

---

## **The Crucial Question of Biblical Interpretation and Its Impact on the Interpretation and Applicability of Biblical Texts on Homosexuality**

*Winfried Vogel*

### **\*\*Introduction\*\***

The Free Church of Seventh-day Adventists has derived its legitimacy and mission from the authority of the Bible since its founding in the 19th century. Biblical truths such as the creation Sabbath as God's eternal day of rest, the message of the real second coming of Jesus, and God's plan of salvation in the reconciliation event in the sanctuary distinguish early Adventists from other churches that do not share these biblical insights. The authority of the Bible was based for early Adventists on a Reformation understanding of Scripture that takes biblical statements seriously and does not reinterpret them through questionable interpretations and unbiblical traditions. Martin Luther's Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone) and his conviction that the Bible interprets itself shaped the development of Adventist theology to this day. When Adventists are asked why they celebrate the Sabbath and not Sunday as a day of rest, they refer to biblical statements that, however, are interpreted differently by representatives of other denominations. It is already evident here how crucial the foundational attitude is with which the Bible is read and understood.

Higher biblical criticism, as the critical approach to the Bible was called at the time, was frowned upon among early Adventists.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising, as the authority and trustworthiness of the Bible were an unconditional prerequisite for the rediscovery of biblical truths. There was also a deep conviction that Jesus' promise to the disciples that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth (John 16:13) is valid for the followers of Jesus at all times and that therefore the insights of early Adventists were also inspired by this Spirit.<sup>2</sup> The Bible was the foundation of all research, and it is part of the Adventist self-understanding that God took care of discovering biblical truths.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it was only logical to reject the trend towards critical analysis of the Bible that arose in theological science, particularly in the second half of the 19th century, along with the resulting reinterpretation of biblical texts.

The claim of Adventist theology today is still to take the Bible's statements seriously as a reliable testimony of divine truth and not to undermine or weaken it through the application of biblical-critical hermeneutics.<sup>4</sup> Today's historical-critical research views the Bible as merely a literary product that must be critically examined for its origin, source, form, language, culture, and not least historical credibility. Accordingly, the Bible is interpreted like any other book. Historical questions can help illuminate biblical statements, and they can indeed confirm the truth content of biblical statements. However, many historical-critical research results lead to the weakening or negation of the authority of the Bible, especially when the statement of the text is made dependent on the immanent worldview of historical research. This can go so far that the biblical text undergoes a completely different interpretation than the literal statement of the text clearly indicates.<sup>5</sup>

### **\*\*The Challenge of Hermeneutics\*\***

Even those theologians who do not question the authority of the Bible use various analytical tools and ask questions such as: What did the author want to say at that time? What did the original recipients understand in their historical and cultural context? What does the text want to say to us today? Both critical research and several non-critical theologians state that it is necessary to understand the author's original intention in order to grasp the meaning of a text. Meanwhile, it is noted that not only the critical researcher runs the risk of becoming a relativist. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, a German poet of the Enlightenment in the 18th century, was convinced that the Bible was historically conditioned and that its statements were true in a specific historical context, but could no longer be conveyed to the mind today. He wrote: "That is the ugly wide ditch over which I cannot get, however often and seriously I have tried to jump. If someone can help me over, let him do it; I ask him, I beseech him. He deserves a reward from God."<sup>6</sup> The same view is found in today's relativist, who asserts that

"a book from the setting of antiquity cannot solve today's problems. The historical distance has become an impassable abyss. And that seems to have become even greater, for the relativist today asks whether an ancient text can even be grasped by today's interpreter, let alone be relevant."<sup>7</sup>

In the debate on the Bible's statements on homosexuality, the culture of the time the texts were composed plays an important role for LGBTQ advocates.<sup>8</sup> Legitimate questions are asked: How are these biblical texts to be understood in their historical and cultural context? Can we still understand and follow them today as they were meant at that time? These considerations touch on fundamental questions of biblical interpretation and present the exegete with the challenge of deciding which patterns of thought and rules he follows when interpreting texts.

And thus we arrive at the Gretchen question of biblical interpretation: How do we regard the relevance and binding nature of biblical statements in our own current context? This is indeed a fundamental question, for aside from a necessary ethical and social discussion regarding a homosexual orientation, "the authority of Scripture and the Sola Scriptura principle are at stake"<sup>9</sup>.

#### **\*\*The Argumentation of LGBTQ Advocates\*\***

Before we come to the question of biblical interpretation in general and with regard to relevant texts on the topic of homosexuality in particular, it is helpful to better understand the argumentation of LGBTQ advocates before they engage with the biblical evidence. It reveals much about their fundamental approach and shows how the logic contained therein almost inevitably leads to the special viewpoint on biblical texts. This is also clearly observable in the book "Queergedacht."<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, it can be summarized as follows:

1. LGBTQ advocates report a personal confrontation with the issue, perceiving the suffering of queer people due to "un-Christian behavior in our congregations" with shock and indignation. For Werner Lange, this led him to consider "whether the seemingly unequivocally negative statements of the Bible about same-sex relationships, which are the main cause of [the un-Christian behavior in the congregations], can also be interpreted differently with a conservative method of interpretation."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Reinder Bruinsma had this experience

when he heard "heart-wrenching accounts of experienced hatred" at a Kinship meeting in Holland in 2005, with which queer individuals were rejected and discriminated against (and continue to be) in Adventist congregations.<sup>12</sup> Dennis Meier recounts in his introduction the "painful history" of a church leader's son who was rejected by his father and left the congregation. In conversation, the father later confesses how glad he is that his son "found such a lovely partner." Meier writes: "This left me with the impression that something is not right – either with the outside (the chaotic world out there) or with the inside (the supposedly clear stance of the Bible and the church)."<sup>13</sup>

For many LGBTQ advocates, the starting point for engaging with the biblical text is evidently the reality of life rather than the biblical text. This means that there are first and foremost strong emotional reasons that lead to greater engagement with this topic and – among other things – seek solutions for the suffering of queer people in a reinterpretation of the biblical texts. The book "Queergedacht" follows this pattern and accordingly dedicates the first part A to experiences and testimonies.

2. Homosexual orientation is genetically determined and therefore, like heterosexuality, is innate and unchangeable. For this reason, those affected should not be held morally responsible. They "may" live out this inclination. This is also the subject of discussion in Part B of the book "Queergedacht." In the chapter "Biological Causes of Sexual Orientation," it states:

"The majority of scientists agree that the factors responsible for sexual orientation are almost all either biologically innate or attributable to prenatal influences. Sexual orientation is not subject to change after birth. Therefore, it should be regarded as the result of a normal biological development. If it is normal, consequences should also be allowed, and individuals should be given the freedom to embody the person they are according to their sexual orientation and to marry a same-sex partner."<sup>14</sup>

It is evident that this reasoning necessitates a reinterpretation of the relevant biblical texts for LGBTQ advocates, and this must occur even before one has truly engaged with these texts. Embracing the argument of biologically or genetically determined homosexuality necessarily requires a rethink in the interpretation of the Bible, because – as the conclusion goes – God cannot have anything against the expression of an orientation that is innate and therefore cannot be classified as sinful.

3. The conclusion from point 2 is that every person has a right to live out their sexuality. Orientation in this area is innate and therefore closely linked to a person's identity. It cannot be ignored or changed.

4. From all of this, it is allegedly concluded that the biblical texts on homosexuality cannot be meant as they have traditionally been understood, namely as condemnation of all homosexual acts. These texts represent negative moral judgments of a behavior based on an orientation for which the affected individuals, according to points 2 and 3, cannot be held responsible. What a person is not responsible for cannot be sin. Therefore, the corresponding biblical texts must be ignored or reinterpreted. For a church that takes the word of the Bible seriously, ignoring the texts is not a good option. The reinterpretation remains as the only seemingly viable alternative. One supposedly acceptable path is pointing to the historical and

cultural context that played a role in the drafting of these texts and which relativizes them. Thus, the texts lose their applicability to homosexual practices within a binding partnership, as they only warn against violence, abuse, and promiscuity.

5. The homosexual inclination, according to further argumentation, should be lived out exclusively in a binding partnership. Thus, the indirect conclusion is that homosexuality can be legitimized for a Christian church.

6. This allows for a relaxed approach to people who are same-sex oriented. Same-sex partnerships can exist equally alongside heterosexual marriage within the church. Reference is often made to the changed legal situation in Germany since 2017, as Andreas Bochmann does in Chapter 15 of the book "Queergedacht." The new law, which was passed by the German Bundestag in 2017, states that same-sex partnerships "are converted into marriages with the same rights and obligations as heterosexual couples; thus, same-sex individuals have the opportunity to enter into marriage just like heterosexual people."<sup>15</sup> Bochmann then concludes: "A church, after all, that advocates for freedom of belief and conscience can hardly oppose the equal treatment of heterosexual and homosexual partnerships in state and society, even if it holds a different view of marriage."<sup>16</sup> He even goes so far as to transfer the text in Genesis 2:24, which constitutes the marriage between man and woman, to binding same-sex partnerships, contradicting the intention of the text, as it explicitly refers to man and woman.

We can state at this point that this chain of argumentation and the associated logic leave little to no room for an interpretation of the relevant biblical texts that sees divine rejection of homosexual practices. The emotional pressure, combined with the claim of Christian love and acceptance of every person, and the strong influence of the zeitgeist as a societal consensus lead to questioning the clear statements of biblical texts. This goes so far that the suggestion is made to follow the state legislator and accept same-sex partnerships in the church just like heterosexual marriage,<sup>17</sup> even though the Bible fundamentally and clearly opposes homosexual acts.

#### **\*\*Reinterpretation of Biblical Texts for More Love and Acceptance\*\***

Furthermore, the traditional interpretation of biblical texts is blamed for the rejection and un-Christian behavior in the church towards LGBTQ individuals. A new interpretation is hoped to bring about a change within the church that leads to greater acceptance of members with this orientation.<sup>18</sup> To put it more clearly: The rejecting attitude in congregations towards affected individuals, which is very regrettable, is allegedly based to a significant extent on the traditional interpretation of the relevant biblical texts that brands homosexuality as misconduct. To change the attitude towards these individuals, the biblical texts would need to be reinterpreted in such a way that their interpretation allows for the acceptance that homosexual behavior is fundamentally also accepted by God, with only certain abusive forms being rejected.

The problem with this argumentation mainly lies in the fact that it does not primarily start from the biblical evidence. When we allow the interpretation of biblical texts to be determined by the reality of life, which is sinful according to the Bible but is normal according to scientific research, the Bible loses its authority as the word of God. A loving and accepting approach to

LGBTQ individuals should be a matter of course. Unfortunately, reality often looks different, and this applies, by the way, to the handling of all behaviors that are morally reprehensible. In this area, many people and also many church members still have significant learning potential. At its core, this is the challenge of a spiritual attitude that approaches the other with mercy and warmth, as Jesus Christ has exemplified for us. A fitting example is His interaction with the adulteress in John 8, to whom He says: "So neither do I condemn you; go now and leave your life of sin" (verse 11).

We attribute special significance to the homosexual inclination, and we do so with a certain justification, because it is so closely linked to a person's identity. However, there are many human inclinations that the Bible clearly sanctions negatively, and where God offers help to every person through His Spirit to overcome them. Of course, this is particularly challenging regarding LGBTQ individuals, but why do many find it so hard to see this inclination as a consequence of the sinful nature of humanity as well? The aforementioned chain of argumentation is strongly influenced by the prevailing zeitgeist today and offers only a false solution. Perhaps this is preferred due to helplessness and confusion in dealing with LGBTQ individuals. However, there is a better way to handle the Bible and, consequently, to deal with those affected, and it begins with responsible interpretative rules that allow for an interpretation that corresponds to the intention of the biblical texts and critically confronts the prevailing zeitgeist.

#### **\*\*A Relativistic Interpretation Method\*\***

The book "Queergedacht" dedicates nine chapters to the topic "Same-Sex Relationships in the Light of the Bible." Not only does it address the relevant biblical texts on the subject,<sup>19</sup> but it also presents fundamental considerations that are primarily treated in the first two chapters. In one, Bernhard Oestreich discusses the changes that have occurred (and are still occurring) in language, while in the other, Werner Lange explains how behavioral instructions can be derived from biblical texts.

In all chapters, a certain argumentation repeatedly stands out. It acts like the proverbial red thread running through. It can also be referred to as a premise, that is, a presupposition. Bernhard Oestreich summarizes it quite succinctly when he writes: "To understand the Bible correctly, we must consider the life world of that time."<sup>20</sup> Werner Lange elaborates:

"The main difference between biblical times and ours lies in the completely different cultural living circumstances and views regarding certain behaviors. Between our time and the writing of biblical books lie not only centuries but millennia.... We must therefore also draw upon extra-biblical sources such as historical accounts and studies."<sup>21</sup>

At the end of his chapter, Werner Lange writes:

"It is not enough to analyze just the biblical texts and their context for the proper understanding of the behaviors that the Bible prescribes or prohibits; the cultural backgrounds and circumstances at the time the texts were written must also be taken into account. Reliable extra-biblical sources (the Bible alone is not enough) must be consulted – if they exist."<sup>22</sup>

This approach is referred to in scholarly circles as "historical relativism" or "cultural relativism." The exploration of the historical and cultural context in light of societal developments allegedly leads to insights that relativize certain statements of the Bible. This relativism suggests that it is the only way to bridge the gap – what Lessing called the "ugly wide ditch" – between then and now.

The motivation behind this, namely to make texts from a long-ago time more understandable for today's reader, is fundamentally worthy of praise. We want to understand the Bible, and we want to apply it in our present life situation; however, we find that this is not so easy. It seems as if the texts were spoken or written into a certain context that is so significantly different from today's context that the texts allegedly cannot be authoritative for today's reality. The crucial question, however, is to what extent this context should actually determine the interpretation of the text.

The Hebraist and Old Testament scholar James Barr believed it was simply irrational to think that a book that is a product of a specific culture can have authority for other cultures and thus also for our current culture.<sup>23</sup> He wrote: "Modern culture and its views differ from biblical culture and its views. Therefore, the interpretations we attribute to events must be different from the interpretations that biblical writers would attribute to them."<sup>24</sup> The Adventist theologian Hans Guti  rrez Salazar summarizes it in "Queergedacht": "The fact that we use the same linguistic categories as the authors of the Bible to describe God does not mean that their meaning is the same. Cultural name identity is a current phenomenon. We say that we worship the same God as Abraham and are believers like him, but substantially, our God is a different God."<sup>25</sup>

But is this so? Is what the biblical author wanted to say really so entirely different from what we should understand? Do I have to read commentaries and other scholarly literature first to know what the author meant? Or is it possible for every reader of the Bible to find out what the author wanted to say and whether what he wrote is still applicable today, based solely on the Bible itself?

In the book "Queergedacht," the chapter on the relevant texts regarding homosexual behavior in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 describes in detail the social and family-political situation in the Old Testament patriarchal period,<sup>26</sup> thus discussing the historical and cultural background. In the end, this discussion of the background leads to two conclusions. These two texts, which reject homosexual acts and call them "abominations," are interpreted in such a way that they are allegedly not applicable to binding homosexual relationships:

1. In the "detailed prohibition list concerning the sexual relationships that a married family and clan leader should not enter into," the two verses appear more as though they were added later<sup>27</sup>, and
2. "Due to other statements in this chapter that clearly refer to married heterosexual men, and the circumstance that oriental men at that time were expected to marry early, they are very likely also the addressees here. They are warned against seeking a sexual adventure with another man or with a temple prostitute..."<sup>28</sup>

In Chapter 12 of the book "Queergedacht," where Werner Lange discusses the interpretation of Romans 1:26-27, the consideration of the Roman culture at the time of Paul plays a decisive role in the argumentation. In this context, a book by Marilyn B. Skinner, an American

antiquities researcher, is de facto granted interpretive authority regarding the applicability of Paul's statements due to the allegedly high quality of her research results on sexuality in the Roman Empire.<sup>29</sup> According to this view, there were no monogamous same-sex relationships among men or women in ancient Rome, and "therefore Paul's statements in Romans 1:26-27 do not refer to such relationships."<sup>30</sup>

The Adventist theologians Clinton Wahlen and Wagner Kuhn describe this way of dealing with a biblical text as "resistant reading" or "suspicious hermeneutics."<sup>31</sup> Within the framework of so-called reception criticism (in English also "Reader Response Criticism"), it involves critically questioning the clear and straightforward reading of a text in order to reinterpret it based on extra-biblical research. Wahlen and Kuhn cite the text in Romans 1:24-27 among other examples and write:

"The natural reading of this passage understands its statement to mean that people should know of God's existence through observation of nature and that those who choose idolatry should actually know better. Likewise, people should know the proper practice of sexuality through the complementary bodies of man and woman. It follows that homosexuality is wrong and that God's wrath is directed against those who violate the moral order of nature. From a reception-critical standpoint, however, there are many different ways to read a text."<sup>32</sup>

They then list some readings from a homosexual perspective, including the view that homosexual acts are only wrong when they are "unnatural," that is to say, practiced by heterosexual individuals. Against this interpretation, which is heavily influenced by the cultural context of that time, Wahlen and Kuhn argue that the term "unnatural" (also translated as "abominable") – in the Greek original text *para physin* – is apparently applied by Paul to behavior that ignores the "natural" biological or physiological compatibility of man and woman.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Paul indeed expresses himself fundamentally against homosexual acts.

These examples show that the authors of the book "Queergedacht" practice a hermeneutics that ultimately does not differ from the classical historical-critical method, where likewise extra-biblical criteria determine the interpretation of the text. The final consequence of this view is that the authority of the Bible is limited to its own cultural environment and does not extend beyond it. In 1984, the well-known theologian and cultural philosopher Francis Schaeffer, three months before his death, expressed concern about this development: "The Bible is made an echo of the culture surrounding us at this moment in history. The Bible is adapted to culture instead of the Bible judging our society and culture."<sup>34</sup>

#### **\*\*An Interpretation Method That Does Justice to the Bible\*\***

The non-critical hermeneutical approach that the Free Church of Seventh-day Adventists has chosen as the basis for doctrine and practice is often referred to as the historical-biblical, biblically-grammatical, or grammatical-historical method.

"It recognizes the self-testimony of Scripture and explores its phenomena. It accepts the claim that God has revealed Himself (1 Samuel 3:21), that He entered into a relationship with the human authors of Scripture (Amos 3:7; Ephesians 3:5), that He has revealed propositional truth and communicated messages (Daniel 10:4; Titus 1:3), that He inspired the human

authors to communicate these messages to others (2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:10-12; 2 Peter 1:19-21), and that the written message is the Word of God (Mark 7:10-13)."<sup>36</sup>

The fundamental premises of this interpretative method can be summarized as follows:

1. The Bible alone is the final and highest test of truth (*sola scriptura*). Anything that does not respect the self-testimony of Scripture must be rejected.
2. The Bible as a whole is the written Word of God (*tota scriptura*). The message of the prophets and apostles is the propositional Word of God. The human and divine sides of Scripture are inseparably connected.
3. All texts on a topic must be collected to properly grasp biblical teaching. This includes both the unity and clarity of Scripture. This means not only that the Bible can be understood, but that clearly understandable texts explain the more difficult ones.
4. Spiritual things must be understood spiritually. Anyone who wants to understand the Bible needs illumination by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not contradict the Scripture He has inspired.<sup>37</sup>

These premises are fundamentally accepted by most interpreters and also by church members in the Free Church of Seventh-day Adventists. The Bible and its authority in matters of faith and life still hold a high status. However, as we see in the example of the book "Queergedacht," the interpretation of biblical texts within our Free Church does not always adhere to these premises. Due to a declared dependence on extra-biblical criteria, the aforementioned interpretative premises are no longer applicable. Therefore, it is important to clarify the Gretchen question mentioned at the beginning: How do we deal with the influence of historical and/or cultural circumstances on the process of biblical interpretation?

#### **\*\*The Importance of Cultural Context\*\***

One thing must be emphasized here: The historical-biblical interpretative method also does not forgo the exploration of historical and cultural backgrounds of a text. Precisely because we are so temporally and culturally distant from the time when the biblical texts were written or the events they report took place, it is good – some might even say necessary – to see and hear through the eyes and ears of those who lived centuries and millennia ago. "By trying to bridge the gap of time, language, and culture, we believe we can approach the biblical text closely and apply it to our present situation."<sup>38</sup>

However, we find that Jesus and the authors of the New Testament applied texts and passages from the Old Testament, which were hundreds and in some cases over a thousand years removed from their time, to their situation and made clear that they also have validity for later generations. Richard Davidson writes:

"The biblical writers emphasize that the theological message of Scripture is not culturally conditioned and is therefore not only applicable to certain people and a certain time, but permanently and universally applicable... The general principle that is named and exemplarily demonstrated by the New Testament writers is to proceed from the transcultural and timeless



relevance of biblical instruction unless the Scripture itself names criteria that limit this relevance."<sup>39</sup>

However, Davidson also writes: "Although biblical instruction is relevant for all cultures and times, it was given for a specific culture and time. Time and place must be considered in application."<sup>40</sup> The authors of the book "Reading Moses Seeing Jesus" point out that "many of the Mosaic laws are practically impossible to observe today due to the reality in which we live," and they cite, for example, the commandments on slavery and cultic purification rituals.<sup>41</sup>

This poses a decisive question for the interpreter and every Bible reader: What is still valid and applicable from what the Bible says today, and what is not? Is this a more or less subjective decision that the individual has to make based on weighing and common sense? This should not be treated lightly, as the authority of the Bible as the word of God is at stake. There is a real danger that we allow our biases, which can also depend on feelings, to determine the validity of the text for us today. In the end, it would come down to the idea that what is not permissible cannot be. On the other hand, do we trust the Bible to make clear what has limited applicability and what does not?

Davidson names an important criterion for distinguishing between the timeless and the time-bound:

"In the context of a passage, the Bible often provides clues [in the English original: controls] to let us know when it is appropriate to seek a principle and find another way to apply the same principle... Furthermore, the Bible makes clear that certain forms are intrinsically linked to their meaning and therefore cannot be replaced by a contemporary compatible form. The Seventh-day Sabbath, which is rooted in creation, cannot be replaced by Sunday, and the practice of foot washing, which is rooted in Jesus' express example and command, cannot be replaced by another form of humility."<sup>42</sup>

Against this background, Ekkehardt Müller raises the legitimate question: "Must we sharply differentiate between what the text meant and what the text means?"<sup>43</sup> Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart state in one of the classic books on the subject:

"The only correct control for hermeneutics is found in the original intent of the biblical text.... That is the 'clear meaning' for which we seek. Otherwise, biblical texts can be made to mean whatever they should mean to any reader. But such a kind of hermeneutics is purely subjective, and who then decides whether one interpretation is right and another wrong? Then anything is possible. In contrast, we insist that the original meaning of the text – as far as it is in our power to recognize it – is the objective control point.... In this one thing there must surely be agreement: A text cannot mean what it never meant. Or, to put it positively: The true meaning of the biblical text for us today is what God originally wanted to say when the text was first spoken. That is the starting point."<sup>44</sup>

This also relates to the respect for the Bible as the Word of God. Even if we can assume that God has spoken into special circumstances and situations, His word is not limited to a specific time and place. By definition, the Word of God, despite all differences between then

and now, is timeless, as it is indeed His Word. "In the Bible, one senses an inherent authority."<sup>45</sup>

"God's word is not culturally or historically conditioned, but culturally/historically grounded. It transcends cultures and reaches us today. Therefore, what the biblical text fundamentally meant in its original setting is exactly what it means for us today. Every application of a text to our situation must be bound to its original meaning."<sup>46</sup>

Davidson also points out that there are clues in the biblical text itself that make clear whether the text requires a timeless application. After some remarks about commandments in the Old Testament that were either abolished or fulfilled by the end of the theocracy or by Jesus Christ, he writes:

"In some cases, where it may not be so clear whether a particular divine command is timeless and transcultural, the Bible provides clear indications of the universal and lasting character of the text material. For example, the law concerning clean and unclean foods (Lev. 11) must be seen in the context of numerous lexical, structural, and theological clues (both in the OT and NT) to make clear that this is part of universally binding legislation; and the same applies to the laws imposed on Gentiles in Acts 15."<sup>47</sup>

His reference to Acts 15 is particularly relevant for our topic. At the Council of Apostles, it was decided that Gentiles should refrain from idolatry, blood, strangled animals, and sexual immorality (Greek: *porneia*) (Acts 15:20, 29). With this term for sexual immorality, the apostles apparently referred to the prohibitions of sexual misconduct in Leviticus 18,<sup>48</sup> which thus retain their validity beyond the time of ancient Israel. This particularly concerns all ethical-moral commandments that God has given, including many commandments in Leviticus. Furthermore, homosexual acts are designated there as "abominations." This term indicates that it is a moral failing that God does not endorse. The text also contains no indications that it is not valid for all times, and it is formulated so fundamentally that one cannot conclude that monogamous same-sex couples are exempt from the prohibition formulated therein.

### **\*\*A Holistic Approach\*\***

In the framework of the interpretive method that is based on the authority of the Bible and seeks to do justice to its concerns, the typological or Christological interpretation<sup>49</sup> should be mentioned, which is essentially a holistic approach to understanding the Bible. It is not just about classical typology, where New Testament writers refer through the terms "typos" and "antitypos" to persons, events, or institutions that are not only historical but find fulfillment in later times or have already done so. Particularly outstanding are the fulfillments of the typoi in the sanctuary and in the life and death of Jesus Christ.<sup>50</sup> Rather, it is about recognizing through intensive study of the text and the terms, persons, and events used therein that everything contained in the Bible belongs to a larger whole, and this overall picture is then revealed when repetitions, analogies, and allusions show that connections between terms, persons, and events are present. This type of composition has a lot to do with the Hebrew writing style, which works with a high degree of repetition, parallel structuring, and analogies.

"Typology means that earlier personalities and events are understood as a view for later personalities and events, and the text is written in such a way that the connection becomes

clear... The analogies among different personalities can become clear through names, quotes, allusions, physical details, actions, etc. The analogies among different events can become clear through the place, a similar sequence of events, repetition of key terms or phrases, etc. Whatever the specific means, the biblical writer draws on the inner typology to guide the reader through."<sup>51</sup>

If this interpretive approach is practiced, it cannot be avoided to see Jesus Christ in the personalities, events, and also in the institutions. Not because that would be a constraining search criterion to which everything would have to conform, but because it is a fascinating discovery in the deep reading of Holy Scripture.<sup>52</sup>

There is not enough space here to treat this holistic approach in more detail. However, it should be mentioned here because it is an important indication for all biblical interpreters: It is not the extra-biblical sources that determine the interpretation of the Bible, but the Bible itself indeed contains everything that the reader needs to understand the intention of the biblical text and to find the correct application.<sup>53</sup> This also applies to the book of Leviticus. "The response to the accusation of irrelevance is that typology is the only basis for making the Bible practically relevant."<sup>54</sup>

This would mean that we do not first have to understand the historical background to recognize whether or how the biblical text is relevant for us today, but it is the inner-biblical connections and references that show us how relevant the Bible actually is.

#### **\*\*The Interpreter as a Factor\*\***

A crucial factor in the process of biblical interpretation is the pre-understanding, life world, and emotional world of those who interpret. This not only concerns the basic attitude towards the Bible but especially the personal perspective that someone has on the topic the text speaks about. No one approaches the Bible without a frame of reference and without a thought pattern shaped by experiences and emotions or also by other extra-biblical sources. The more emotionally affected or involved someone is, the more it will influence their handling of the biblical text. Therefore,

"the interpreter must attempt to discover thought assumptions within themselves that originate from the current zeitgeist and distort or silence the message of Scripture.... Every interpreter must be vigilant and aware of the constant danger that horizons blur, which can even happen when someone unknowingly reads Scripture through the lens of the zeitgeist."<sup>55</sup>

The danger described here plays a significant role, especially in controversial and highly emotionally charged topics such as homosexuality. As previously mentioned, it is observed that biblical interpreters who report personal experiences with affected individuals and particularly acknowledge their inner distress with empathy and touch have a stronger tendency to interpret the relevant biblical texts in such a way that they no longer represent a harsh rejection of homosexuality. This phenomenon is also distinctly felt in the book "Queergedacht."

Understanding the plight of the homosexual individual leads concretely to a weakening or even complete reinterpretation of biblical statements. Furthermore, there is uncertainty regarding the possible life practice of such individuals, who must live with their longing for tangible love and intimacy on one hand and the moral rejection of their behavior in the Bible on the other. According to credible statements from those affected, this is emotionally hardly manageable. Because the queer lifestyle is positively promoted in public, especially in the media, those affected, as well as friends, church members, and observers, get the impression of normality. This influence of the zeitgeist is sometimes so strong and suggestive that it seems politically incorrect to oppose it, and the previous understanding of the biblical texts on homosexuality suddenly seems out of place.

Recently, someone who personally wrestles with the correct answer to the question of how this inner conflict can be resolved in practice said: Those who are "with the Bible" are not with the people, and those who are "with the people" are not with the Bible. Presumably, neither group would want to sign this statement as it stands, even though they would have to agree that there is some truth to this perception. It would certainly be fatal if people and the Bible could be divided. No one will disagree that Jesus was exemplary in His dealings with people while He lived here on earth. He openly showed His love and acceptance for people, especially for sinners and those who did wrong. Nevertheless, He never weakened or changed the authority of the Word of God, especially in moral matters. When He said to the adulteress: "So neither do I condemn you; go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11), He was also saying: "Go and sin no more." He did not say: The command regarding marital fidelity is to be understood differently today. The love of Jesus does not encourage endorsing sinful behavior, as sin always harms the one who commits it, regardless of whether the person realizes it or not. Therefore, God wants to protect every person from sin by forbidding it. Paul wrote: "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10), not its abolition.

---

#### **\*\*Conclusions for the Biblical Texts on Homosexuality\*\***

From the previous discussions on the criteria of hermeneutics, that is, the methodology of interpretation, several important conclusions can be drawn. These pertain to the fundamental attitude towards the Bible itself, the personal emotional involvement in this topic, and the approach to interpreting and applying the relevant biblical texts. The following points should be noted:

1. First, there is the fundamental view of the Bible. Is it unreservedly the revealed word of God? Do its statements have authority? Does this apply to the Bible as a whole, or is there a selection made so that some texts have less validity and applicability for the here and now?
2. Does emotional involvement influence the fundamental approach to interpreting and applying the relevant texts on the topic? Frankly, this can lead to a real inner conflict, as one sees the suffering and discrimination of affected individuals and wants to help them. It is necessary to examine whether this increases the willingness to reinterpret the biblical texts without thorough and responsible exegesis supporting it.

3. The question must be clarified: What role does the historical and cultural context of the biblical texts play or should it play? What compelling clues or controls actually exist in the texts to allow cultural and historical conditions to determine the interpretation of the text?

4. Another question is what significance the immediate context of the biblical texts has. It must be linguistically and literarily analyzed to what extent secure conclusions can be drawn from the context for interpretation and to what extent they may determine the interpretation. In "Queergedacht," it is argued regarding Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 that these verses only reject homosexual acts by heterosexual individuals, but not homosexual acts in themselves. This interpretation and the claim that these texts mention "no permanent monogamous relationships of same-sex oriented men" are not based on thorough exegesis.<sup>56</sup> In the discussion of Romans 1:26-27, Werner Lange interprets Paul's statements exclusively in light of the Roman culture of that time and concludes that they are not applicable to "monogamous relationships of gay men."

5. The interpretation of some biblical texts, determined by cultural and historical context, logically has fundamental consequences for other biblical truths. For example, theologians from churches that observe Sunday instead of the Sabbath use the same arguments to change the biblical matter in their favor. It sounds like this: "From an exegetical perspective, it is very likely that the idea of rest on the seventh day arose during the religious separation from Canaan, gradually gained acceptance, and was designated as Sabbath at the latest since the exile (6th century BC)."<sup>57</sup> Selectively approaching biblical interpretation, reinterpreting some texts while taking others at face value, is not a defensible option.

#### **\*\*Conclusion\*\***

It is undisputed that Christian churches, in particular, have a significant need to improve their loving interactions with same-sex oriented individuals. Our own Free Church is no exception. It is well known that moral failings in our church are often met with demeaning and exclusionary behavior from fellow believers. This is true even more so in the case of homosexuality. Same-sex orientation is already seen as a sin, let alone its expression. The fact that the Bible describes this expression as wrong and even as an "abomination" can lead certain individuals to adopt a loveless attitude towards those affected, even if such behavior cannot be derived from the biblical text itself. However, our empathy and loving acceptance of queer individuals must not lead us to change and dilute the statements of the relevant biblical texts. The view represented in "Queergedacht" that binding monogamous relationships of same-sex oriented individuals are not negatively sanctioned by the Bible and that such relationships should be accepted and blessed by the church is an attempt to help individuals with this orientation in their distress and provide them with a sense of belonging in the church. However, this contradicts the clear statements of the Bible, as it fundamentally rejects homosexual acts, regardless of whether they occur within or outside a permanent relationship.

It must be possible for Adventists to acknowledge the authority of Holy Scripture even where it seems uncomfortable and painful on one hand while also engaging freely, openly, and lovingly with affected individuals on the other. Here, we must learn from Jesus. One must not exclude the other. The love of Jesus should not be played against the truth of Jesus. We humans struggle with certain inclinations in many areas of life that God does not endorse.

They stem from our sinful nature. The same-sex inclination is certainly a particularly burdensome one, and it requires special help from God and the special attention of others. The longing for genuine love and commitment is just as great in a homosexual individual as it is in heterosexual individuals. Similar to singles who cannot find a partner, they need our special acceptance, care, and genuine attention. In this area, as in all other areas of life, we must shape our lives in trust in God's promises and live in accordance with His will.

One certainty we should always keep in mind: The same God who knows exactly why He created humans heterosexually and does not endorse homosexual acts suffers with our human inadequacies, knows all our inclinations, and offers us His grace, mercy, and strength for living. The same God who wants to protect us from wrongdoing and its consequences is more than willing to stand by us and provide any help we need when we are struggling.

---

1. Ellen G. White in *\*Education\** (Hamburg: Advent-Verlag, 1954), 211: "Even Bible study, as it is too often conducted in schools, robs the world of the immeasurable treasure of the Word of God. What 'higher criticism' achieves with its dissection, guessing, and reconstructing destroys faith in the Bible as divine revelation; it deprives God's Word of the power to guide, uplift, and inspire human lives."

2. Ellen G. White in *\*Written for the Church\** (Hamburg: Advent-Verlag, 1991), 169-170: "God has given us the truth for this time as the foundation for our faith. He Himself has taught us what truth is. One or another will come and proclaim a new light that contradicts the light that God has revealed through His Holy Spirit.... We had the truth; we were guided by God's angels. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the sanctuary was presented.... We are hindered in our work by men who seek their own glory. They want to be seen as founders of new theories that they present as truth. When these theories are accepted, it leads to rejecting the truth that God has given His people over the past fifty years and has confirmed through the revelation of the Holy Spirit." (Emphasis added)

3. See J.N. Loughborough, *\*The Rise and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventists\** (Hamburg: Internationale Traktatgesellschaft, 1897), 38-54; C. Mervyn Maxwell, *\*Tell It to the World\** (Vienna: TopLife Wegweiser-Verlag, 2010), 136-138.

4. For a detailed discussion on modern trends in the field of hermeneutics, see Frank M. Hasel, "Recent Trends in Methods of Biblical Interpretation" in *\*Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach\**, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021), 405-461. Also see "Methods of Bible Study," a document on the principles of biblical interpretation, approved by the Executive Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists at the Annual Council meeting in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on October 12, 1986. [Methods of Bible Study](<https://www.adventist.org/documents/methods-of-bible-study/?searchsite=www.adventist.org&ref=on-site-search&searchterm=methods+of+bible+study>) or in *\*Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach\**, 463-473.

5. William Miller, who provided the initial impetus for the later doctrinal development of the Adventists with his biblical insights, formulated hermeneutical rules for the study of the Bible that corresponded to the Protestant tradition and took the Bible's statements seriously without relativization. For further details, see P. Gerald Damsteegt, *\*Foundations of Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission\** (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 16-20; Konrad F. Mueller, *\*The Early History of the Seventh-day Adventists\** (Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag, 1969), 27-28; cf. Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *\*Light Bearers\**, rev. ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2000), 65-66.

6. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *\*On the Proof of Spirit and Power\**, 13 [Digital Collections](<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10927792?page=13>) (accessed November 17, 2023). A fitting response to Lessing's failure at the "ugly ditch" is Benjamin Kilchör, Harald Seubert, and Andreas Späth, eds. *\*And a Voice Came from the Cloud\* – The Christ Testimony of the Old Testament* (Ansbach: Logos Editions, 2019), 27ff.

7. William Larkin, Jr., *\*Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics\** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 34 (all translations from English-language literature in this article are mine).

8. This is the official German abbreviation. However, the abbreviation LGBTIQ (or simply LGBTQ) from the English-speaking world is also used in German-speaking areas, as is the case in *\*Adventisten Heute\** 09/2023.

9. Richard M. Davidson, "Homosexuality and the Bible: What Is at Stake in the Current Debate," in *\*Homosexuality, Marriage, and the Church\**, ed. Roy E. Gane, Nicholas P. Miller, and H. Peter Swanson (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 187.

10. *\*Queergedacht\**, ed. Werner E. Lange, Dennis Meier, and Reinder Bruinsma (STAB-Verlag, 2023). Note the order of the topics: The first part consists of emotional testimonies, and only then is the biblical evidence discussed.

11. Foreword by Werner E. Lange in *\*Queergedacht\**, 11. One naturally wonders what Lange means by a "conservative method of interpretation." It needs to be examined how the hermeneutics applied in *\*Queergedacht\** can be classified. Furthermore, footnote 3 refers to a presentation by Rolf Pöhler, in which he confirms (the obvious truth) that the chosen line of argumentation leads to differing views regarding the biblical assessment. Unfortunately, this presentation is neither published in the book nor provided with a bibliographic source. It is assumed that the reader is familiar with it.

12. *Ibid.*, 17-18.

13. *Ibid.*, 20.

14. *Ibid.*, 86.

15. *Ibid.*, 229.

16. *Ibid.*, 241.

17. Thus Andreas Bochmann in *\*Queergedacht\**, 241.
18. See the quote by Werner Lange mentioned earlier in point 2 in *\*Queergedacht\**, 11.
19. These texts are Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 (Chapter 11 by Udo Worschech) as well as Romans 1:26-27 (Chapter 12 by Werner Lange).
20. *\*Queergedacht\**, 124.
21. *Ibid.*, 138-139.
22. *Ibid.*, 150.
23. James Barr, *\*The Bible in the Modern World\** (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 42.
24. *Ibid.*, 39.
25. *\*Queergedacht\**, 245.
26. Udo Worschech, "What Do Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 Mean?" in *\*Queergedacht\**, 171-185.
27. *Ibid.*, 179-180.
28. *Ibid.*, 183.
29. *Ibid.*, 194, footnote 20.
30. *Ibid.*, 201.
31. Clinton Wahlen and Wagner Kuhn, "Culture, Hermeneutics, And Scripture: Discovering What is Universal," in *\*Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach\**, ed. Frank M. Hasel (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2021), 149.
32. *Ibid.*, 150.
33. *Ibid.*, 151.
34. Francis A. Schaeffer, *\*The Great Evangelical Disaster\** (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 60.
35. The term "propositional" commonly used in English refers to a statement that can be either true or false. "Propositional truth" is a truth that is inherently true and cannot be falsified.
36. Ekkehardt Müller, "Guidelines for the Interpretation of Scripture" in *\*Understanding Scripture: An Adventist Approach\**, ed. George W. Reid (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute of Seventh-day Adventists, 2005), 111. See also the document "Methods of Bible Study," approved in 1986 and mentioned in footnote 4.



37. *Ibid.*, 111-112; see also Richard M. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation" in *\*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology\**, ed. by Raoul Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 60-68.

38. Müller, 112.

39. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 85-86.

40. *Ibid.*, 86.

41. Seth D. Postell, Eitan Bar, Erez Soref, *\*Reading Moses Seeing Jesus: How the Torah Fulfills Its Goals in Yeshua\** (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 104.

42. *Ibid.*, 86.

43. Müller, 112.

44. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *\*How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth\** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 25-26.

45. Grant Osborne, *\*The Hermeneutical Spiral\** (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 8. Also see Frank M. Hasel, "Elements of Biblical Hermeneutics in Harmony with Scripture's Self-Claim," in *\*Biblical Hermeneutics: An Adventist Approach\**, 43-44.

46. Müller, 113.

47. Davidson, "Biblical Hermeneutics," 86.

48. Werner Lange also explicitly agrees with this in his chapter 22 in *\*Queergedacht\**, 323, but he writes a few pages later that the apostles only followed what the Holy Spirit had already decided regarding the issue of circumcision of Gentile Christians. His conclusion: In the matter of monogamous same-sex relationships, the Holy Spirit has already decided positively, and therefore the congregations should not wait for the church to come to decisions on this topic but should "move ahead in practice" (325-328), whatever that may mean (likely recognition and blessing of queer couples). This view is only possible due to the questioned separation of homosexual behavior and binding monogamous relationships of same-sex couples. This separation is a contrivance for which there are no indications in the Bible.

49. Peter J. Leithart, *\*A Son To Me: An Exposition of 1 & 2 Samuel\** (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 9-24. This approach should not be confused with Christological hermeneutics, which is promoted in some evangelical and Adventist circles, where the aim is to make Christ the center of the Bible, which is certainly commendable but also becomes a criterion for assessing different degrees of authority within the Bible. Martin Luther's "was Christum treibet" led him not to assign the same importance to books like James or Revelation as to the Gospels or the letters of Paul. See also Frank M. Hasel, *\*Biblical Hermeneutics\**, 449-453.

50. Davidson, "Biblical Interpretation," 83-85. See also his dissertation *\*Typology in Scripture\**. Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1981).

51. Leithart, 13-14.

52. See also Postell, Bar, Soref, *\*Reading Moses Seeing Jesus\**.

53. Leithart, 21, referring to the time of pre-critical interpretation of the Bible: "Instead of viewing the text through the lens of any extra-biblical system, the extra-biblical world was viewed through the lens of Scripture. And not only the world, but the individual wanted to read their life through the types of Scripture."

54. *Ibid.*, 24.

55. Fred Klooster, "The Role of the Holy Spirit in the Hermeneutical Process," cited in Larkin, 98.

57. <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/ressourcen/wirelex/7-inhalte-iv-didaktik-der-religionen/sabbat-sonntag-freitag> (accessed November 26, 2023).