner passions and desires (Rom. 7:14-19). Therein is found a promise that needs to be claimed by contemporary Christians: "Where sin abounded, grace abounded much more" (Rom. 5:20 NKJV). Victory can only come when the power of sin is first acknowledged; then Christian leaders can reach out for the greater power from God to prevail. Rather than indulging in hedonistic and narcissistic desires, Christian leaders can redirect and rechannel their energies in seeking intimacy with God and their spouses.

Awareness of Personal Condition

Although several studies have shown the reality of the humanness and brokenness in Christian leadership, an often ignored fact is that a greater number of Christian leaders have remained steadfast and have not given in to sexual temptations. This is encouraging, despite the fact that every single moral indiscretion casts a slur on all Christian leaders, whether guilty or innocent. Christian leaders need to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses, their boundaries and limitations. Knowledge of one's sexuality and need for emotional acceptance is vital to stability in ministry. Sharing such awareness with one's spouse is a helpful stance in dealing with temptations. Personal awareness is the first step to self-preservation.

Acceptance of the Need for Help

The greatest news in the struggle against fleshly lusts and our sexuality is that help is available. The data from the LEADERSHIP survey revealed that close to one-third of clergy who admitted to sexual indiscretions admitted that they were attracted to their consorts, while about two out of five stated that they did not feel they received sufficient love from their spouses. Other contributory factors cited included early exposure to sex, abuse, or pornography. Although each of these factors come with substantial baggage and are not easily wished away or effortlessly overcome, nevertheless, victory is attainable. Unfortunately, sexual issues and the admittance of personal struggles with temptation are, in ecclesiastical circles, often regarded as weakness, and a lack of spirituality. Because such matters are shrouded with secrecy and tainted with shame, sufferers generally do not feel inclined to want to admit their struggles or seek external help. This scenario results in a situation of double jeopardy and often terminates in disaster. Consequently, the voice of the church needs to be heard loudest directing people to where help can be found and given clear guidelines as to what can be done. Although family enrichment programs are common and regular, couples need to be encouraged to celebrate rather than condemn their libidos and regard them as a deeper yearning for love, and for God.

Adjust Structures and Safety Nets

In order to help leaders grow spiritually as they manage their sexuality, a number of structures are needed, personally and corporately. Personal boundaries need to be established based upon the emotional, psychological, and

spiritual nature of the leader. Personality tests and other diagnostic tests used in determining the constitution of the leader will be helpful in order to determine such boundaries and personal space. While some leaders are huggers, others may not have the capacity to handle hugs from the other sex without emotional signals getting mixed up. Some may need to establish that not hugging a crying lady does not count as aloofness, but a personal boundary they have set for their own protection and safety. Depending upon their training and constitution, some leaders should not embark upon marital counseling issues without establishing personal safety nets. One of the factors that contributes to the vulnerability of some leaders is a “superman complex.” This is a conviction that they can never fall. This is not faith, but presumption.

Organizations also have a part in creating environments that preclude moral indiscretions, although much is dependent upon the leader’s disposition. In the Adventist Church, policies on acceptable periods for spouse separation, and provision for the accompanying spouse on extended travels are commendable, but still need to be reexamined in the light of the times and context. Rather than expect that those who have risen to leadership have now become immune, religious organizations especially ought to know the perils of power. According to Archibald Hart (2002), leadership can be hazardous, and among the perils leaders are exposed to are the four A’s: arrogance, aloneness, adventure, and adultery. Consequently, religious organizations need to recognize the vulnerability of their leaders and should design regular programs and policies to help provide support to families to forestall sexual indiscretions.

Also, mentoring and other support networks need to be encouraged and established to provide platforms for strengthening the experiences of spiritual leaders. These structures will provide safety nets for leaders alongside the support of their spouses in coping with their sexuality and spiritual needs.

Conclusion

As Christian leaders strive to advance the kingdom of God while encountering oppositions from within and without, help is needed to keep them from falling. As the *Christianity Today* (1988) article states, Gary Collins, professor of counseling, warns we must realize that we are living in a Corinthian age and stop preparing leaders for the Victorian age. Programs and structures are needed to enhance the spiritual growth of organizational leaders. Such programs should include components that address the sexuality of the leader and recognize this as God-given and not shame-inducing. Holistic, spiritual programs of this nature are needed much more today than ever before in a society with growing levels of depravity.

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