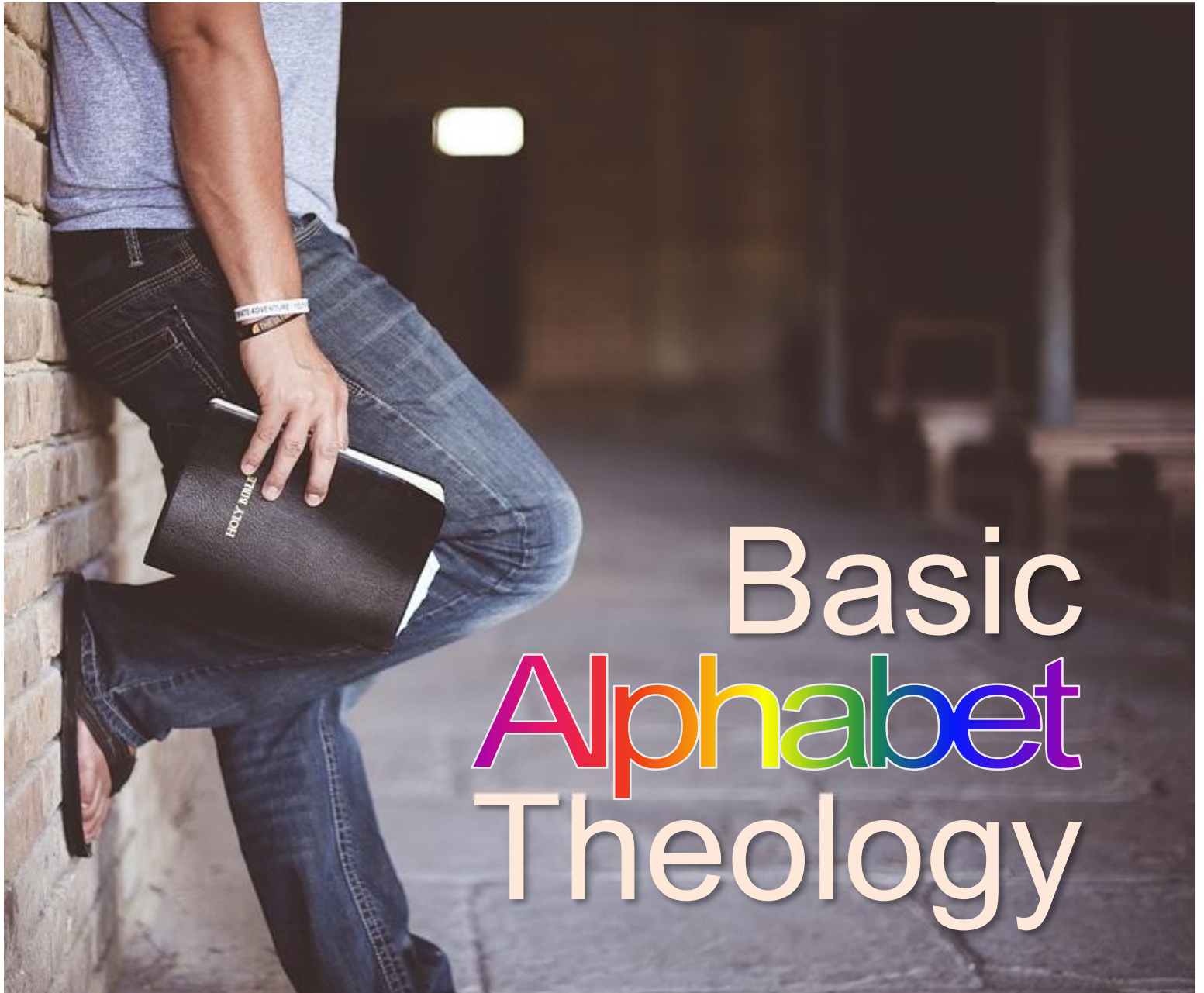
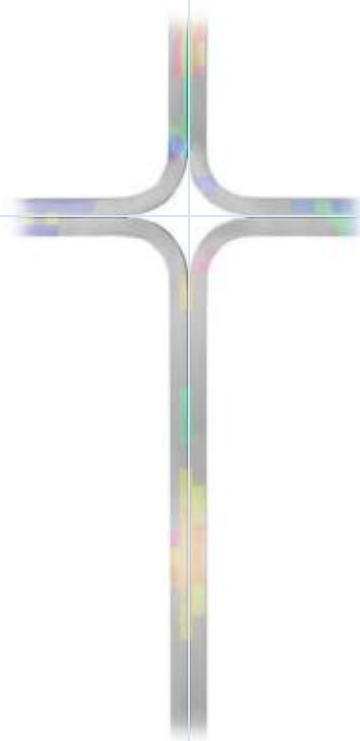


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Basic
Alphabet
Theology



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Introduction

For a heterosexual male to write about homosexuality and “alternative” sexual orientation is a risky business. How can I ever hope to understand the challenges that non-heteros must face? And the difficulty further increases because of my background. I am a senior citizen who grew up in a time when homosexuality was hardly talked about. Moreover, I have my spiritual background in a denomination that has traditionally taught its members that the only kind of sex the Bible approves is that between a male and a female, after they have married. Until a few decades ago my views to a large extent coincided with the majority opinion in the Seventh-day Adventist Church—the denomination to which I belong and have served as a minister in for almost half a century.

I have changed my mind on many aspects of non-hetero sexuality. That change did not come overnight but was the result of a long journey. One important factor in this process was that I gradually learned to read the Bible in a different way. I understood more and more that the “proof-text” method that takes a select number of texts at face value, and then connects them in a particular way to underpin an established view or doctrine, does not do justice to the underlying message of the Bible, and often neglects the historical and cultural context in which these texts are embedded. I began to understand that the so-called “clobber texts” that are used to condemn any kind of same-sex relationship, are not at all as clear as they are, by many, made out to be.

However, the most important factor in this process was that I began to meet with gay and lesbian people. Many of them are members or former members of my church. I found that these are not the kind of men and women who would fit the picture that lots of people have of gay people because of seeing pictures of gay pride parades and hearing about the so-called gay scene: people who lead extremely promiscuous and superficial lives. No, many of these gays and lesbians that I came to know live in committed, loving, permanent, same-sex relationships. Many of them are committed Christians. But, sadly enough, many have experienced that, after “coming out of the closet,” they were no longer welcome in their church or could not fully participate in the life of the church.

In presenting this “basic alphabet theology,” I do not pretend to have answers to all possible questions. Personally, I continue to struggle with some implications of this theology, and I do not expect that all hetero readers will abruptly change their mind after they have read this booklet. I do hope, however, that it will be helpful to those who are also on a journey towards a fuller acceptance of others who are “different” as far as their sexual orientation is concerned. And even if we do not fully agree on the correct interpretation of some biblical texts, we must—I strongly believe—recognize that the fundamental Christian values are equality in Christ and unconditional love for each other. That will always have to be the basis for a Christian view of sexuality, whatever one’s sexual orientation might be.

Zeewolde, Spring 2018

1. “All you need is love”

This brochure is about *basic “alphabet” theology*. What do these three words mean?

- This small brochure is “basic.” My aim is to be simple, but not simplistic. We will search for important patterns rather than losing ourselves in a cascade of detail.
- Theology literally means: “a study of God.” In speaking about God, we must always be aware of our human limitations. God is infinite, and we are not. God’s words are Truth, while our words—even when we talk about Truth—remain deficient human attempts to find words for the unspeakable. Our most eloquent God-talk is a mere stammering in the divine ears.
- The word “alphabet” has to do with the fact that in this brochure our theology (God-talk) has a special focus: the so-called “alphabet” people, as gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and intersex people, and other groups of men and women with a “different” sexual orientation are commonly referred to. Often, we see the abbreviation of LGBTI, LGBTQ, or some other combination of capital letters.

The foundational principle of all Christian theology is: *God is love*. Unless our God-talk is rooted in this basic principle, it may be about all kinds of things but not about the true God who revealed himself in the Supreme Object of His love: Jesus Christ.

God is love

Humans have ascribed a long series of attributes to God. He is said to be eternal, omniscient (He knows everything), omnipresent (he is present everywhere), almighty, and unchanging. He is also said to be patient, just, and forgiving. But the all-embracing description of God is found in 1 John 4:16: *God is love*.

God has demonstrated this love in an utterly concrete way:

This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world, that we might live through Him (1 John 4:9).

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

The core of the Christian faith and life: Love for God and for one another

Humankind has been created in the image of the God who is Love (Genesis 1:27). Whatever else this may mean, it tells us that love is a key aspect of our humanness. Human beings are spiritual beings, who are endowed with many different gifts. But all these gifts find their apex in the gift of love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

God’s instructions to His human creatures are summed up in one sublime statement that is found in the Old as well as in the New Testament.:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:5).

“The most important [commandment],” answered Jesus, “is this...love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30, 31).

So, in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you (Matthew 7:12).

We demonstrate that we are followers of Christ when we show love to others: *Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him (1 John 4:16).*

Loving others may be a challenge, but Christian love is not selective. It includes all people, even those we regard as our enemies (Matthew 5:43).

So, that is where we must start in any God-talk, whatever group of human beings it may concern. “All you need is love.” This “basic alphabet theology” is about God’s love for all human beings and our non-selective love for all people we encounter.



2. Yes, we are different

As human beings we have a lot in common:

- We are all children of our heavenly Father: *Have we not all one Father. Did not one God create us?* (Malachi 2:10).
- In Christ all people enjoy the same status: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:28).
- We are all holistic human beings: *souls* in which the physical and the spiritual is united (Genesis 2:7).
- We all have received the command to love one another and to care for one another. *Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others* (Philippians 2:4).
- God's love includes every person. *God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life* (John 3:16).
- We all share in the same hope: *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called!* (Ephesians 4:4).



God loves diversity

We have much in common, but each of us is also unique. This is a fundamental feature of who we are. Diversity is not something humans have invented. God is himself “diverse” in his “being-God.” There is one God, but He is revealed to us as Father, Son, and Spirit. Christ, our Savior, also embodies a fundamental, but inexplicable, kind of diversity: He is fully divine and fully human. He is our Great *God* and Savior (Titus 2:13), but He is also described as the one Mediator: The *Man* Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). The Godhead is in the Bible most often referred to in masculine terms, but the Scriptures also use feminine terms. Significantly, one of the Hebrew names for God—El Shaddai—is often translated by linguistic experts as “the many-breasted one.”

We find a similar paradoxical diversity in the written Word. *God* has spoken to us through various means. The Bible is an important vehicle for God's revelation (Hebrews 1:1). Yet, while God is the Author, we are also told that God, over a period of many centuries, used dozens of human authors as his “penmen” (2 Peter 1:21), which makes God's written Word very diverse, not only in its language but also in its emphasis and theology.

It is also important to note that the church is meant to be diverse. It is like a body with lots of different members (1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Moreover, the gifts of the Spirit, that the members may receive to fulfill their calling, are also diverse (1 Corinthians 12:8-12, 28; Romans 12:6-8).

Humankind is and will always be diverse

The Bible leaves us in no doubt that humanity has always been diverse. It was not something that just happened to develop, but it was God's intention from the very beginning. Genesis 10 gives us a picture of the diversity of human origins. The ethnic diversity that has always been part of humanity is even reflected in Jesus' family tree. Interestingly, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus mentions a few non-Israelite women (Matthew 1:1-17). During his ministry, Jesus associated with men and women of all occupations; with Jews and non-Jews, e.g. Samaritans, a Syro-Phoenician woman, and Romans.

The church was to welcome people of all ethnicities and cultures (Acts 2 and 15), in response to Christ's mission mandate: *Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost* (Matthew 28:19). God's people are described as the great multitude, *from every nation, tribe, people, and language*. When they enter the New Jerusalem, *they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it* (Revelation 21:26).

Sexual diversity

According to many Christians, the Bible is negative about the sexual diversity beyond the male and female condition, and, so they say, any other sexual activity is *perverse* rather than just *diverse*. There is no basis in Scripture for this view, even though a small number of Bible texts are quite commonly quoted in its support. We will discuss these texts later and will see that they are not as clear-cut as they are often believed to be. Several of these texts address *improper* homosexual acts, just as many other texts address *improper* behavior of heterosexuals! However, we must emphasize that a condemnation of some forms of homosexual behavior does not automatically apply to permanent, loving same-sex relationships.

A few statements on the spiritual status of eunuchs may be relevant. Eunuchs are warmly welcomed into the covenant relationship (Isaiah 56:4-7) and later into the church (e.g. the Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 8:22), in spite of the fact that they are "different." This perhaps is an indication that sexuality as such does not determine spiritual status and does not preempt full equality with all others within the people of God.



3. Male and female, and...?

Creation

Both creation stories (Genesis 1 and 2) confirm that God created human beings as male and female (Genesis 1:27; 2:21-25)

Based on this, most readers will conclude that sexual differentiation was initially limited to male and female. But opinions remain divided and others have suggested that this may be too hasty a conclusion and that the text does not exclude some inherent fluidity between those two genders. However, there is no direct biblical confirmation for this.



In the beginning

Humankind was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). There are many different views about this divine image. It sets human beings apart from the rest of creation. Some have pointed to the gift of human sexuality as the essence of being created in God's image. Others believe that it is the human ability to use abstract thought and to communicate and/or human creativity. Whatever else it may be, it must, primarily, include our human ability to give and receive love, as God is love.

The first human pair was given a clear commission. Adam and Eve were to be the stewards over the world that God had created (Genesis 1:28). In addition, they were also told to "be fruitful and multiply" and even "to fill the earth." This does not imply that sexuality was only intended for procreation, as some have argued. The Bible does not support that view.

Many questions may be raised. One of these is whether procreation would, at some point, have ceased, if humans had not sinned. What would have happened once the earth would have been "filled"? It seems logical to conclude that this would have affected the procreation aspect of sexuality.

The reality of sin

The story of Genesis 3 makes it clear that soon after creation sin entered the world. The story tells us that the entrance of sin did not only affect the first human beings but also the animal world, as both humans and animals were now subject to death, as well as the world of plants (Genesis 3:18). Elsewhere in the Bible, the first sin is linked to all human sinfulness (see Romans 5:12-21).

What once was perfect was now less than perfect. Work was no longer an effortless pleasure (Genesis 3:19). The relationship between male and female was adversely affected, and childbirth would become a painful affair (Genesis 3:16). Moreover, the concept of shame was introduced (Genesis 3:10, 11).

Is a non-heterosexual condition the result of sin?

This is a very difficult question to answer and opinions differ. After the Fall, women would suffer in childbirth and work would bring tiredness and sweat. These things were the result of sin, but no one would suggest that women in labor are sinning. And even if the existence of a non-heterosexual orientation is one of the results of the drastic changes in creation because of sin, this does not mean that having such an orientation has to do with any personal sin. *Sin has to do with how we live with our sexuality, whether we are heterosexual or LGBTQ.*

How should we respond to the conditions of a sinful world?

Most (if not all) Christians would agree that we must do whatever we can to deal as optimally as possible with the changes that our sinful world has experienced. We do not just accept that things are as they are. In other words:

- We do all we can to make work more pleasant, less dangerous, and less strenuous;
- We take medication to deal with sickness and to postpone death;
- We do what we can to limit the pain and distress of childbirth;
- We have ways to overcome infertility;
- We remove the thorns and thistles to increase our harvest.

If we see a non-heterosexual orientation as a change that came about after human sexuality became affected by sin, it would seem to follow that:

- We must accept the reality of sexual differences and deal with these in a positive way.

What happens next?

It seems logical to assume that some of the elements of a sinless Eden would not, in every respect, have continued forever. Death would not have occurred, but procreation would probably at some point in time have stopped. How that would have influenced human sexuality we do not know. What we do know is that present forms of sexuality will eventually cease to exist. Jesus tells his disciples that heaven will know of no gender differentiation (Matthew 22:23-28).



4. God accommodates

The biblical picture portrays God's ideal for human sexual relationship as a life-long relationship between one man and one woman. That is how it was "from the beginning." The biological complementarity would also seem to point to this original design.

But things did not remain perfect. This applies to various aspects of interhuman relationships. As time went by, the initial equality between male and female gave place to the ugly reality of the kind of male dominance that we now call a "patriarchal society." In many parts of the world, the struggle against gender inequality continues. Social inequality became a tragic fact, with slavery becoming an all too common practice. It became so ingrained in society that God decided to make some accommodations and He instructed Moses to include laws about slavery in Israel's legal system.

Polygamy (and to a lesser extent polyandry) became a common feature in many societies. When surveying the biblical data, we find numerous instances of polygamy.

- Famous polygamists are Abraham (Genesis 16:3), Jacob (Genesis 35:23-26), and Solomon (1 King 11:3). But there are numerous others.
- Even in the New Testament, there is no blanket condemnation of having more than one wife (1 Timothy 3:2).
- Despite David's many sins, including his polygamy, God describes him as a 'man after his [God's] own heart' (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

From ancient times onwards, many "marriage" relationships ended in divorce. The New Testament contains some clear restrictions on divorce and remarriage (e.g. Matthew 5:31, 32; 19:9; Mark 10:4). But the Old Testament was more lenient (Exodus 21:7-11; Deuteronomy 24:1-4; Malachi 2:16).

What do we conclude from this? God's ideal was not to be given up, but God was willing to make accommodations in view of societal changes. He gave the people space to deal with the less than ideal.

Does God also make space (accommodations) for same-sex relationships?

The Bible does not say very much about homosexual relationships, and what it says is not always clear. But, when we start from the premise that homosexuality was not part of God's original pattern (as most Christians would argue), we have reason to conclude that the overall message of the Bible is that God is willing to accommodate changes in the relationships between males and females and that this would include the emergence of the phenomenon of homosexuality.

The use of the word "emergence" is intentionally vague. Thus far scholars are not close to any consensus to explain why people are attracted to persons of the same sex. Some have emphasized *milieu* and *nurture*. Others have pointed to sexual abuse or, for men, unhealthy relationships with females. Others maintain that there is evidence that genetic factors play a major role or that homosexuality has much to do with hormones or the "wiring" of the brain. It probably is some combination of factors; and, so far, we do not have a fully satisfying explanation. But we know one thing for sure: *homosexuality is not a matter of choice*.

Sexual orientation is not something with which we should experiment. It is clearly wrong when heterosexual people decide to make a homosexual excursion or vice versa. Paul speaks directly about sexual activity that is *against the nature* of the individual concerned (Romans 1:26, 27).

Homosexuality is a fact of life

We do not know the exact percentage of people with a “different” sexual (that is, not clearly heterosexual) orientation. Estimates range from two to as high as ten percent of the population. Some countries continue to claim that there are no homosexuals within their borders; and, if there is any homosexuality, they argue, it is due to Western import. There is ample evidence that homosexuality has existed through the ages, in all cultures, and is a truly worldwide phenomenon. The tragic reality is that people with a “different” sexual orientation still face serious problems in over eighty countries. And even today many countries have laws against homosexual activities (some Western countries also, until quite recently).

Christians must face the reality of “different” sexual orientations. Many of the brothers and sisters in their faith community belong, either openly or secretly, to the “alphabet” community. They have not chosen their orientation, just as their heterosexual fellow believers have not chosen theirs. Christians must decide how they can view homosexuality in a Christian way and how they can deal “Christianly” with the “alternative” sexual orientation of others or of themselves.

In the following sections of this brochure, we focus on several Bible texts that are often used to “clobber” homosexuals, we do well not to forget two basic elements:

- a. God is love and wants His creatures to experience love.
- b. God is willing to make accommodations when His original plans seem (or are) unattainable.

On this basis, we will proceed.



5. Homosexuality in the Old Testament

It is often argued that the Old Testament contains some clear statements that squarely condemn all forms of homosexuality. Some would, however, claim that the relationship between David and Jonathan shows that these men were, if not homosexual, bisexual. When David laments the death of Jonathan, he says: “Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women” (2 Samuel 1:26). There is, however, no conclusive evidence that the bond between these two men was more than that of two close friends.



When dealing with these Old Testament passages, we must ask ourselves two fundamental questions:

1. Is the wording of these texts always as clear as a superficial reading of some Bible translations might suggest?
2. Do the Old Testament texts, which directly or indirectly mention homosexuality, speak about committed, enduring love-based same-sex relationships, or about other homosexual practices?

This second question is the easiest to answer. There is no indication whatsoever that the “anti-homo” texts reflect any awareness of sexual orientation as a fact of life—that it is not a matter of personal choice but a condition a person has to live with. These anti-gay texts must be understood against the background of the world of the Old Testament in which male prostitution, particularly in a cultic context, was common among Israel’s neighbors and was also often practiced by the Israelites. (See 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; 2 Kings 23:7; Job 36:13, 14.)

Let us look at the main Old Testament texts that are usually quoted as proof that homosexuality is a horrific sin.

Deuteronomy 23:17, 18

This passage is about sexual depravity in a cultic setting. It is instructive to look at different Bible translations. This shows immediately how the original wording was very challenging to the translators. These three different versions will illustrate that point:

King James Version: *There shall be no whore of the daughters of Israel, nor a sodomite of the sons of Israel. Thou shalt not bring the hire of a whore, or the price of a dog, into the house of the LORD thy God for any vow: for even both these are an abomination unto the LORD thy God.*

Revised Standard Version: *There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the wages of a dog, into the house of the LORD your God in payment for any vow; for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God.*

New International Version: *No Israelite man or woman is to become a shrine prostitute. You must not bring the earnings of a male prostitute or a female prostitute into the house of the Lord your God to pay any vow because the Lord your God detests them both.*

Leviticus 18:22

Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind: it is an abomination (KJV).

This text also is not as clear-cut as it seems. A literal rendering of the original wording is: *With a male, you shall not lie down the lyings-down of a woman.* The word “with” is inserted to let the text make sense. Scholars are divided about the meaning of this text.

An anti-gay reading of the text usually stresses the word *abomination*. To judge the strength of that word, it should be remembered that this same word is quite frequently used in the Old Testament, in most cases in connection with dietary restrictions, improper sanctuary rituals, or, in general, improper behavior. Proverbs 6:16 (KJV) lists “a proud look” and “a lying tongue” as things that are an *abomination* to God.

In addition, there is the question whether all the various laws that are part of the so-called “holiness code” still apply today. And if the “law” against homosexuality still applies, does this also mean that those who engage in homosexual acts are to receive the death penalty, as this same law demands? (See Leviticus 20:13.)

Sodom

The most frequently quoted passage about homosexuality remains Genesis 19. The Sodom story has given the world the term *sodomy*. Most people are convinced that this story is about flagrant homosexual behavior and God’s unmitigated condemnation of it. A careful reading of the text, however, makes clear that this is a horrendous story about gang rape and certainly not about a committed same-sex relationship between two individuals. The key issue in the story is one of Near-Eastern hospitality.

Lot’s solution to defuse the situation by offering his two virgin daughters to the mob to satisfy their sexual cravings goes against all modern-day values. Moreover, it is interesting to read what the prophet Ezekiel later describes as Sodom’s iniquity: “[the people in Sodom] were ‘arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and the needy’” (16:49). There are about a dozen other places in the Bible in which Sodom is mentioned. But, remarkably enough, none of these mentions any sexual misconduct.

The story of the scandal in Gibeah, in Judges 19, 20, is very similar, but, if possible, even more hideous. Here also the main issue is the concept of hospitality.

6. What does the New Testament tell us?

There are a few texts in the New Testament that are often quoted when people argue about the sinfulness of being gay or lesbian, or of having any other non-heterosexual orientation. Significantly, the four gospels are silent on this issue. Some have suggested that there is an allusion to homosexuality in the story of Jesus' healing of the servant of the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13). Does the description of the special care this Roman officer manifested for his servant perhaps indicate more than a master-slave relationship? It could well be, for this would fit with what we know about Roman mores of those days.

The letters by the apostle Paul contain a few verses that, at first sight, appear to condemn all homosexual practices. However, do these texts really say what they appear to say? If the reader comes to these texts with the firm conviction that any same-sex relationship is utterly sinful and is eager to find confirmation for that view, it may seem that these texts offer support. However, one should try to read with an open mind; and, in reading the Bible, we must always recognize the cultural and historical background against which a section of the Bible was written. Paul lived and worked in the Roman world in which a form of homosexual behavior was rather common: in the higher classes, a married man with a family would often also have a sexual relationship with a young boy. We would now refer to this as *pederasty*. There is every reason to believe that the apostle was primarily thinking of this phenomenon in addressing sexual aberrations. There is no indication that he was aware of what it means to have a sexual orientation.



Romans 1:26, 27

This passage is of special interest. In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul describes the moral depravity of humankind. People have knowingly ignored God's commandments.

For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 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.

It seems that Paul is referring to heterosexual men and women who have decided to act *against* their nature and now experiment with same-gender sex. For gay and lesbian persons, it is decidedly not against their nature to have same-sex relationships. If they were having sex with someone of the opposite gender, they would have been involved in an act that was unnatural for them. Whatever explanation is given to this text, it is not about loving relationships.

1 Corinthians 6:9

As in other writings of the period, we find in several places in the Pauline epistles lists of virtues and of vices. This text is one such example. In interpreting this text, we are confronted with a few Greek words that are rather rare in the New Testament and are not easy to translate. That explains the many different readings in various Bible versions. Below are just three examples of how the translators wrestled with this text:

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind... (KJV)

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts,... (RSV)

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who have sex with men,... (NIV)

Malakoi is one of the Greek terms that is far from clear. Its core meaning is something like “softies.” In Luke 7:25 the word is used to refer to men who wear expensive clothing.

The other word in this text that has caused much discussion is *arsenokoitai*. It refers to “sexual perverts,” and possibly also to homosexuals; but the word seems to have an exploitative association.

1 Timothy 1:8-10

A similar, oft-quoted, text is found in the first letter of Paul to Timothy. A comparison between the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version indicates that, in this instance also, the translators were not always sure what words to use.

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayer, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine. (KJV)

Now we know that the law is good, if anyone uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. (RSV)

When reading this text, we must ask ourselves: What is Paul really talking about? Many theologians assert that some of the keywords are quite ambiguous and may not refer to homosexuality at all. But,

even if they do, *it does not follow that Paul's words address the issues of sexual orientation or of same-sex committed, monogamous relationships.*



7. “Generous Spaciousness”

In recent times, several denominations have recognized that a person’s sexual orientation is not a matter of choice and that all people, regardless of their sexuality, must be fully accepted and be allowed to participate one hundred percent in the life of the church. Some denominations have gays and lesbians among their clergy and treat same-sex marriages as they do marriages between people of different genders. However, many churches (as, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church) continue to regard gay and lesbian relationships as “unnatural” and morally indefensible. The only path for gays and lesbians, they say, is that of celibacy. Positions of Protestant denominations vary, and faith communities that have a worldwide presence (e.g., Anglicanism) face major controversies about these issues within their ranks.

The official Seventh-day Adventist view is like that of the Catholic Church: gays and lesbians are welcome and can become members if they do not engage in any homosexual *practices*. In some areas of the world, and in many local congregations, attitudes are gradually shifting and becoming more accepting. Unfortunately, some Adventists still believe that homosexuality is a condition that can be “healed;” but this idea finds less and less support and has been condemned internationally by psychiatric, psychological, and social work organizations.

What does the Bible say?

Many Christians, including large numbers of Adventists, believe that the Bible strongly condemns any same-sex relationship. Opinions will continue to differ, but experience shows that these opinions are often set in concrete and do not easily change. The basic question is: *How do we read the Bible? Do we choose a so-called “plain-reading” approach, in which the words of the Bible are, if possible, taken literally? Or do we try to let the underlying message of the Bible speak to us in our time and culture? Do we have an open eye for the historical and cultural context of the so-called “anti-homo” texts? Are we willing to accept that Bible writers, like Paul, had never heard of “sexual orientation”? Are we sure that the biblical statements that refer directly or indirectly to homosexuality address our contemporary situation and are concerned with loving, enduring, committed same-sex relationships? In other words: Do we expect to find answers to questions the Bible does not ask?*

A way forward?

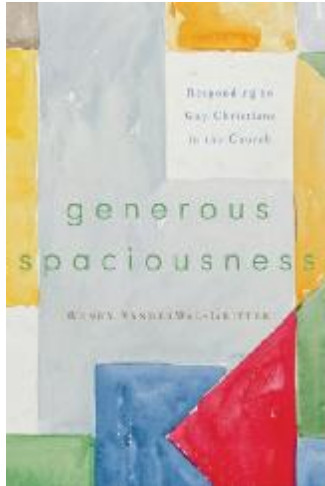
So, how do we move forward, considering the polarity in the Christian church (including the Adventist Church) about the “alphabet” people? It may well be the best (in any case, the most pragmatic) way to approach it primarily from a humane and a pastoral perspective.

Even if we should argue that heterosexuality was God’s original design for human relationships, we must be willing to recognize that this ideal situation no longer exists. Heterosexuality has not retained its original perfection; and it is also a fact that a considerable percentage of human beings—all over the world and in all kinds of cultures—discover, often sooner rather than later, that they are “different.” The Bible provides us with evidence that God accommodates situations that do not fully reflect his original design.

Many heterosexual marriages fail, and divorce is a reality. It is never an easy solution, and the church will continue to uphold the biblical ideal of the marriage covenant “until death doth us part.” Like most

denominations, the Adventist Church has a pastoral rather than a strictly biblical approach to divorce. Could this principle perhaps also point the way in the topic of homosexuality? Could the church, rather than operate based on a few biblical statements that may be interpreted in different ways, implement an approach of acceptance and mercy towards those who are attracted to members of the same sex? Does the model that Christ left us with not suggest that, when in any doubt, it is always better to err on the side of love, mercy, and understanding?

Excluding people because of their sexual orientation is wrong. Alphabet people must be able to feel safe in the church. They should never be ostracized, judged, or discriminated against.



Heterosexual people must realize that they never fully understand the plight of those who are “different.” Mrs. Wendy VanderWal-Gritter, a Christian Reformed minister and at one time an official in the Exodus-organization, wrote, *“For those of us who are straight and who don’t spend a whole lot of time processing, wrestling, hiding, or managing our heterosexuality, I think there will always be a gap in our understanding of what it is like to be persistently attracted to the same-sex.”*

Her experience very much also reflects mine: *“Building relationships over the last years with gay Christians has allowed me to experience, in a very tangible way, the wideness of God’s mercy.... I have been confronted with my own impoverished view of God, one that often expected a stinginess in God’s mercy rather than lavish acceptance.”*¹

Archbishop Desmond Tutu once said, “I can’t for the life of me imagine that God will say: ‘I will punish you because you are black; you should have been white; I will punish you because you are a woman, you should have been a man; I will punish you because you are a homosexual, you ought to have been heterosexual.’ I can’t for the life of me believe that this is how God sees things.”

Who can really argue with that?



¹ *Gracious Spaciousness*, Baker Publishing House, 2014, pp. 51, 52.

Finally . . .

Some time ago a film was produced with the somewhat provocative title *Seventh-Gay Adventists*.² It tells the stories of a few gay and lesbian couples and their relationship with the Adventist Church. I was touched by the story of two young men who decided to get married. One of them approached his brother, an Adventist minister, to lead out in a service of blessing for him and his partner. This brother-minister realized that he was not supposed to do this, as his church does not recognize the validity of same-sex partnerships. But, after much soul-searching, he decided to do it anyway. His words stuck in my mind: "If I do something wrong, or do not know what to do... 'If we err, let it be on the side of mercy rather than on the side of condemnation and harsh dealing.'" These last words, which are quoted from a letter by Ellen G. White (Letter 16, 1887), encapsulate what has become my firm conviction. If in doubt as to what we should do, let's always choose the path of love and compassion rather than the path of condemnation and rejection. I am convinced that this is the way followers of Jesus Christ must choose.



²The film was produced by Daneen Akers and Stephen Evers. Free copies can be downloaded through <http://www.sgamovie.com/free>.

