



# Building Safe Places

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## Newsletter

November 2015

**Ellen G. White,**  
***Desire of Ages***  
**pg. 353**

Christ himself did not suppress one word of truth but He spoke it always in love.

He exercised the greatest tact and thoughtful kind attention in His intercourse with the people.

He was never rude, never needlessly spoke a severe word, never gave needless pain to a sensitive soul.

He did not censure human weakness. He fearlessly denounced hypocrisy, unbelief, and iniquity but tears were in His voice.



## Dear Colleagues

We hope you are doing well.

What an interesting time in our church. Here I have been reading Dr. Gilbert Valentine's presentation on Adventism's reaction to and repercussions from the 1888 message; and now, 127 years later, we get to be part of how our church is dealing with other large-scope issues that affect how we view God and each other. Exciting times to be alive and thinking.

Hanz Gutierrez' article seems to fit right in with the discussions. It is derived from a Sabbath presentation under the trees of Villa Aurora with Kinship members and Italian Adventists from several local congregations. It was published in *Spectrum*, but we want to give those of you who have not read it in that location a chance to hear his thoughts. You can share your responses with him through the link at the bottom of the article.

We are sharing two very different kinds of options in our Resources section this month. The first is a book about the character of God. Given that we are a people immersed in *The Great Controversy*, I will be interested in hearing what you think about the various ideas presented by the writers of the book. Our second resource is from a married couple who are the Family and Friends coordinators of SDA Kinship. Many of you might want to contact them as a sounding board and for more resources.

George Babcock has written before about his relationship with his daughter Sherri, her wife, and their family. This is a more recent and retrospective view of his continuing journey. It was not easy to be both a General Conference administrator and the father of a young lesbian. His is a story of how love guided his path.

We continue Jerry McKay's serialized story of his personal journey with God, Adventism, and his sexual orientation. Not easy to be missionary-focused for the church and to be gay.

And, with much appreciation, we finish up Gil's research and sharing of our individual and corporate learning from the 1888 message. We find it particularly timely to share two unions' different responses to the decision at the General Conference session in San Antonio to not allow world divisions to decide whether our women pastors may be ordained.

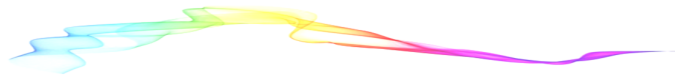
As always, please feel most welcome to share this newsletter with anyone you think would find it interesting and helpful. Our website has a schedule of our upcoming training and workshops, both in the United States and in Europe. If you are interested in attending any of those, let us know at [info@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:info@buildingsafeplaces.org). If you have a

congregation that would like a Sabbath day presentation of *Understanding our Brain, Understanding each Other* with Dr. Arlene Taylor and members of our team, you are welcome to contact us at the same address.

In the meanwhile, we wish you many blessings,

*Catherine Taylor*

and the Building Safe Places Team:  
Frieder Schmid, Ingrid Schmid, Dave Ferguson,  
Floyd Pönitz, and Ruud Kieboom.



**Building Safe Places—For Everyone**

Creating conversations to help us better understand and care for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in our congregations, our communities, and our lives.

*Educational newsletter, small-group meetings, multidisciplinary trainings, multimedia resources.*

For questions, requests, concerns, and contacts:  
[Info@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:Info@buildingsafeplaces.org)

"The last message to this world is a message of God's love, a revelation of His love." —*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 415

## In this month's issue

### **A Sabbath for Homosexuals: An Oxymoron or a Blessing?**

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The 14<sup>th</sup> annual European Kinship Meeting (EKM) took place on August 27-31, 2015, in the charming and breezy city of Florence, Italy. It was well-organized by Ruud Kieboom and Lisa Verona, and LGBT Adventists from all over Europe met to share their experiences and to encourage each other in their Christian living. Under the general title of "This Church is Our Church, is Your Church, is Mine," led by an emphatic Italian pastor, the group tried to understand and discover the sense and need of healthy religious roots and belonging. Two dimensions were kept closely in mind during the entire weekend.

### **Inter-faith Dialogue and Denominational Rhetoric**

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Another cluster of issues that involve interfaith dialogue are currently matters of urgency for *semper reformanda*. The abrupt change of the tone of discourse and strategic orientation that occurred in the church following the 2010 General Conference session has been noted by many and has given rise to extensive discussion. Perhaps nothing more striking and unprecedented in the history of the denomination has been the response to the changes expressed in the volume *Where Are We Going?* This is a deeply pastoral but exceptionally brave book published in late 2011 by Elder Jan Paulsen. A basic concern of the book is that while General Conference session mandated a change in leadership it did not mandate a change in the strategic direction of the church.

### **The Norwegian Union Conference has voted to stop ordaining pastors**

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The Norwegian Union Conference Executive Committee has voted to stop ordaining pastors, male and female, followed by the response of the Dutch Union Conference.

### **Resources**

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#### *\* Book Tip*

*Servant God* is written by a wide variety of authors, both theologians and lay people.

#### *\* A Journey to Remember*

It was unexpected, but it became a night to remember!

It happened after a grueling eight hours of seminars on "exciting" topics such as: "*Regulations and Requirements Affecting Infection Prevention and Control*," "*Epidemiology of Infectious Diseases*," and "*Cleaning, Sterilization, and Disinfection*." Riveting material, huh!

**Homosexuality**  
**—Through One Parent's Eyes**

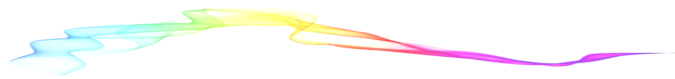
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I first heard of homosexuals in the 1950s when I was in academy. Rumor had it that one of the dorm guys was a "homo." That caused quite a bit of underground buzz among a few students, but others remained totally oblivious. When a famous Seventh-day Adventist psychologist spoke at boys' dorm worship, he addressed the subject rather briefly, assuring the boys that although they might have occasional attractions to other boys, it would all go away once they were married. Unfortunately, some believed him and wrecked the lives of innocent women before deciding that their attractions to other men were not a teenage whim.

**Journey (part IV)**

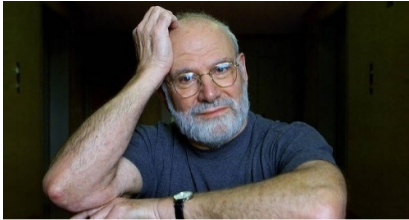
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Before continuing with the chronological part of my story, I want to look at two written sources that compounded my confusion and distress: the "homosexual" passage in Romans chapter one and an article in the Adventist health encyclopedia, *You and Your Health*.



- Send your comments about this section to [editor@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:editor@buildingsafeplaces.org). •

### A Sabbath for Homosexuals: An Oxymoron or a Blessing?



Oliver Sacks, “In memoriam”  
(1933-2015)



By Hanz Gutierrez

**Hanz Gutierrez is a Peruvian theologian, philosopher, and physician. Currently, he is Chair of the Systematic Theology Department at the Italian Adventist Theological Faculty of “Villa Aurora” and director of the CECSUR (Cultural Center for Human and Religious Sciences) in Florence, Italy.**

*For this is what the LORD says: “To the ‘homosexuals’ (eunuchs) who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off” (Isaiah 56: 4, 5).*

The 14<sup>th</sup> annual European Kinship Meeting (EKM) took place on August 27-31, 2015, in the charming and breezy city of Florence, Italy. It was well-organized by Ruud Kieboom and Lisa Verona, and LGBT Adventists from all over Europe met to share their experiences and to encourage each other in their Christian living. Under the general title of “This Church is Our Church, is Your Church, is Mine,” led by an emphatic Italian pastor, the group tried to understand and discover the sense and need of healthy religious roots and belonging. Two dimensions were kept closely in mind during the entire weekend.

First, there is the enormous value of the real, concrete life of these Adventists—sons and daughters, brothers and sisters of us all—who attend the same Sabbath school meetings, sing the same hymns, and read the same Bible; Adventists who are deeply attached to the same hope in Christ’s second coming. This heterogeneous and existentially rich group, here in Europe or elsewhere, doesn’t represent a problem or a risk for Adventism, as some still believe, but rather a resource and an opportunity to understand and re-articulate the real priorities in our church. Because Adventism is a religious community very much attached to its high ideals and standards, it becomes easy for Adventists to forget that those values are emptied of meaning if we isolate them from the actual life and experience of the people they are supposed to inform and orient. Real people are not ancillary realities or entities subservient to ideals. Rather they help correct, reshape, and—above all—distinguish which ideals are ideological and dehumanizing and which are life-promoting and thus truly binding.

The concrete life of people can’t be reduced to just an application of our ideals. It must become the assessment-place of our cherished high ideals. This happens in healthy families and must also happen in our Adventist community. Ideals can help us but may also deeply damage us. Ideals are not God and, therefore, are not absolutes in themselves but need to be continually assessed and reoriented. The best way to do this is by confronting them with the real lives of people. That is what LGBT Adventists can really represent for us. A mercy, a gift, a human space to check the validity and real force of our ideals. We can’t give them up. We would become poorer and hollowed, merely methodological Adventists without dimensions of hope and laughter. A reduction to religious machines, trying to make others as predictable as ourselves.

Second, we have used the Bible to keep us blindly attached to our unduly absolutized ideals. This attitude is visible in the rule-based understanding of the Sabbath, the second coming, vegetarianism, or other lifestyle issues. But we can't rescue and renew these fundamental Adventist experiences if we keep maintaining the same rigid and monolithic principle-based hermeneutics. For this reason, our typical "exclusive principle-based" hermeneutic must become an "inclusive poetic-narrative hermeneutic" that allows us to privilege plurality and complexity instead of univocal homogeneity. Our exclusivist hermeneutic has led us to deform our understanding of the Sabbath. We have been attentive to all the passages which are predominantly rule-based and therefore exclusivist. But the Bible also has strong inclusive Sabbath-related verses such as the one quoted at the top of this essay. In reality, both perspectives belong to the Bible, the inclusive and the exclusive. But we need to modify and update our massively exclusive Sabbath hermeneutic, introducing important corrections. And the most important corrective is to allow inclusive texts their rightful dominance. This is just what Jesus himself taught us in the Gospel: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).



This is what the group gathered in Florence was debating, without fully realizing it, after the opening Friday evening meeting, in the nice but still impersonal Hotel "Stibbert." A seemingly practical decision: where to go to church Sabbath morning. But the discussion also implied an important theological positioning. We decided to go to the Central Adventist Church in Florence because that was the place where we felt the most sense of belonging. During the service, the leading elder welcomed the Kinship group; and the Italian Adventist University, "Villa Aurora," offered its beautiful garden to have the afternoon Sabbath meeting, thus showing an inclusive Sabbath hermeneutic.

This same inclusive hermeneutic caught our attention later that afternoon by the corporative reading of Oliver Sacks' last short narrative, "Sabbath," that simultaneously had appeared some days before in the *New York Times* and in the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/16/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-sabbath.html? r=0>) Sacks' narrative indirectly describes three important conditions about religion and the Sabbath:

- 1) The bewildering ambivalence of religion—every religion. Religions can both help and damage. We've known that since...forever. But usually we interpret this fact in a convenient way, believing that *wrong* religions do really damage but not the *true* ones (i.e., ours). Sacks' point, however, is that "true religions" are the ones which damage the *most*. His own very orthodox English Jewish community gave him an incredibly positive sense of belonging but simultaneously a chronic and incurable sense of rejection when, on one Sabbath day, he confessed his homosexuality to his father.

When his mother also learned this she screamed at him, saying:  
*"You are an abomination. I wish you had never been born."*

- 2) Religions survive more for the relations they are able to build and care for than the doctrinal apparatus they proudly exhibit and defend. This is not a matter of whether the religion is conservative or liberal. Sacks implicitly welcomes the positive figure of his religiously orthodox cousin Robert John Aumann, winner of the 2005 Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on Game Theory. He praises the deep religious commitment that pushed Aumann to say he would have renounced the Nobel Prize if had he been invited to go to Stockholm on a Sabbath. But Aumann's religious commitment was never divorced from a deep human warmth, tenderness, and inclusiveness. So much so that, in his last visit to Jerusalem, Sacks and his lover Billy were invited by Aumann to join him and his family at their opening Sabbath meal.
- 3) Religions are not true because they believe correctly in what God, reality, or human existence is. All religious ideas are just *approximate* knowledge. For this reason, both true and false religions keep making mistakes. Their truth-validity resides instead in their capacity to confess, repent, and reorient themselves in favor of people's well-being and renewal. The Jewish community that had excluded him, after 60-65 years, now welcomed him back and accepted him and his partner Billy without understanding. Sacks says of this moment: *"The peace of the Sabbath, of a stopped world, a time outside time, was palpable, infused everything."* And, sometime after his visit to Jerusalem—lying in his bed, beaten by irreversible metastatic cancer—Sacks still feels himself coddled like a baby by the memory of his inclusive and welcoming Jewish family and the Sabbath blessing they succeeded in transmitting to him. That blessed memory gives him peace and trust when he writes: *"I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest."*



In our last meeting with the Kinship European group, near the Ponte Vecchio in Florence's magic Oltrarno quarter, we were eating a delicious pizza and still remembering the healing touch of Sacks' narrative on the Sabbath when we got the news that he had passed away that same day.

Sixty years had passed until his orthodox Jewish family and community that rejected him finally welcomed him back again—and still without understanding. But they did. Will we be able to do the same?

How many Bryan, Carlos, John, David, Linda, Klaus, Ulrich, Marjorie, Gianni, and Carmen Adventists need to pass away, isolated and abandoned, without having been included in our church's Sabbaths? Oliver Sacks was blessed and, with timid and wavering hope, I dare to trust it will also be true for my children, in the community where they were born.

- Send your comments about this article to [editor@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:editor@buildingsafeplaces.org). •



**Church in the Crucible:  
the 1888 Conference that shapes  
21st Century Adventism**

## **Interfaith Dialogue and Denominational Rhetoric**



**By Gilbert M Valentine, Ph.D**

**The 1888 Minneapolis Conference shaped the development of the Adventist church in the decades that followed. This presentation explores how the themes and insights of 1888 continue to inform Adventism in its endeavor to be a *semper reformanda* church, with particular emphasis on responding to the challenges of the twenty-first century.**

## **Visions of God and the Church [2]**

Another cluster of issues that involve interfaith dialogue are currently matters of urgency for *semper reformanda*. The abrupt change of the tone of discourse and strategic orientation that occurred in the church following the 2010 General Conference session has been noted by many and has given rise to extensive discussion. Perhaps nothing more striking and unprecedented in the history of the denomination has been the response to the changes expressed in the volume *Where Are We Going?* This is a deeply pastoral but exceptionally brave book published in late 2011 by Elder Jan Paulsen. A basic concern of the book is that while General Conference session mandated a change in leadership it did not mandate a change in the strategic direction of the church. The book was written with the conviction that “global unity is a non-negotiable value for the Adventist Church” and that this means that something that a major segment of the community finds unacceptable cannot be imposed on the global community. “Preserving unity, even in the presence of disagreement” is a vital issue for leadership, he argues.<sup>i</sup>

The book makes a strong argument that a leadership that turns the church inwards and backwards to a perceived but non-existent golden era of the past and yields the agenda of the church to voices of the independent or self-supporting agencies (generally radically conservative ministries) and their large donors poses serious problems for the global unity of the community. Is the turning away from interfaith dialogues that have been carefully nurtured over several years a wise strategy? Will such a rejection of dialogue ultimately damage the mission of the church as it seeks to relate to the wider religious world and advocate its distinctive contributions? “Principled engagement,” suggests Paulsen, must continue for the internal spiritual health of the community as well as for the opening of doors for mission.<sup>ii</sup>

Another exceedingly vital issue addressed in Paulsen’s volume is an understanding of the need to create a church community that has a climate of warmth and acceptance, that is a place of welcoming and not a place of judgment and exclusiveness. The temptation “to embark on a pre-Advent purging of the church, driven by a ‘let’s toss out anything that looks like a weed’ mentality” is a “dangerous” activity, he argues. He is concerned because this approach communicates a “spiritual high-handedness; an arrogant, judgmental attitude that can lead to personal ostracism and can destroy community, derail mission, and cripple the body of Christ.” The book expresses a deeply passionate pastoral appeal to resist the impulse to weed and to be exclusive but instead to create a warm family spirit in congregations.<sup>iii</sup>

It may seem something of a paradox that a reflection on *semper reformanda* that anticipates ongoing reform in responses to the



powerful challenges and probing light of the gospel might also express discomfort with the catch cry of “revival and reformation.” Elder Paulsen, in a very careful and nuanced critique however, shows that if used in a popular and less than careful way such a campaign can communicate that the resolving of the tension of living with the ideal and the less than ideal can be achieved if only the community is more careful, more devoted, more pious, more perfect. The intention may be good in the sense that it reflects a desire to move a community away from the messiness of present reality toward something that’s higher and better. But when this is linked to the concept that only when such ideal perfection is achieved will the Lord return there is cause for concern suggests Paulsen. Is there hidden danger in an understanding that it is a church leader’s responsibility to ensure that such a state of readiness is achieved so the Lord will definitely return “on my watch” as a leader? As former *Review* editor Johnsson has observed, the Lord will come in his own good time and in the meantime we still live with the unresolved tension and a goal that is still before us somewhat elusive. What happens in a community bent on bringing on the advent of Jesus by rigorous and disciplined effort and moral purity is that when the victory is not achieved the cause must be that there is some Achan in the camp. In such a situation the focus turns to getting rid of the Achans, the enemy within, and the community is purified but destroyed in its effectiveness.<sup>iv</sup>

Words matter. Rhetoric is important in creating the right climate in the church. A lesson that we can learn from 1888 is that an extreme or unbalanced understanding of eschatology that heightens the sense of imminence in an unhealthy way can inflict strange and damaging behavior patterns on a church. End-time awareness and bright hope are of course part and parcel of what Adventists think. It is part of our profile so to speak. But this has a distinctly negative downside as well. The “Shaking Time” is a central theme of our end time story and its sub-themes include a “falling away” and an “omega” of apostasy and calls for “loyalty” and the “steadfastness of the saints.” Often, this “shaking” as a sign of the end is far too easily used to legitimize and encourage talk of division and apostasy within the community. The “shaking” at times in the past has been seen in almost everything new. Such a narrative inevitably encourages an anticipation of the prospect of schism. In an ironic way, the subtext of this narrative for many is that division is almost a basis for rejoicing because it is such a prominent sign of the longed-for consummation and the encouragement of a “shaking” becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Perhaps as a community, Adventists could allow the prayer of Jesus in John 17 “that they might one” to take a higher precedence in our narrative and balance the end-time emphasis. Perhaps finding another paradigm for the narrative will focus more energy, creativity and commitment to finding ways of embracing the reality of diversity in our unity and we will have a deeper appreciation of the values of staying together for the accomplishment of the gospel commission. Let us hope and pray that the Seventh-day Adventist Church will be

*Ecclesia semper reformanda est.* That each of us will be open to this impulse in our own congregations. The challenges for our community will not go away and we absolutely need to remain relevant in each new age.

## Conclusion

The renewal impetus that stirred the church in the late 1880s and 1890s had a marked influence on church practice and its self-understanding in the decades that immediately followed the conflict. While during the mid-twentieth century there was ongoing conflict about what constituted the central ideas of the conflict, new discoveries of primary sources and more careful recent analysis has clarified the overarching themes and central theological concerns. But in spite of the varying interpretations of the various theological perspectives, the central Christo-centric, scripture centered themes have continued to challenge and shape the church's understanding of its mission and its message. As the church engages with the twenty-first century and finds itself confronting new challenges, the impetus and the insights from 1888 are still important in the shaping of its responses.

- Send your comments about this article to [editor@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:editor@buildingsafeplaces.org). •

- i Jan Paulsen, *Where Are We Going?* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2011) 62-71
- ii Ibid, 68
- iii Ibid, 107
- iv The observation was made in a presentation to the West Coast Bible Teacher's Fellowship, La Sierra University, 2011.

## Visions of God and the Church [3]

### The Norwegian Union Conference Executive Committee has voted to stop ordaining pastors, male and female

The following statement was issued on the union's website

The Executive Committee of the Norwegian Union voted on Sunday, September 20, 2015, to discontinue the practice of ordaining pastors. The action means a change of a previously established practice but is loyal to the vote in San Antonio this summer not to allow individual world divisions of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to make decisions regarding ordination of female pastors.

The document prepared for the Executive Committee refers to the General Conference Working Policy BA 60 05 entitled Basic Principles, which states: "The Church rejects any system or philosophy which discriminates against anyone on the basis of race, color, or gender. The Church bases its position on principles clearly enunciated in the Bible, the writings of Ellen G White, and the official pronouncements of the General Conference."

The ordination practiced within the Seventh-day Adventist Church for many years has been at odds with the basic biblical principle of the equality of all human beings. The backing material for the Executive Committee refers to the priesthood of all believers and states that it is impossible for the church to respect the fundamental human right of equality without a reassessment of the way ordination has been practiced in the past.

During the past five years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has conducted a thorough study of the theology of ordination. After the



comprehensive studies on the theology of ordination, the Seventh-day Adventist Church world leadership has been aware of the fact that there exist two opposing views on ordination by conscientious and loyal Adventists. World church leadership has failed to provide space for unions, which are of the conviction that the present practice is biblically wrong, to follow their conscience within the boundaries of voted church policy. This has placed the Norwegian Union in a very difficult situation.



“The Norwegian Union does not want to be rebellious or to break away from the global Seventh-day Adventist fellowship. This is very important to us,” said Finn F. Eckhoff, Secretary of the Norwegian Union.

The theme of ordination has been studied for more than thirty years. Still it has not been possible to establish a clear biblical basis for the practice followed by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Now the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Norway has decided to encourage world church leadership to establish a biblically based practice that is not threatening the unity of the church.

The action voted by the Norwegian Union Executive Committee has six points. Point number one is a request to the Seventh-day Adventist world leadership to revisit the recommendations in the report from the Biblical Research Committee of the Trans-European Division. The 871-page report recommends the church to admit, “There is no biblical command to ordain anyone by the imposition of hands and that there is no consistent biblical formula for how a leader is inducted to office in the Christian church.” (“The Mission of God through the Ministry of the Church. A Biblical Theology of Ordination – With Particular Attention to the Ordination of Women.” Biblical Research Committee, Trans-European Division, p. 814.)

From now on, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Norway will have a simple dedicatory prayer for a person embarking on pastoral internship. Similarly, there will be a dedicatory prayer for those who take the step from pastoral internship to regular pastoral service.

The Norwegian Union will operate with only two categories of pastoral employees from now on: 1) Pastors in regular service and 2) Pastoral interns. The Norwegian Union will not report pastoral employees to the Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook until the General Conference has established pastoral categories that are not discriminatory.



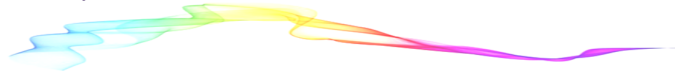
Union President, Reidar J. Kvinge, stressed the fact that the Norwegian Union does not want to be in rebellion against the global Seventh-day Adventist Church. But the vote of the Executive Committee comes as a result of a conviction that equality between the genders is a biblical principle.

“It is a matter of conscience for the Norwegian Union,” said Pastor Kvinge. He added: “We cannot see any Biblical foundation for the ordination practice our church has followed for many years. That is the reason for our vote to discontinue the practice. The New Testament does not give us a command to discriminate against women in pastoral ministry. God gives his gifts to women and men. The Holy Spirit equips women and men for pastoral ministry. We want to recognize that.”

<http://spectrummagazine.org/article/2015/09/22/adventist-church-norway-will-no-longer-ordain-any-pastors>

For many years, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Norway has treated men and women in pastoral ministry with equality. Pastoral employees have the same wage scale and terms irrespective of gender even if ordination has been only for men.

• Send your comments about this article to [editor@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:editor@buildingsafeplaces.org). •



### The Dutch response to the General Conference Working Policy BA 60 05 entitled Basic Principles

*First: The delegates of the Dutch churches voted at their Session in the autumn of 2012 to ordain women in an equal way to their male colleagues. The vote took effect in June 2013 and will remain in effect. The decision of the General Conference Session in San Antonio does not change this. Female pastors will continue to be ordained in the Netherlands Union Conference. We thank God that he calls men and women to serve him. We want to enthusiastically confirm that call by the laying on of hands.*

#### Follow up:

Dear reader,

It is with pleasure that I bring this site to your attention, [www.womensordination.nl](http://www.womensordination.nl). I trust that you will enjoy the articles, which give a clear insight into the functioning of our church.

The site pays special attention to and gives a clear insight into the role of women in the local church congregations, such as deaconess, elder, and pastor. You will also read about our connectedness with the world church.

I wish you much reading pleasure and God’s richest blessing.

On behalf of the Executive Committee and the pastors serving within the Dutch Seventh-day Adventist church.

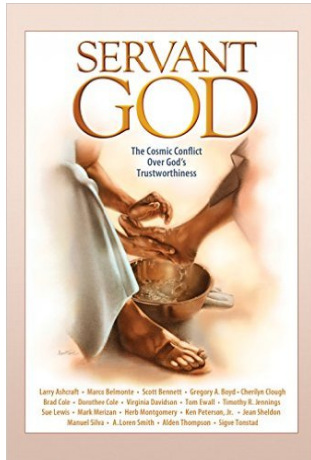
Pastor Wim Altink, President



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## Resources

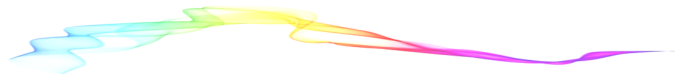
### Servant God: The Cosmic Conflict over God's Trustworthiness



Two thousand years ago, Jesus showed us that God's infinite power is matched by his humility; that the success of his Kingdom is defined not by conquering our enemies through force or fear, in the courtroom or on the battlefield, but by our love for them; that the heart of the omnipotent God always serves.

*Servant God* is written by a wide variety of authors, both theologians and lay people. This blend of writers reflects the composition of God's Kingdom—people from different backgrounds and walks of life joining in a common message, bound together by their love for a Person—God revealed in Jesus.

<http://www.amazon.com/Servant-God-Cosmic-Conflict-Trustworthiness/dp/1594100233>



### A Journey to Remember



By Kris and Debbie Widmer  
Family and Friends Coordinators

It was unexpected, but it became a night to remember!

It happened after a grueling eight hours of seminars on “exciting” topics such as: *“Regulations and Requirements Affecting Infection Prevention and Control”*, *“Epidemiology of Infectious Diseases,”* and *“Cleaning, Sterilization, and Disinfection.”* Riveting material, huh! I had recently been asked to be the Infection Control Professional at the surgery center where I work and I had been sent to this two-day workshop/seminar to get me up to speed. My head was totally spinning and now I had a new to-do list that would keep me busy for months to come.

I was lucky in that my husband could take a couple of days off and go with me. We had flown to Phoenix and planned to take an extra night and make it a get-away trip for us, as well. After the meetings ended that first day, we left the hotel in search of something to eat. We had located a pizzeria not far from us and we took off on foot in its direction. We walked several blocks from the hotel and found a quaint pizzeria with only a few tables and lots of people waiting. The line snaked clear out to the street! The place was obviously very popular. We checked with the hostess to see how long the wait might be. Ughh! Our hunger would not wait an hour to an hour and a half...so we left.

We headed back towards the hotel and since we hadn't seen much as we walked to the pizzeria, we decided to go south a couple of blocks and then head back on a different street.

We turned the corner to head west and had walked a couple of blocks when we saw it: Chase Field, Home of the Arizona Diamondbacks. We crossed the street and wandered over to the ballpark. It is an amazing stadium, with a covered dome, air-conditioned interior (a plus in the desert), and glass windows with a city view. We peeked in the door windows and could see glimpses of the excitement inside. We could see parts of the field, the scoreboard, and more importantly, people. They were watching, cheering, eating, laughing, and having a great time. Even though we didn't have tickets, we longed to be inside with them, enjoying a ball game.

It was then that the unexpected happened. A man walked up to us and asked us if we'd like to go in. He had two tickets he couldn't use and since it was already the third inning, he'd let us have them for \$20.00. That's a great price for two tickets. He said they were great seats. Great seats back home for our home team would cost us at least \$100.00 each. We checked the tickets, of course, making sure we weren't being scammed. Yep, they were for that day and the price quoted on the ticket was considerably more. Hesitantly, we paid and pocketed the tickets. We figured that, even if we had been taken, the anticipated fun was worth the risk of \$20.00.

We went up to the gate. Beep! Our tickets were legit—scanned and approved. Were they great seats? Oh yeah...about 5 rows up from the third base dugout. A high-scoring game was in progress, and we got to see lots of action. (Almost caught a foul ball, too!) Instead of pizza on the outside, we had veggie-dogs and french-fries on the inside—of Chase Field—with a great game! It really was a night to remember. And that night made the whole trip a journey to remember.

As we begin our term as the Friends and Family Coordinators for Kinship, we have talked about how we can be the best representatives of God's love and grace. The evening at Chase Field has been an analogy for us as we think about the intersection of the LGBT+ community and faith. Many within the LGBT+ community are watching from the outside of the faith community, longing to be inside, laughing, cheering, eating, worshipping, sharing, praying, and communing together. And yet, the doors are often closed, the ticket too expensive or not available at all.

We believe that we can be that first step towards inclusiveness. We can be like the man who offered us the tickets. We can invite any who long to be on the inside to come in and be a part of the faith community. It can be risky on both sides, but it is worth the risk, for it can be a journey to remember. Of course, the analogy begins to fall apart when we realize that the ticket we offer is actually free. Jesus is the One with

the ticket and He offers it freely to *all* who will accept it. He has already paid the price.

Maybe you are just beginning this journey as a friend/family/ally and you feel like you are also outside looking in—you are not sure where you fit in—or you are struggling in this journey and feel all alone. To each of you, we would like to offer you support, a listening ear, and resources to assist you. You are not alone! It was wonderful friends that stood by us that helped us begin our journey.

Maybe you are deeper into the journey and you wonder how you can start to make a difference for your LGBT+ family and friends in the faith community. We'd like to say that we have it all figured out, that we have a list of things to do, or we have a formula that will work. We don't. However, we can partner together and brainstorm ideas that may be helpful. We believe in prayer and if we ask God, Divinity will provide guidance, ideas, and opportunities.

We offer this starting point in making a difference, for this has made a difference in our lives. Get better acquainted with LGBT+ people or allies in the community. Let's do lunch. Have an inclusive Thanksgiving. Take in that ball game together. Go bowling.

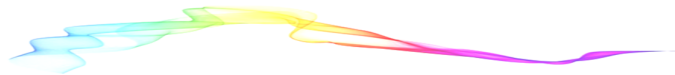
As you build or invest in a relationship, you may find the two communities of LGBT+ and faith are really one community after all. Stand close beside your family/friends, being their support and having their back. Speak up for inclusiveness at a board meeting or Bible study. You never know where God will lead!

**To contact the Family and Friends Coordinators, send email to [family-friends@sdakinship.org](mailto:family-friends@sdakinship.org).**

**For more information online, visit <http://sdakinship.org/regions-groups/groups/family-friends-of-kinship.html>**

Maybe you have been on the journey for many years and have stories and experiences to share how God has guided and blessed. We thank you today for your courage in the past and we ask that you will continue to bless us with your experience and wisdom.

Look around today and see who is peeking in the windows of your world. Then go up to them and tell them about the free tickets to God's kingdom. Is it risky? Yes! But it's worth the risk—and it's guaranteed to be a journey to remember.



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### Homosexuality —Through One Parent's Eyes



By George Babcock

I first heard of homosexuals in the 1950s when I was in academy. Rumor had it that one of the dorm guys was a “homo.” That caused quite a bit of underground buzz among a few students, but others remained totally oblivious. When a famous Seventh-day Adventist psychologist spoke at boys’ dorm worship, he addressed the subject rather briefly, assuring the boys that although they might have occasional attractions to other boys, it would all go away once they were married. Unfortunately, some believed him and wrecked the lives of innocent women before deciding that their attractions to other men were not a teenage whim.

During the 1960s when my wife and I were working for the Adventist church in the field of education, we heard rumors of a pastor who had been dismissed for homosexuality. We were shocked, as we’d not heard of such a thing before. Infidelity or adultery, yes, but not homosexuality. Then we heard of a teacher fired for the same reason. It seemed like a growing thing—but looking back now, we think that the gay movement was just beginning to come out of the closet.

In the ’70s, we began to discover that some of our friends were gay. One of our classmates divorced her husband for that reason, and we sympathized with her as she tried to raise her two girls. Ten years later she confided to us that one of the girls was a lesbian—but by then her ex-husband had died, and she was more understanding of the problem and maintained a good relationship with her daughter. Another friend went into the hospital and died of AIDS. After his death, his wife revealed his gay orientation and became part of a support group for wives of gay men. By this time, we had nothing but sympathy for gay men who tried to be straight but failed and for wives who were abandoned and struggling.

In the 1980s, I was in the General Conference Education Department when SDA Kinship, an organization I’d never heard of, distributed flyers on the Andrews University campus offering a phone number to call if you weren’t sure of your sexual orientation. This outraged the General Conference president who called me in and ordered me to find out who this “Kinship group” was and what was going on.

I contacted the SDA Kinship president who invited me to an upcoming board meeting and asked that I provide the worship thought for the day. There in California I met a group of gay and straight Seventh-day Adventists, sincere and respectful, working together to figure out how to encourage LGBT Adventists to hang onto a relationship with the Lord and avoid despair and depression. What could Kinship do to contact troubled youth and how could the church members’ attitudes be softened toward those who through no fault of their own seemed unable to relate romantically to people of the opposite sex? When I

heard how many gays commit suicide and how many unsuccessfully tried and prayed and worked for a change in their lives, my heart ached. Surely this whole group of people should not be shunned or despised. Christ wouldn't have treated them as some of His people did. I returned to the GC with my report, but it didn't make the brethren very happy.

In the 1980s the AIDS epidemic swept America and the first AIDS quilt commemorating those who had died from the disease was spread out on the National Mall near the Washington Monument. Thousands of people walked past the quilt, each block representing an AIDS victim. Some had pictures of the deceased, personal T-shirts, flowers, and memorabilia of all types. I remember the picture of a baby who died of AIDS, his tiny toys sewed onto the quilt. Suddenly all the anonymous victims began to seem real, their hopes and dreams dashed, the people who loved them grieving. They were no longer disgusting gays. They were real, hurting humans. The quilt worked.



In the middle of the '80s, our family's whole outlook on the issue of homosexuality was severely challenged. Our daughter, Sherri, who had traveled to Pohnpei in the South Pacific to teach math for a year at the island's Adventist school, climbed the hill that held a satellite dish and called the States. Amidst tears and static, Sherri told her mother she just *had* to talk to Daddy. Wasn't he in Asia somewhere? No, she couldn't explain the problem because the phone line wasn't secure. Just try to find Daddy. My wife caught the desperation in her voice and assured her she would try to get in touch with me. At the time, I was in the Philippines visiting and evaluating schools as part of my job at the General Conference.

When the message reached me, I became alarmed. Sherri had always been a steady, non-emotional girl, pastor of two of her high school classes, valedictorian and president of her senior class. I'd never known her to be frantic and crying for her daddy. She wouldn't insist on seeing me unless it was really important. I quickly canceled some appointments and found a plane to Pohnpei. Unfortunately, only one plane from Manila flew in and out of that island each week. But I reached my daughter and spent the week with her. She eagerly showed me her island, took me by motorcycle to see beautiful places, and said not a word about any "problem" until the last night of my visit. As we sat together in the dark on the flat roof of her student missionary quarters she began to cry. Then she said words I can never forget.

"Dad, I am a homosexual."

A thousand thoughts raced through my head. What would this mean in her life? What would it mean to our family? How would our church react to this news? The church had rules and I was an ordained minister. But my weeping daughter came first.

Wrapping my arms around her, I cried with her and assured her of my love and her mother's. She feared that as a minister I might be fired for having a lesbian daughter. She told me of her struggle to be heterosexual, of the days, months and years she'd spent trying to do everything right according to the rules of the church. She had prayed in vain that God would change her, give her a new heart, a new outlook. She'd even given a year of her life to student missions. But nothing had changed. She loved God but couldn't help how she was wired.

The next morning I flew off to resume my itinerary while my wife in the States waited impatiently for my return. I did assure her that our daughter was not pregnant or raped, and I'd be home soon to explain.

That year proved difficult for all of us. The island school begged her to stay another year, but she returned to Andrews University and changed her major from math education to engineering. She was beginning to realize that she would never be able to teach math in an Adventist school as she'd planned. At Andrews, she received counseling, but nothing seemed to help. After that year, she transferred to Walla Walla College for engineering.

As usual, she did exceptionally well scholastically and became the lead student in the engineering class. But that year convinced her that she was alone with her problem. Not daring to talk to anyone, she threw herself into her schoolwork and tried to forget. Isolated and lonely, she made it through her junior year and returned home that summer to work in the General Conference.

Her senior year proved more difficult and stressful. At one point, she had a daunting final project that required hours of computations on her engineering calculator. Wanting to get outside for a bit, she and another girl walked to a nearby park, settled themselves under a tree, and began to work. Several hours later, the girls got up to stretch and run to the edge of the lake which was within viewing distance of their study area. The nearly deserted park only contained a few students, and Sherri left her backpack and books lying on the blanket. Although she wasn't gone long, when she returned, her backpack, high tech calculator and the meticulous notes she had taken all quarter for all of her subjects had vanished.

That night she called us in tears again. She just couldn't face doing all that work over, pages of calculations had disappeared along with her engineering calculator. She had a deadline to reach, end of quarter tests were coming up, and she had no notes on any subject. As she saw it, her engineering career had gone up in smoke, she was still struggling with her sexuality, and everything had gone wrong. She just wanted to quit college. Our daughter sounded so hopeless and despairing that we were alarmed.

At that point, I remembered the SDA Kinship organization and told Sherri about it. I made her promise that if she would stay in school and finish her last quarter before graduation, I'd contact SDA Kinship and see if there was anyone she could talk to about homosexuality. And meanwhile, she would talk to the professor who had assigned the large project and plead for extra time to reconstruct her work. At last she promised to stay and finish.

I called Kinship and was given the names and phone numbers of two lesbian members in southern California who were willing to talk to a young woman in distress over her sexuality. When Sherri called them, they welcomed her call, talked to her for hours, and finally invited her to visit them during her upcoming spring break.

Before leaving for break, she told her teacher about the stolen backpack and pled for mercy. Knowing that Sherri was always honest and did faithful work, the good man assured her that he would accept her paper after the vacation and reaffirmed her ability to complete the project with excellence.

That vacation proved to be a turning point for all of us. The Kinship women welcomed her with understanding and acceptance. They encouraged her and gave her the name of a safe faculty member to talk to at Walla Walla. She returned to Walla Walla, finished her paper, and contacted the safe faculty member who sympathized, gave her books to read, and helped her understand more about her sexuality. Just having someone to talk to, someone non-judgmental and supportive gave her the courage to finish the year and graduate at the top of her class. We thanked God for caring, loving people who could nurture and comfort our daughter when we were a continent away. I was so glad that I'd become acquainted with SDA Kinship before I ever knew we'd need their support.

That summer Kinship held a Kampmeeting in Maryland, not far from our home. Sherri came home and worked at the General Conference again that summer, but took the time to attend the gathering of Seventh-day Adventist homosexuals. She urged us to join her on Sabbath, and we agreed, not knowing quite what to expect.

We found the Kinship group having worship, sharing life stories, listening to a guest minister presenting a sermon on one's relationship with Christ, singing hymns, laughing at one another's jokes, and relaxing in the safe camp atmosphere. Young people told of when they first knew they were different, if and when they had come "out" to their parents and friends, and how they had been treated since. We listened with heavy hearts as some told of parents who had disowned them, churches which had disfellowshipped them, and friends who dropped them. When the group found out we were Sherri's parents, several came to thank us for attending and supporting not only our daughter but them as well. One girl whose mother had rejected her came to my wife and said, "I wish you'd been *my* mother. Would you give me a

hug?” My wife complied at once, and for the rest of the day tried to minister to this hurting young lesbian.

After the news about our daughter hit the Adventist hotline, we got all sorts of advice. Take her to this group for “change ministry,” get her away from her evil friends, help her to understand that as long as she’s living this lifestyle, she is not welcome at home. And on and on. Very few said we should just love her and keep her!

Some declared that we should love the sinner but hate the sin, a non-Biblical concept at best. I’ve not seen that work very well. Frequently the church says, “We love you, but you can’t sing in our choir. It would be a bad example for others.” Or “We love you, but you can’t sing or play for special music anymore.” Or “We love you, but don’t speak up in Sabbath School class. Your comments wouldn’t be appreciated.” “Yes, you’re an excellent teacher, but we can’t hire you.” “Wouldn’t you be more comfortable in the church across town?” When I heard of the children of lesbians who had been denied a Christian education because of their mothers’ orientation, I wondered “Where is the love?” I cannot imagine a loving Jesus saying such unloving things.

As I read the Bible and Spirit of Prophecy, I discover that the revelation of God’s love is the last and most important message He has for us to give to the world. Not a message of rules and regulations, not just a warning about the end time and sudden destruction, but a message of unconditional love. I do not argue theology with the church, but I certainly take issue at the way some members treat people who are not just like themselves. This applies not only to homosexuals but to those of various ethnicities or races.

Fortunately, attitudes are changing, I believe. More churches welcome anyone to join in their worship. Many are realizing that churches are hospitals for sinners, not fortresses for saints. I’m thankful that my daughter’s local Adventist church is warm and welcoming, that her spouse can sing in the church choir, and their two children are accepted in the church school. When I baptized my eldest granddaughter in that church two years ago, it was with a very thankful heart that she had been under the influence of Christian parents and school teachers.

When gays began making news some years ago, I had no idea that gay couples would ever be allowed to form permanent legal unions. Now many of the couples we know are legally bound together, and we think that’s a good thing for stability and family.



When Sherri found her love, Jill, it seemed an answer to her prayers. Raised as a good Methodist, Jill had a relationship with Jesus, delighted in her social work with the elderly, and had a wonderful sense of humor. Jill’s father, an administrator of a local Methodist conference and delegate to their General Conference, had been assigned to investigate the “homosexual issue” for his church before two of his



daughters revealed that they were lesbian. God seems to have prepared both our families to understand and accept the girls He has given us.

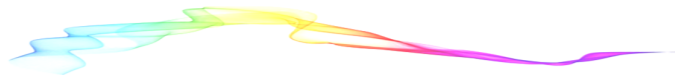
Sherri and Jill have been together for 23 years now. Jill has proven to be a wonderful mother to Grace and Faith, and we couldn't ask for a better daughter-in-law. She is so loving, hard-working, and caring, organizing Adventurers in the Adventist church and visiting the sick and hurting, helping with potlucks and transportation to the Adventist school. Since losing her own mother to cancer a few years ago, Jill treats my wife as her mother and calls her frequently for advice or to talk about our two grandchildren, Grace and Faith.

As more information about sexual orientation comes to light, I am hoping that people will realize that one doesn't choose one's sexuality. I'm hoping that more Christian people will decide that this matter is one that must be left in God's hands and that we are not here to judge but to love one another.

When my granddaughter Grace was four, my wife took her into a side room during a Kinship Kampmeeting so she could play with felts while I preached to the group. Evidently she was listening as she played, because when I declared, "What we need is *grace!*" She flew out of the room and up the aisle calling, "Here I am, Grandpa!"

What an object lesson! I treasure it still, and I think the key to the future for our LGBTI brothers and sisters is "lots of grace" and a heart full of love. We're leaving the judging to God.

- Send your comments about this article to [editor@buildingsafeplaces.org](mailto:editor@buildingsafeplaces.org). •



This story is part of  
*Enough Room at the Table*  
<http://www.enoughroomfilm.com/>

## Journey (part V)

### Sources of Distress



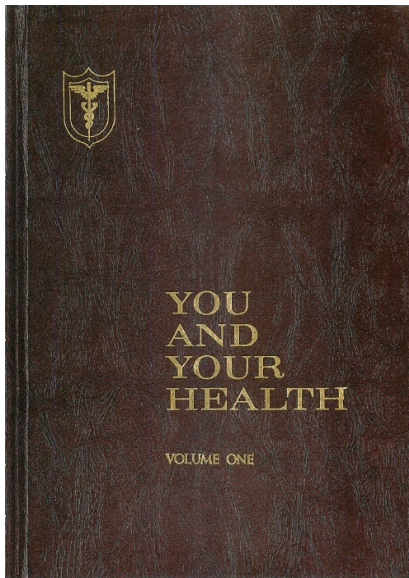
By Jerry McKay

## Stories of the Heart [2]

Before continuing with the chronological part of my story, I want to look at two written sources that compounded my confusion and distress: the "homosexual" passage in Romans chapter one and an article in the Adventist health encyclopedia, *You and Your Health*.

Having read the Bible for years, I was familiar with the book of Romans but not the details. I was more familiar with the story of Sodom because my read-the-Bible-in-a-year momentum had usually dried up by April—well before I would have reached Romans. Besides, I usually focused on reading the gospels. It was only when I studied Romans for those Bible classes in high school that I become aware of what Paul seemed to say about people like me.

Perhaps you have never read Romans chapter one; or, if you have, it may have been awhile. I have included the relevant section here—Romans 1:18-28. As you read it, try to put yourself in my shoes—a teenager who had had unrelenting attractions to the same sex since adolescence. The verses that haunted me most are in bold.



*18. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. 21. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. 22. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23. and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. 24. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,*

*25. 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. 26. For this reason, God gave them up to the dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27. 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 their own persons the due penalty for their error. 28. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct.*

Now that you have read the text, I must ask: If you believed this passage applied to you, how would you have felt? What would it have done to your spirit?

It is next to impossible to describe the effect this passage had on me. Imagine the frustration and angst it created every time I felt some variation of those *unnatural* desires Paul spoke of. Add to that the fact that my attractions involved my Christian friends. With every attraction, I heard Paul talking about the wrath of God, ungodliness, suppressing the truth, becoming fools, and God giving *those* people up to their dishonorable passions and shameless acts.

The knockout, however, came from my plain reading of the text. I mention this interpretative principle because in segments of the church it is emphasized as “the way” to interpret scripture.

If we were discussing a legal statute, Wikipedia would remind us that in a plain reading world each word should be interpreted according to the ordinary meaning of the language unless otherwise defined.

Ordinary words should be given their ordinary meaning, technical terms their technical meaning, and local, cultural terms recognized where applicable.

When it comes to the Bible, the application is similar. The plain meaning of plain reading is that the Bible should be taken at face value—it says what it says and it means what it means. That interpretive principle also suggests that we not read anything into the text. In reality, this principle is seldom applied consistently because very quickly we realize that scripture has to be interpreted.

In a recent conversation, a friend made this insightful comment about plain reading as it applies to scripture. He said he found “the idea of a ‘plain reading’ to be a rather frightening and obscuring phrase. You are reading ancient texts; there is, therefore, a richness and mystery inherent in it. There is nothing ‘plain’ about the process of encountering such a phenomenon.”

No matter how much I agree with his sentiment now, I did not approach Romans chapter one as a mystery with richness to be mined when I was in my teens. I was very much a plain-reading guy.

It is not my intention to contextualize, analyze, or interpret this passage here. I’m only going to share how I read it and applied it to myself. There are others that have researched this passage competently

When I was in my teens, I didn’t use an interpretive filter. Without a filter, Paul said that it was because “*they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator*” that “*God gave them up to the dishonorable passions.*”

From this, I understood that my attractions were the result of *my* failure to worship God correctly. I did not understand scripture to say that God was angry *because* they did unnatural things. Rather, God had handed them over to their dishonorable passions *because* of their idolatrous ways. For me, this scripture said that the impure hearts and shameless acts of those people were *because of* their distorted worship of God. Reading Paul this way had profound implications for me.

At the time, I was not able to make the distinction between what I was feeling as a teenager and the ritualized sexual practices of those idolatrous worshipers. I had become a Christian as a child and had been as intentional about worshiping God as faithfully as possible. The idea that God did this to me or allowed this to happen to me because I had failed to worship Him properly was confounding.

Even though I never had one *unnatural exchange* during high school, I did long to hold a friend’s hand or snuggle up to a friend or two. When I found a friend’s eyes beautiful, I wanted to look into them as he looked into the eyes of his sweetheart. Because all of my emotional



and physical responses were directed toward my male friends, I saw myself in the same crowd as that described in Romans.

Link Paul's comments with Jesus' statement, "As a man thinks in his heart, so is he," and you can understand how I felt I couldn't win for losing. Believing that Romans chapter one was speaking about me was spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically damaging. It contaminated my understanding of God, and it added to the insidious numbing of my soul. The prayer life that I enjoyed was constantly overshadowed by this passage. Years later, I would become aware of the nuanced ways theologians could interpret this text, but it was too late. The damage was done.

In a later section, I will expand on the nuanced interpretation I was introduced to and give examples of how I was to apply it to changing my orientation. In short, I was encouraged not to take the reference personally. Rather, I should see it as having a universal application. I was told Romans one was speaking about the human condition in general. We are all idolaters by nature, and we are all complicit in suppressing the truth of God. The phrases *wrath of God* and *handed them over* meant that God has left all of us to our own devices and the consequences of our choices.

Romans does imply choice when it says, "women *exchanged* natural relations for unnatural and the men likewise..." In context, it is speaking about the choices adults make. I was introduced to an application of the word *exchanged* for an adolescent context. I will get into the subtleties of that interpretation later, as well. For now, you need only know that I was encouraged to see my orientation as one manifestation of all human brokenness.

As if to minimize or normalize my sin, I was reminded that "we are all sinners." That nuance was supposed to be of some comfort. In some ways, I guess it was. However, I soon learned that with this topic few people really think this way. All sin and sinners are not treated equally in scripture, and we do not treat each other as though all sin were equal.

In reality, under this collective experience of God's handing us over, most of humanity struggles with gluttony, drunkenness, anger management, or gossip; and five percent of us get to be homosexual.

If the we-are-all-sinners sentiment were true, folk like me would not be labeled the abominations of the world, blamed for the destruction of two Old Testament cities, and constantly reminded that scripture orders that I be stoned to death. As well, all the woes of the world from terrorist attacks to catastrophic natural disasters would not be attributed to my existence. More often than not, the phrase "we are all sinners" has a very hollow ring to it.

Years later, when I did share my plain-reading understanding, I could tell many were uncomfortable with it. The idea that a young adult would think such harsh things about himself or believe God would do this to me disturbed people. I was often puzzled at how quickly my plain reading of scripture was, in fact, interpreted. As I said, more about all of this later.

One upside to being a teenager in the '70s was that I was spared the experience of sitting through sermons focused on that passage. At that time, few pastors preached on the topic.

The Stonewall Riots in New York City in June of 1969 that set the “gay liberation movement” in motion were given little notice by most Christians. I don't remember being aware of what was happening in New York City, either. Even if people were aware of those events, most dismissed them as far removed and in the gay ghettos of notorious cities. No one assumed that a student at a Christian school, especially one on track to become a minister could be one of those people—a homosexual.



There have been great strides in understanding since then, but there is a downside. In the '70s, most Christian campuses and Christian homes were relatively safe places for an LGBT teenager —the loneliness, confusion and isolation, notwithstanding—because we were not subjected to the hurtful comments we often hear today.

The public nature of the topic means *we* are talked about everywhere. While dialog is usually a good thing, many continue to assume that *we* are not sitting in the pews of local churches or around the dining room tables of the nation. Never make that assumption. Either as guests or as your children—we are there.

I have often felt the sting of comments that are devoid of understanding and empathy because I can pass! I can pass as heterosexual, I mean. I can sit at your table and you would not assume I was one of *those* because I don't present with all the stereotypical mannerisms that secular and church media like to focus on. Sadly, the secular media likes to shock with sensational images while the church uses the same images to mock. In all cases, we are all diminished.

I am well aware of the larger concerns that seem to be buried in this text, but unexamined comments have the potential to create more harm than good. I don't mean that we should dismiss what the Bible says. Rather, if we are going to make this passage in Romans the basis of our next sermon, I hope we do the hard work involved in mining it for the “richness and mystery inherent in it,” as my friend suggested. It still hurts when I hear or read certain comments, but I am able to recover faster now. It's the teenager or the person too emotionally beaten up to defend himself or herself that I really feel for.

The Wikipedia entry had a very important caveat to the plain-reading approach. It should be used “unless,” Wiki cautioned, “the result would be cruel or absurd.” Good advice, I think.