

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Issues: Pastoral Perspectives

The secret of moral discernment lies in working out how to live lives free from bondage to sin without presuming to be already translated prematurely into a condition that is free from the sufferings of this present age.¹ Diane Kessler

Having given attention to both biblical perspectives and the bio-chemistry which inform the proclivities of persons of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender (LGBT) orientation and pursuant to a pastoral response, we must now move on to consider the wider context within which such is shaped, that is, how is human sexuality portrayed relative to the larger canonical framework of divine-human relationship? In this regard, our concerns here will ultimately seek to answer the question regarding whether or not, person of LGBT orientation may obtain membership with our local Baptist churches. Even so, this effort makes no pretence at being exhaustive. At best, what follows are principles which ought to be borne in mind, pursuant to a responsible ethic which is consistent with the spirit of Christ Jesus our Lord.

i) The Will of God re: Human Sexuality

Bonhoeffer's ethics posits that true reality is to be found only in Christ. For us, this means that instead of seeking answers to the questions, *'how can I be good, or how can I do good'* we are to ask the question, *'what is the will of God?'*²

Scripture affirms repeatedly that God created woman and man for each other and that our sexual desires rightly find fulfillment within a faithful heterosexual relationship. Richard Hays (1999) asserts that the normative

¹ Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications Geneva, 1999), pg. 73.

² James Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective*, Vol. 1, pg 19

canonical picture of marriage provides a positive backdrop against which the Bible's few negations of homosexuality must be read.³

ii) The Reality of our Human Condition

Mainly through Pauline theology, scriptures also affirm that subsequent to the fall, all creation has been made subject to sin. St. Augustine has since asserted that we are born in sin and not necessarily sinners by rational choice. As such we are no longer living in perfectly loving and just relationships with each other, and our rationality no longer conforms to the standards of divine love and justice. Instead, as imperfect beings, we tend to use our rational powers for selfish destructive purposes and we live in communities that do not display the love and justice which God intended for creation. All humankind, inclusive of persons of LGBT orientation are therefore in bondage to sin (Rom. 6:17) and are accountable to God's righteous judgment for our actions.

iii) The Essence of Grace

The redeeming grace of God is God's ministry of liberation which sets us free from the power of sin and opens up the possibility of our being transformed into God's righteousness (Rom. 8:1-11.) The doctrine of grace finds expression in Rom 8:31; *"if (since) God is for us, who can be against us"*. The essence of grace is that it is freely given, for *"while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly"* (Rom. 5:8.) The sufficiency of grace is found in the fact that *"where sin abounded, grace did much more abound"*, (Rom. 5:20.) Grace however, is not cheap forgiveness of sin! The pardoning of sinful humankind was effected by the judgment and punishment of the Innocent. It is by this undeserved, selfless act of grace that we are being delivered from the bondage afore mentioned. Amid times of manifest hostility and insularity, amid a culture of deception and

³ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, pg 390

disillusionment, amid grave uncertainty about how to treat with the spirits of this age, inclusive of the spirituality of our sexuality (*cf. point 'v' below,*) it is a proper appreciation of the grace of God that we all need, in order to peacefully co-exist.

iv) Rethinking the Power of Sex

Hayes appeals to both scriptures and generations of human experience in calling attention to the fact that human beings can live lives of freedom, joy and service without intimate sexual relations.⁴ Indeed, however odd it may seem to contemporary sensibilities, some New Testament passages clearly commend and recommend the celibate life as a way for faithfulness (*cf. Matt. 19:10-12 and 1 Cor. 7:1,7&8*). Bearing in mind, earlier expressions re: the will of God for human sexuality, the power of sexual drives must be acknowledged and made subject to constraints, either through wholesome heterosexual covenantal commitments or through disciplined abstinence. The appeal and fascinations of sex ought not to become the basis for defining a person's identity or the ultimate means of discovering fulfillment in life. Jesus had declared that the weightier issues of life are those which have to do with justice, mercy and faithfulness (*Matt. 23:23.*)

v) The Human Rights Factor

Throughout the world, Baptist adherents are involved in the constant struggle to preserve human rights and freedoms for all people in the name of Christ. At the General Council of the Baptist World Alliance meeting in Vancouver, Canada, July 1997, on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations, Baptists passed a resolution affirming the Universal Declaration of

⁴ Richard Hays, *op.cit.*, pg 392

Human Rights “which has exerted great moral influence in the cause of justice, peace and religious tolerance”.⁵

Here in Jamaica, recent amendments to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as they relate to the issue of sexual autonomy and sexual liberty were in some ways responsive to the seismic shifts resulting from the spirit of modernism and postmodernism. With the rise of modernism, an opposing permissive approach to sexual morality rose to usurp traditional sexual conventions in western culture. For example, under modernism, individuals used sex as they chose, and what they chose should not matter to anyone else. In recent times, postmodernism has been visited upon us with an interesting fusion of a spirituality which justifies sensuality. Herein, sex is not ultimately for love, marriage or family relationships but instead, it is for connecting humanity with the powers at work in the universe. We may need to consider the extent to which our commitment to the preservation of human rights and freedoms is conditioned by the changing and diverse views on sexual ethics.

It is against this background that we can make practical commentaries on how the challenge of ministering among, with and to the needs of persons of LGBT orientation, may be pastorally effected. Three theo-ethical constructs help us to shape a paradigm for our proposals, namely,

- i) *the importance of koinonia (community / fellowship)*
- ii) *ministry as diakonia (servanthood) amid hamartia (sin)*
- iii) *the transformative power of hope*

A) The Significance of koinonia

⁵ Douglas Blount, Joseph Wooddell, Ed., *The Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Critical Issues an America, pg 29

Contrary to popular opinion, the biblical restrictions against homosexuality and by extension, the inclinations of most persons of LGBT orientation, are not just related to the private morality of individuals. By and large, the teachings relate to God's concern for the health and purity of the faith community. This perspective is evident in the holiness code of Leviticus. Almost immediately following the prohibition of homosexual conduct (Lev.18:22), we find the following warning:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for by all these practices the nations I am casting out before you have defiled themselves. Thus the land became defiled; and I punished it for its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you shall keep my statutes and my ordinances and commit none of the abominations, either the citizen or the alien who resides among you. (Lev. 18:24-26)

In a similar way, Paul's advice to the Corinthians to “*glorify God in your body*” grows out of his passionate concern for the unity and sanctity of the community. For Paul, sexual intercourse with a prostitute is wrong because sexual immorality not only defiles the individual but the corporate “body of Christ.” His theology gives clear expression to his conviction, that in and through baptism, Christians have entered a *corporate whole*, whose health is at stake in the conduct of all its members; “*if one member suffers, all suffer*” 1 Cor. 12:26. Admittedly, this perspective has implications which transcend the limitations of our current concerns.

B) Ministry as *diakonia* amid *hamartia*

A careful reading of the gospels reveals no passage which brings the issue of homosexuality into direct relationship with the story of Jesus' life, service and ultimate death. However, the reality of our human condition afore discussed, creates the context that makes the servanthood and death of Jesus a missional necessity. Jesus came, not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The message of the cross is that God loves us even while we

are in rebellion and the sacrificial death of God's suffering servant is the measure of the depth of that love. This has profound implications for the Christian community and our response to persons of homosexual inclinations and orientations. Even if some of their actions are contrary to God's design, the servant life and witness of Christ models the way in which the community of faith ought to respond to them: not in holy condemnation, but in sacrificial service. This is particularly urgent for the Church, as we seek to rediscover the radical missional potential in being a servant community.

C) The Transformative Power of Hope

According to 1 John 3:2, as Christians, we live between the “*already*” and the “*not yet*”.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

As we live between the times, we are all gracious beneficiaries of the transforming and sustaining grace of the Triune God. Paul makes much of the Greek concept of the **arrabon** which denotes that God has made an investment in the believer's soul. The believer must take courage, in the fact that he or she is treasured in the eyes of God and that subsequent installments follow. In Romans 8:23, Paul states that the whole creation groans in pain and bondage, “*and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we await the adoption, the redemption of our bodies.*” This means that, among other things, Christians set free from the power of sin through Christ's death, must continue to *struggle* to live faithfully in the present time. The redemption of our bodies remains a future hope; final transformation of our fallen state awaits the resurrection.

Consequently, in ministering with, among and to the needs of persons of LGBT orientation, as with all other Christians, we can celebrate the transforming

power of the Spirit even as we live with the reality of the hard struggle to live faithfully. St. Paul makes clear expression of this,

It is in hope that we are saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with endurance. Rom. 8:24

Toward a Conclusion

What then might be the Church's obligations relative to persons of LGBT orientation?

1. We are to commit to the preservation of their human dignity

Persons of LGBT tendency, like other persons have a need for a place where they may live out the dignity of their humanity in hope. Being welcomed into and among a local faith community is the foundation of spiritual support that the Church can offer to them.

2. We are to commit to the presenting of Jesus Christ as the Author of full Salvation for all persons.

Persons of LGBT orientation like other persons have a need for the liberation that God offers to all, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Our instructions to such persons ought to reflect the fullness of the Church's teaching on human sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular. "*Moral conscience requires that, in every occasion, Christians give witness to the whole moral truth, which is contradicted both by approval of homosexual acts and unjust discrimination against homosexual persons.*"⁶

In tone, instructions ought to be welcoming yet challenging, charitable but firm in the truth. The Church should assist parents as the first teachers of their

⁶ Ministry to Persons with Homosexual Inclinations, Guidelines to Pastoral Care, <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action>, 2006.pdf., retrieved Oct. 1, 2017

children regarding sexual and affective development as well as their children's understanding of divine and natural law in matters of human sexuality.

3. We are to commit to creating opportunities for wholesome participation

As is the case with other persons whose life-style contradicts the standards of the Bible, persons of the LGBT orientation, even when known to be practising homosexuals, should always be welcome at our churches. However, membership should be granted only to those persons of the LGBT orientation who do not engage in homosexual acts; and in other respects fulfill the basic requirements for church membership, namely, personal faith in Jesus Christ and baptism.

Such persons who have been granted membership should also be eligible for leadership positions in the Church. However, the Church should maintain wholesome interest in their engagements and should reserve the right to deny special portfolio responsibilities or offices to those whose public conduct violates her teaching. Such service may seem to condone an immoral lifestyle and may even be an occasion of scandal.

In his paper on homosexuality, Burchel Taylor proposed four possible responses to the reality. This document finds resonance with the response dubbed "Disapproval without Condemnation" and as such reproduces it here in part for good pastoral effect.

This is a position that indicates that the order of creation in terms of human relationship is gender differentiation, which means that heterosexuality is the norm. Same-sex sexual relations are therefore contrary to the creative norm. They are not natural and cannot be regarded as normal. ...Therefore, the disapproval does not constitute a rejection of the homosexual person as such. It is rather a rejection of the portrayal of the condition as normal and same-sex physical and genital expression as just a matter of preference and the equivalent of similar heterosexual expression. This position rules out blanket condemnation of the homosexual and insensitive attitude lacking in understanding and any attempt to understand. It is a position open to treat with the homosexual person with care and understanding without condescension or

*self-righteousness. It will seek to offer whatever help is possible toward dealing with the condition, not ruling out the possibility of change. Yet where change is not achieved or does not seem possible, abstinence is counseled and whatever help is possible is offered toward this end being fulfilled.*⁷

Bearing in mind also the biblical perspectives and clinical examination of the issues (see Paper 1,) this document concludes with some specific pointers which may be prayerfully employed in our ministry to persons of such orientation. The church under divine enabling should seek to:

- 1. Provide biblical and clinical education on sex and sexuality for the church at large.*
- 2. Create and foster a climate of honesty and sensitivity re: sexual issues.*
- 3. Provide strategies of prevention of sexual sins and therapeutic, redemptive options for 'the fallen'.*
- 4. Affirm and operate with a sense of the personhood and right to respect, of the homosexual.*
- 5. Lovingly confront the homosexual with the sexual standards of the Bible.*
- 6. Offer disciplinary measures in humility, to the homosexual Church member who is unrepentant. (Mt. 18.15-18).*
- 7. Extend forgiveness to, counsel and restore, the homosexual who has genuinely repented. (2 Cor. 2. 6-9).*⁸

The burden of our concern in this paper may be summed up in the question: ***Are persons of LGBT orientation to be excluded from the community of Christian faith?*** Our treatment of the issues here offers a resounding “No” as a direct response to the question. However, we maintain that anyone who becomes a part of the church should be made aware of the fact that, it constitutes a community of discipline, of learning and transformation and is not to be deemed as merely a place to be uncritically accommodated or indulged.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Where are you right now emotionally after reading this pastoral perspective?

⁷ Burchel Taylor (2001) Homosexuality, paper presented to JBU Faith and Order Commission

⁸ Clinton Chisholm (2016), Ministering to the LGBT Community, presented to JBU Faith and Order Commission, pg 15

2. In terms of ideas, on what issue exactly do you sense you need more clarity/information?

3. It is discovered or disclosed that a leader in your local church has been involved in homosexual practice. If you were a Board member, what from this pastoral perspective would influence your contribution to a Board discussion of the matter and why?

4. Now then, in all honesty, would your response above be different if the leader had been involved in adultery or fornication? Give reasons for your answer.
