

## **\*\*The Elephant in the Room\*\***

### **\*\*Queergedacht Metathema: Compulsion to Celibacy\*\***

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One of the most controversial aspects in the discussion about homosexuality and the church—perhaps the elephant in the room—is certainly that our official viewpoint means for homosexual Adventists that they cannot enter into a biblically legitimized marriage with a same-sex partner and should therefore live celibately as singles.

Already in the preface of the book *\*Queergedacht\**, one of the authors expresses his stance on this: He has “no right to condemn individuals with a different sexual orientation to a life without a sexual partner.”<sup>1</sup>

Many Adventists share this sentiment: How can we say that we love and accept people... and then deny them something as fundamental as marriage? Since most pastors and church members are married, this claim often comes from the mouths of married individuals, which makes it seem even more questionable from the perspective of some.

Questions arise such as: Can we expect people to remain single and sexually abstinent for their entire lives? Is that reasonable and just? Is it even realistic and livable? Or will those affected not inevitably break under such pressure? Do people not become mentally and physically ill when they must suppress their sexual and emotional needs, even though it is not feasible?

#### **\*\*Living Without a Sexual Partner – Not Realistic?\*\***

The book *\*Queergedacht\** positions itself as follows: A life without a sexual partner is an option only for a few; for the vast majority, however, it is unrealistic.<sup>2</sup> Those who remain voluntarily unmarried in the sense of 1 Corinthians 7 should have received this gift from God or feel a special calling.<sup>3</sup> For all others, one cannot demand a single life.

In Chapter 14, the claim is made that Paul was neither aware of the phenomenon of same-sex orientation nor of the inner perspective of homosexual individuals. Had he known about it, he would surely have advocated in his characteristic “pastoral pragmatism” that these individuals be allowed to live “loving monogamous relationships” to avoid falling into fornication.<sup>4</sup> The author considers it “unimaginable to demand that those who are same-sex oriented (and bisexual) Christians live permanently abstinent and without sexual love in a monogamous partnership (as is unfortunately still demanded by many churches and theologians).”<sup>5</sup>

A separate article addresses the theological statements in Chapter 14. Here, the focus is specifically on the assertion that celibacy is unreasonable and unlivable, and its practical implications.

**\*\*Current Statistics from Congregational Analyses in Austria and German-speaking Switzerland\*\***

In 2020, a congregational analysis was conducted in the Austrian Union of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.<sup>6</sup> It recorded the statistical data of all Adventists in Austria since the year 2000. Regarding the relationship status of baptized members, the study found that 34% of them are unmarried, meaning more than one-third. This includes some young people, but also older singles, as well as those who are separated, widowed, or divorced. A similar congregational analysis in the German-speaking Swiss Union collected data from 2001-2021 and found a single percentage of 37%. Current figures for Germany are not available.

According to our official position, we teach that sexual intercourse should only take place within marriage. This means that we expect 34-37% of our members to live celibately! If we say that this is not realistic or livable, it would be highly problematic. Then more than a third of the congregation would be more or less doomed to failure!<sup>7</sup>

### **\*\*Marriage as Ideal and Norm\*\***

That there are Christians who long for partnership but still live alone involuntarily and unplanned indeed creates a tension. An unfulfilled desire for partnership and family can be felt as painful and burdensome. Contributing factors include perceived loneliness, childlessness, sexual temptations, fears about the future, feelings of inadequacy and failure, spiritual questions (the so-called “singleness question”), and stigmatization in the congregation. Some singles feel as though they are living a second-class life and are at least temporarily dissatisfied with their lives.<sup>8</sup>

This feeling is significantly shaped by the fact that we, as a church, strongly convey the ideal that a successful life as a Christian primarily includes marriage. A happy marriage may be the quintessential Christian status symbol, especially for spiritual leaders. With this attitude, whether explicitly stated or only implicitly lived, we reinforce the impression that a renunciation of marriage is not compatible with a life worth living.<sup>9</sup>

This “idolization” of marriage not only harms singles in general but particularly affects members of the LGBTQ spectrum, as they do not conform to the traditional marriage and family model.

If we succeed in overcoming this one-sidedness, we can also improve the situation for queer believers and make it easier for them to live according to a biblical sexual ethic.

### **\*\*Comparability of Heterosexual and Homosexual Singles\*\***

When comparing the situation of heterosexual and homosexual singles, it must not be overlooked that a same-sex orientation brings specific challenges that other singles do not face in the same way. The process of self-discovery proceeds differently, and there can be significant insecurities when one realizes they have a divergent sexual inclination. Many experience phases of exclusion and isolation, especially when there is a lack of safe individuals to turn to. The struggle with same-sex feelings is often also a trigger for a crisis of faith and life. Some individuals may experience a change in their orientation and eventually enter into a partnership, but many others do not.<sup>10</sup> The option of a mixed-orientation marriage is likely only feasible for very few.

Heterosexual singles have a higher likelihood of eventually entering into marriage and can more easily take active steps towards finding a partner. Nevertheless, there are also many among them who, despite desiring a partner, remain single for the long term and must deal with unfulfilled longings. In this regard, despite the differences just described, there is an overlap.

#### **\*\*Life Perspectives for All Singles\*\***

When we consider that over one-third of all Adventists currently cannot experience marriage and the sexuality anchored therein, our perspective broadens. Additionally, there are certainly many who, although married on paper, also do not experience sexual fulfillment or family happiness in reality.

The question arises as to what hope we have to offer all these individuals. If we focus on striving for a happy marriage for everyone (including same-sex couples), we overlook that this solution still does not work for many. Therefore, life perspectives beyond marriage are needed, along with an elevation of the single status.

#### **\*\*Myth of Calling/Gift of Singleness\*\***

The Empirica Institute conducted a study with over 3,200 Christian singles from 2017 to 2019. They found that only about 4% of them view their single life as a calling.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the assumption that singles feel a special calling or gift that draws them enthusiastically to remain single seems to be a myth.<sup>12</sup> A calling can also mean being called to something one did not choose for oneself and growing into it.

The author Preston Sprinkle describes his understanding of calling as follows:

“One of the problems is that we think people are either called to remain single for life or they are called to be married. According to this way of thinking, if someone is called to be married but is not yet married, then by definition, they are not living out their calling; they are incomplete. But the Bible does not say that. The Bible speaks of living out one’s calling as a Christian, whether single or married (1 Cor 7)...

How do you know if you are called to singleness? If you are single. How do you know if you are called to marriage? If you are married. This means your calling as a Christian, as long as you are single, is to be a faithful steward of your singleness. And your calling as a Christian, while you are married, is to be a faithful steward of your marriage.”<sup>13</sup>

From this perspective, we are less called to one or the other life status than to live our faith faithfully in accordance with God’s Word in every situation.

#### **\*\*Fulfilled Life Despite Unfulfilled Wishes\*\***

To the reality of a fallen world belongs that the lives of many people do not unfold as they had dreamed. This can mean remaining single for life or having a difficult marriage, not having children, losing one’s partner, job, or health.

Regardless of the situation one finds oneself in, we all must learn to shape our lives in faith in God and live in trust in His Word, very much in line with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's well-known quote: "There is fulfilled life despite many unfulfilled wishes." This is the message our church can preach in light of imperfect life in this world.

The good news is that a life without marriage is livable and realistic, even if certain longings remain unfulfilled. Single life is particularly livable when one recognizes that God blesses us even in this life situation and gifts us with strength.

### **\*\*Two Life Models for Christians\*\***

The Bible presents us with two equally valid life models:

- One is the marriage between man and woman. The two genders are a symbol for Christ and the church.
- The other, equally valid model, is the life of a single. Interestingly, Jesus Himself lived this model. He spoke in Matthew 19:12 of those who are not able to marry or who give up marriage for the sake of their faith. He and later Paul completely opposed the culture of their time, as marriage and family were the norm back then. The New Testament elevates the single state and raises it to an equal life option.

Single life brings (just like married life) its own challenges. However, the renunciation of marriage is a genuine, livable, and even attractive way of life. One can lead a fulfilled and happy life even without marrying. Furthermore, living as a single opens many opportunities to serve God and cultivate a particularly deep relationship with Him.

### **\*\*Counter-Cultural\*\***

Living as a single is frowned upon in our society. It is less about not marrying and more about the notion that abstinence is seen as unhealthy and unrealistic. But Jesus was neither unhealthy nor unmanly. He was a complete human being in the image of God and demonstrated that experienced sexuality is not necessary to be fully human and fully man (or woman).

When we indirectly say that the only desirable life is one with a partner, we uncritically adopt the position of our society, which claims that one can only be happy when the desire for partnership is fulfilled. When we suggest that a successful, blessed Christian life is synonymous with marriage (and also draw the conclusion that anyone who does not achieve this has evidently done something wrong), we compromise our biblical position on the issue of homosexuality.

### **\*\*No Demand from Church Leaders\*\***

Unlike what is suggested in some parts of the book *\*Queergedacht\**, the renunciation of marriage for all those who cannot find or desire a heterosexual partner is not a "narrow-minded paternalism" from Adventist church leaders.<sup>14</sup> Our understanding of sexual ethics is

based on God's revelation and is thus an expression of His will, not ours. We are merely stewards of teachings derived from the Bible.

As long as these come from careful exegesis, we are allowed to uphold them and trust that they mean the best for all of us. In comparison to the sexual permissiveness of our culture, the Bible imposes numerous boundaries regarding sexual immorality, such as premarital sex, extramarital affairs, pornography, or same-sex intercourse. Accepting these boundaries in obedience is an expression of trust in God.

At the same time, it remains the freedom of each individual whether he or she wants to follow Jesus.

### A Call to the Community

In order to credibly represent the biblical teaching on sexual ethics, we need a community that makes every effort to ensure that singles – regardless of the reasons they are alone – feel welcomed like in a big family. They should not have to justify their status. This community should also be willing to invite and include queer individuals. There should be activities that both families and singles can participate in. We must convey to our young people that it is okay – yes, even good – if they do not marry, if God leads them that way. Such a community would be a great testimony to a world obsessed with romance and sex. It would be well-prepared to become a true home for Christians who experience same-sex attraction.

### Further Reading:

- Sam Allberry, *7 Myths of Singleness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2019)
- Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the storyline of Scripture affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010)
- Astrid Eichler, *Es muss was Anderes geben: Lebensperspektiven für Singles* (Witten: SCM Brockhaus, 2006)
- Tobias Künkler, Tobias Faix, Johanna Weddingen (Eds.), *Christliche Singles: Wie sie leben, glauben und lieben. Das Buch zur empirica Singlestudie*. (Holzgerlingen: Brockhaus, 2020).
- Danielle Treweek, *The Meaning of Singleness: Retrieving an Eschatological Vision for the Contemporary Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2023)

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*1 Werner E. Lange, Dennis Meier, Reinder Bruinsma (eds.), Queergedacht: Beiträge für eine offene Diskussion über gleichgeschlechtliche monogame Beziehungen (Adendorf: STAB-Verlag, 2023), p. 18.*

*2 Ibid., pp. 116, 222.*

*3 Ibid., p. 224.*

4. *Ibid*, p. 227.

5. *Ibid*.

6. STA-Gemeindeanalyse Union Österreich, Autor: Biostatistik & Consulting, Dr. Markus Savli.

7. See also Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2019), Chapter 1 "Singleness Is Too Hard," pp. 17ff.

8. A detailed study on the lives and life satisfaction of Christian singles can be found in Tobias Künkler, Tobias Faix, Johanna Weddingen (eds.), *Christliche Singles: Wie sie leben, glauben und lieben. Das Buch zur empirica Singlstudie*, \* (Holzgerlingen: Brockhaus, 2020).

9. The homosexual David Bennett expresses his bewilderment over this characteristic of Christian culture as he perceives it in his book *A War of Loves: The Unexpected Story of a Gay Activist Discovering Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), pp. 127-135.

10 This range of experiences is depicted in this book: Markus Hoffmann (ed.), *Weil ich es will: Homosexualität – Wandlungen – Identität. 39 Lebensberichte*. (Basel: Fontis, 2023).

11 Künkler, Faix, Weddingen (eds.), *Christliche Singles: Wie sie leben, glauben, lieben. Das Buch zur empirica Singlestudie* (Holzgerlingen: SCM Brockhaus, 2020), p. 63.

12 Sam Allberry, *7 Myths about Singleness*, Chapter 2 "Singleness Requires a Special Calling," pp. 35ff.

13 Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not an Issue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), p. 173. (Translation by deepL.com)

14. *\*Queergedacht\**, p. 46.

15 See also Sam Allberry, *7 Myths of Singleness*, Chapter 4 "Singleness Means No Family," pp. 63ff.