

The Stance of the Methodist Church Sri Lanka on Homosexuality

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I. Introduction:

The response of the Church to Homosexuality has become a burning question for Christians, especially in the West. Up to the 19th Century, Homosexuality was not acceptable in the Church. In the 20th Century, however, many western churches have taken a different view on Homosexuality. It is no longer considered a sin. It is seen as something normal for those whose sexual orientation is different to that of the majority. It is argued that people with a homosexual orientation should be free to express their sexuality in Homosexual acts. They must be given all the rights of the Church including marriage. The Western Church is divided and even splits and schisms have taken place because of this issue.

II. The Sri Lankan Situation:

The situation in Sri Lanka is very different. Sri Lankan Law forbids homosexual activity. It is a criminal offence punishable with fines and even a prison sentence. However the Law is rarely implemented. For almost 50 years no cases have come up in the Courts where people have been charged for Homosexual activity among consenting adults. Homosexual activity between adults and minors, however, has been taken seriously and several people have been convicted for this type of child abuse. As the Law is still in force, many Homosexuals are ashamed to admit their orientation fearing being ostracized in our shame dominated culture. Hence most of them are secret homosexuals.

More recently, however, the LGBTQI community has been active even though up to now most of its activities have been conducted covertly. Several organisations and social activists have spearheaded work among this community and events such as 'Colombo Pride' have been held since 2005. This event has mainly concerts, musicals and processions. These organisations offer counselling and support for the LGBTQI community. 'Human Rights Watch' report that the gay community are discriminated against in Sri Lanka when attempting to obtain employment, housing and healthcare (Salondra 2017). In 2008, Sri Lanka refused to sign the UN Declaration that urged member states to decriminalize homosexuality.

III. The Sri Lankan Church:

Within the Church in Sri Lanka homosexuality has been a non-issue. It does not come to the forefront in the churches thinking and there have not been discussions on the subject in Church Seminars and other fora. A few voices have been raised asking the Church to give freedom to those with different sexual orientations to express themselves, but there has been much opposition to these views and the Churches are firm in their commitment to the traditional attitude to Homosexuality. No self- confessed homosexual is given any office or leadership in the Church. There have been a few isolated cases of homosexuality but these have not been given much publicity and been dealt with under the normal disciplinary processes in the church.

IV. Reasons for the Church's Stand against Homosexuality:

(1) The Biblical Prohibitions:

The first reason for the Church's stand against homosexual relations is that the Scriptures condemn it as an activity against God's will. As our Church believes in the divine inspiration of the Bible and bases its faith and practice on its teaching, it finds it difficult to approve gay and lesbian sexual relationships. It is true that many interpretations have been given to soften the harsh teaching in the Bible on Homosexuality, yet the Methodist Church Sri Lanka holds to the traditional teaching that the Bible does not endorse homosexual relations.

There are 6 passages in the Bible that seems to specifically condemn Homosexuality.

(a) The condemnation and subsequent punishment of Sodom for homosexuality. In Genesis Chapter 19 two angels came to Sodom and Lot welcomed them to his house. The men in Sodom came to Lot and demanded that they bring them out 'so that they know them' vs 5. The word 'know' is used over 900 times in the Bible but used only 10 times to knowing a person through sexual relations. It is therefore argued by those who support homosexuality that Genesis 19 refers to getting to know people by being acquainted with them. Lot was a recent resident in Sodom and did not know the rules in Sodom that strangers should be introduced to the men of the

city, partly for security reasons. Of the 10 times the word 'know' is used for sexual relations, 6 of these times it is used in Genesis and it is quite possible that Genesis 19 refers to sexually 'knowing'. The fact that Lot offered his daughters to them to protect the 2 angels seems to suggest that there was a sexual motive behind the demand of the men of Sodom. Jude 1:7 states that Sodom and Gomorrah were punished for indulging 'in sexual immorality and unnatural lust'. Other passages in the Old Testament refer to social justice, oppressing the poor, deceit, arrogance and greed as some of the sins of Sodom. John Stott states that "the pseudepigraphical writings of the second century have identified Sodom's sin as unnatural sex behaviour" [Note 1]. The sin of homosexuality seems to be one of the sins among others that Sodom was punished for.

- (b) Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 – in these 2 texts "lying with a male as with a woman" is called an abomination and is punishable with death. These verses come in the section known as the 'holiness code'. God's people are warned that they must not indulge in the sins of the Egyptians and Canaanites because they were a people separated to be God's people. Homosexuality was widely practised in these countries but the Jews were not to have any part in it as they were called to be a holy people. Some argue that these laws refer to ritual impurity and are not relevant for today. Moral Laws are found alongside ritual Laws and at times it is difficult to distinguish between them. Saint Paul, however, includes homosexuality together with moral sins in 1 Tim. 1: 8-10 and prohibits it. Others have identified the sins mentioned in Leviticus 18-20 as sins associated with cult worship in Canaan where adherents had sex with temple prostitutes both male and female as part of their religious rites. They argue that these practices have no relevance to modern times especially when consenting adults have homosexual relations out of love and commitment to each other. One does get the impression that these arguments seek to interpret scripture to fit in and endorse their views and practices. The plain teaching of Scripture must be considered first and applied to our lives before we try to interpret Scripture to suit our lifestyle

- (c) Romans 1:26-27. Here Paul states that the Gentiles reject God though they see His power and divine nature in creation. Consequently they worship the creature rather than the Creator, worshipping images made with human hands. God gives them up to their own depraved minds and decadent practices. They go deeper and deeper into sin and degrade

their bodies by not engaging in natural forms of sex, but rather had intercourse with those of the same sex.

Paul seems to suggest that the natural sexual order is heterosexual sex. Homosexual relations are unnatural and goes against the natural order God ordained for humans. Some have suggested that Paul's use of words like 'exchanged and 'abandoned natural forms of sex for unnatural ones is a reference to those who were heterosexual in their nature and practice but who because of their perversity and lust had homosexual relationships as well. Their argument is that the passage does not apply to those whose orientation is homosexual and have homosexual relationship out of love and commitment to their partner. It is hard to see Paul making this distinction. He was aware of the conditions of Roman Society where there was widespread homosexuality. To him all homosexual relationships seen in their society was wrong because if the nature of humans and the mandate God gave when they were created to have sexual relations only within marriage.

(d) 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 and 1 Timothy 1:8-10

In 1 Timothy 1:8-10 Paul states that Sodomites live lives that don't conform to the Gospel of Christ. In 1 Cor. 6:9-11 he states that Sodomites will not enter the Kingdom of God. The Greek word 'Arsenokoitais' is used in both places and has been translated as homosexuals in some versions of the Bible and Sodomites in others. Those who support homosexuality have argued that the word 'arsenokoitais' cannot be applied to those who have loving relationships with their homosexual partners. Others say the word applies to older men (active partners) having sexual relationships with adolescent boys (passive partners). Robert Gagnon, an authority on this subject states, "These terms are correctly understood in our contemporary context when they are applied to every conceivable type of same sex intercourse" [Note 2]. There is no doubt that Paul condemns homosexual activity of every kind that was widespread in Roman and Greek societies.

Some have argued that Jesus never spoke about Homosexuality being wrong. It is most likely that because Jesus spent most of his time with the Jews he did not see a need to address the question. Among the Jews, Homosexuality was condemned and its practice was very rare. Hence there was no need to include it in his teaching. He didn't speak about incest or sexual abuse of children not because he approved of these practices but because Jewish Society condemned these practices. What is important is that Jesus never condoned

sexual activity outside the context of a lifelong hetero sexual commitment.

Therefore the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka accepts the plain teaching of the Scriptures that prohibits homosexual activity.

2. God's Intention for Sex and Marriage

The Church's rejection of homosexuality does not depend only on the interpretation of these 6 passages in the Bible. What the Bible states about sex and Marriage is also important in forming its attitude to Homosexuality.

God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone'. He therefore created a woman and gave her to him to share his life with her and be united intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and physically with her,

He created humans - male and female, with different sexual identities. In marriage, 2 people complement each other and share their common life. They leave their father and mother and cleave to their partner and become 'one flesh. The one flesh is achieved when they are bound together in a sexual bond. The sex act is a symbol of the union of these 2 people.

Since humans are bodily creatures, their union is completed and sealed when their bodies come together.

The difference in their bodies enables them to complement each other and bring unity into the sex act.

Male and female bodies bring something unique to their sexual union and their unity is complete in the act of sex. Sex is God's gift to humans and the divinely intended meaning of the sex act emerges only when it occurs in the context of marriage.

In homosexual relationships since the body parts are similar they don't bring anything unique into the union and there is no diversity that is united in the sex act. It is just a pretence or imaginative simulation of the real thing. As John Harvey states, "Same sex intercourse does not lead to a true union of human persons on the physical genital level. This maladaptation of parts is a symbolic of the Pseudo Complementarity on the Psychological and Spiritual Level" [Note 3]

Loving gay relationships cannot capture the symbolism of sexual intercourse as there is only a superficial union of one's bodily sexual organs.

Sex intercourse is also the means of procreation. There is the potential to bring new life through the sexual experience. It is God's means of bringing children into the world. While every act

of sexual intercourse is not intended to produce children, the possibility of bringing children is an important aspect of sex as it was originally designed by God. To engage in sex without one of the purposes of sex being possible is to deny God's mandate for Sex.

Therefore, sexual relationships among gays falls far short of God's design for Sex, as it is incompatible with the attainment of 'one flesh which is God's design for marriage.

3. Sexual Instincts and Desires can be controlled

The church believes that it is possible to control one's desires and not express them in an inappropriate manner. Some argue that gays are by nature attracted to those of the same sex. They are biologically created with a homosexual orientation. Stanley J. Grenz states "The quest for a biological foundation for Homosexuality has looked in 3 general directions – genetic make-up, pre-natal or post-natal hormonal levels, and the anatomy of the brain". [Note 4] Much research has gone into seeking for a biological cause for homosexual desire but there is no conclusive evidence to show that biological factors have caused homosexuality. Some experts have identified psychological reasons for homosexuality. Difficulties in the parent child relationship, especially in the early years of life. Some deficit in the relationship with a parent of the same sex and a desire to make good this deficit causes homosexuality. Lawrence Hatterer states, "A dominant, aggressive, hostile, hypercritical mother combined with a passive, ineffectual, rejecting, indifferent father makes boys not want to be like the father and as a result he does not initialise male gender identity" [Note 5].

However, what is important for Christians is not the cause of homosexuality but its morality. Whether we have homosexual desires by nature or by nurture what is important is that these feelings can be controlled. Human beings are by nature sinners. We are constantly tempted because of our own sinful nature and because of the attractions in the immoral world around us. We have to learn to overcome sin and fight our bias to sin. We have seen alcoholic parents produce children who are alcoholics.

But there are some children of alcoholics who have come under the strong influence of a mentor, a parent or a friend and been able to overcome the temptation of being addicted to Alcohol. The Church is called to lead people to holiness. This means helping people to fight their evil instincts and desires and eradicating them. Our Societies are often obsessed with sex.

People look for the pleasures that sex brings but cannot control their sex instinct. They are so individualistic that they think they are free to do anything in the area of sex without considering the effect their actions have on others and society at large. Thus they compromise on Christian standards of sexual behaviour by permitting premarital sex, adultery, incest and homosexuality. The Church cannot take its standards from the world. It takes its directions from the word of God and helps its members to obey the will of God. While sex is an important part of our life, sexual activity must be controlled at all times. In sexual behaviour abstinence must be the norm when it comes to sexual relationships not authorised in the Scriptures like fornication, adultery, incest or homosexuality. If our sexual orientation is gay either by nature or nurture we cannot indulge in sexual activity. Many have chosen celibacy as their option in sexual relationships either because they couldn't find a suitable partner to share their lives with, or they were called to a higher service to serve God and their fellows. Gays too may have to sacrifice sexual activity because their orientation is homosexual. Those who make that sacrifice often lead very fulfilled lives and realise that there are higher goals in life than sexual fulfilment.

4. The effect of approving Homosexuality in our witness

In Sri Lanka, Christians are a minority in a predominantly Buddhist country. We also have a sizeable Hindu and Muslim community. All these religions condemn homosexuality. If we Christians condone homosexuality it will affect our witness to the Non-Christians in our country. A few years ago a few westernised politicians brought proposals to legally decriminalise homosexuality. Many Buddhist clergy and clergy of other religions opposed this bill and it was hastily withdrawn. Many Buddhists feel Christianity is an imported religion – a product of western imperialism. Sadly many Christians follow the cultural behaviour patterns of western countries. We in Sri Lanka owe much to the Christian Missionaries who brought the Gospel to our land and planted churches here. However, some of these missionaries brought their cultural baggage with the Gospel. Many Christians who accepted the Gospel they brought, adopted their western culture. This gives a bad impression to Non-Christians who think Christians are aliens in this land, who blindly imitate the west. Responsible Christians struggle to build up a life style that is in

keeping with Sri Lankan culture and is rooted in the native soil. In our forms of worship, our entertainment, our festivals, our pleasures, our various rituals; we need to show that Christians can practice those cultural norms and practices in Sri Lankan culture which are not contrary to their faith. To accept homosexuality which Sri Lankans know comes from the west, will have a negative impact on the Church's witness.

5. Love and Law must go together

There are those who think that if two people love each other they are free to do anything provided it is done in Love. So they argue that if two from the same sex love each other and are faithful and committed to each other, they should be free to express their love through sexual activity. However, love cannot be the absolute standard because human love falls short of 'perfect' love. Love cannot abolish the moral Law. Love needs the Law to guide it. Jesus said, "If you love me and keep my commandments". Loving a person is essential, but it must be guided by Law otherwise people will do anything under the pretext of Love. Polygamy, adultery, fornication and homosexuality can be practiced saying that they love each other. Love is not the only criterion to judge right and wrong. If it is true love it must be compatible with God's Law. So no one can say, "We can have sexual relationships because we love each other". All their actions must be compatible with God's Law because the highest human welfare is achieved when we obey God's law.

6. Homosexuals can be changed

The question is often asked whether gays can change their sexual orientation. The Church must make every effort to change homosexuals. We can work for many changes. Firstly, those with Homosexual inclinations can be changed so that they do not engage in sexual activity even though they retain their sexual orientation.

Secondly, there are those who have given up their homosexuality and become heterosexual through therapy and counselling. Psychologist Irving Bieber after doing research on male homosexuals writes, "The therapeutic results of our study provided reason for an optimistic outlook". Many homosexuals

become exclusively hetero sexual in psycho analytic treatment.
[Note 7]

In our judgment a heterosexual shift is a possibility for change of homosexuals who are strongly motivated to change.

Thirdly, religious conversion has resulted in people being driven to give up homosexual habits and get into hetero sexual relationships. There have been testimonies of such conversions in our churches. It is a struggle for homosexuals to give up their sexual habits, but if they are motivated to do God's will and if they depend for strength on the activity of the Holy Spirit, they will find that the Holy Spirit helps them in their weakness and they can overcome their homosexual inclinations.

Fourthly, there are practical measures that have been used in churches to change sexual orientation. The Church can help homosexuals to have wholesome relationships with parents whose influence during their childhood may have caused them to become homosexuals. Encourage same sex relationships with friends yet keeping strict limits that exclude sexual activity. Encourage hetero sexual relationships with friends who care for the homosexual. Engage in activities outside the realm of sex so that homosexuals can sublimate their sex instinct and find fulfilment in other activities like sports, study, hobbies, church work, exercise etc.

Organise groups like Alcoholics Anonymous where converted Homosexuals can find friendship and fellowship and encourage each other by sharing their struggles and triumphs.

V. How does the Church treat Homosexuals

The Church cannot condone homosexuality but it can welcome homosexuals to the Church and to the homes of members. They should not be judged or rejected but welcomed and pastorally cared for. Just as Christ welcomed sinners without affirming their sin, we too must follow his example. However, based on our beliefs we cannot solemnise marriages of homosexuals, nor ordain homosexuals. Indeed, we cannot give leadership to practicing homosexuals in our churches because as Paul says, "a leader should lead an exemplary life and not be a stumbling block to weaker brethren" (1Tim. 3). They should have people who help them to fight their sin and motivate them to give up homosexuality. If

homosexuals use the tools of counselling, prayer, friendship, psychotherapy and the resources in the Word of God, they will be changed - 'for with God all things are possible'.

Notes:

1. Quoted in "Issues facing Christians today" by John Stott. Pg 305 Gospel Literature Services
2. Quoted in "Homosexuality" - C.T.S. Publishing Unit Colombo Pg 61
3. Quoted in "Welcoming but not affirming" Stanley J. Grenz Pg 11 Westminster Knox Press
4. Quoted in "Welcoming but not affirming" Stanley J. Grenz Pg 21
5. Quoted in "Welcoming but not affirming" Stanley J. Grenz Pg 17
6. Quoted in "Welcoming but not affirming" Stanley J. Grenz Pg 25
7. Male Homosexuality - Irving Bieber Canadian Journal of Psychiatry Pg 416

Also - Homosexuality and the Christian - Mark A. Yarhouse - Bethany House Publisher