A biblical response to Jonathan Henderson’s homosexuality sermon

Jonathan Henderson's recent sermon on homosexuality at Pacific Union College has generated intense discussion and concern among Adventists. The Compass Magazine asked Omar Miranda, a Christian counselor who specializes in treating sexual addictions, to write a biblical critique of "Adam and Steve."
Did God Really Say…?: A Response to Pastor Jonathan Henderson’s Sermon on Homosexuality

Omar Miranda

A recent sermon preached by the Pacific Union College (PUC) chaplain, Pastor Jonathan Henderson, on October 8, 2014, as part of PUC’s week of prayer has made quite a splash. (PUC recently removed the sermon video from its livestream, but it can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJvQaqnfM-w#t=436).

In the sermon, entitled “Adam and Steve,” Pastor Henderson made a passionate and emotional appeal for the Seventh-day Adventist Church and specifically PUC to be a safe place for people who are questioning their sexual orientation, struggling with same-sex attraction, or actively living a homosexual lifestyle.

He focused his sermon around the thesis that God’s original plan for heterosexual relationships has changed due to sin and especially due to the hardness and stubbornness of our hearts. Therefore, God not only tolerates but accepts people who are confused about their sexuality or who are openly and actively bisexual, lesbian, transgendered, or homosexual.

Preaching on Matthew 19:3-12 (Jesus’ teaching on divorce and eunuchs), Pastor Henderson asserted that many homosexuals can’t help their sexual orientation because they are either born that way or made that way by the behavior and choices of others. Other homosexuals choose to live that way. Regardless of the reason, God understands their need to have a different kind of sexual relationship and adapts to their need. Henderson said God calls “audibles”—a football term for when the quarterback changes the play as it unfolds. According to Henderson, God’s willingness to change His game plan on the fly explains why it was Adam and Eve in the Garden, but now it can be Adam and Steve.

Based on the buzz on social media, Pastor Henderson has touched a raw nerve and rightly addressed many in the Christian faith who have responded to this issue with a lack of understanding, fear, fanaticism, negativity, stubbornness, and downright anger.

Henderson is an incredible speaker. He’s funny and engaging, tells great stories, has wonderful illustrations, and is very relevant. He did a masterful job of presenting statistics on the prevalence of homosexuality and addressing many of the complex social, physical, emotional, and relational issues related to the formation and development of same-sex attraction. He called for Christians to treat these often maligned individuals with respect, understanding, and love and to develop an honest dialogue with them about the realities of their lives.

I applaud Pastor Henderson’s bold and brave stance, his passionate presentation, and his sensitive handling of this crucial but difficult topic. I wholeheartedly agree with him that our college campuses—and by extension, our homes and churches—should be sanctuaries: places where all people can come and feel safe, accepted, heard, and loved. I agree that there has to be a better way of addressing this issue.

But that’s where he and I part ways. In fact, I’m afraid he’s done more damage than healing—on more than one front. But before I get into that, first let me tell you a little about me:

1. I am and have always been a heterosexual male.
2. I have friends and acquaintances who are struggling, confused, or living in same-sex relationships.
3. I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. More on that later.
4. I am a recovering sex/porn addict. More on that later, as well.

5. I have a master’s degree in counseling with postgraduate training and certifications in child sexual abuse/maltreatment, the treatment of homosexuality/same-sex attraction, and the diagnosis and treatment of sexual/pornography addictions.

6. I have lots of experience counseling mostly children, adolescents, and young adults who are confused, struggling, transgendered, or same-sex-attracted, and even some who are struggling to come out of same-sex attractions.

Now that we have that out of the way, let's get down to business!

**Cultural Lies**

Satan and our culture have been hard at work telling us lies about homosexuality. Unfortunately, Pastor Henderson’s sermon only helped to propagate those lies. Strong words, you say? They are strong, but take a look at the lies he held up as truth in his sermon:

- God’s standards about sin, sexuality, relationships, marriage, and gender identity have changed—in fact, He’s OK with whatever you feel like you are or whatever you’re into.
- God’s Word isn’t really black and white about this topic. We can’t really know what God meant in the Bible.
- Our feelings, wants, desires, and passions are the most important thing. By extension: God wants us to be happy—at any and all costs.
- We should accept, love, listen to, celebrate, and not “judge” others (aka tell them God’s view on their actions)—no matter their sexuality, behaviors, or gender identity. We should be silent and just let God convict others of their sin.

Essentially Pastor Henderson is preaching the same false ideas that are so popular in our contemporary culture:

- There is no real absolute truth, and what is true for you isn’t true for me.
- Each person’s narrative (personal experiences), based largely upon their subjective feelings, is tantamount to truth.
- Truth can be created rather than found.

Let’s look at each of Henderson’s false assertions in more depth.

**I Change Not?**

Based on Matthew 19:3-12, Pastor Henderson posited that in the beginning God created marriage to be a man for a woman, but due to the hardness of humans’ hearts, He allowed them to follow their sinful inclinations. The pastor stated, “Just because God planned for it doesn’t mean He planned it!”

The pastor wrongly reasoned that in God’s view of marriage, the need for intimacy and “oneness” between two individuals supercedes His plan for sexuality and procreation through the original union of male and female. Henderson asserted that these needs can indeed be met from same-sex unions—and that God allows it. Pastor Henderson went so far as to state that “had God made Steve [instead of Eve], Adam wouldn’t have had a problem”; in other words, Adam could have found total “oneness” with Steve as well as Eve. I think that’s heresy!

Henderson used David and Jonathan as an example of “soul mates.” In 2 Samuel 1:26 David mourned the death of his good friend: “I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women” (NIV). The pastor suggested (again, heresy) that “it is absolutely possible that David and Jonathan did more than just a friendly kiss,” implying that they may have been homosexual lovers! According to Henderson, David found something even deeper and better than sex: a oneness with someone else.
The pastor stated that God changes the rules because life is dynamic and changes. God, in effect, changes His mind because we change. The fact is that God will never change His mind about people living in open, consistent sexual sin. Many times people want to live in rebellion against God’s law and feel great about it. This is impossible. God can’t change His moral rules, because they reflect the way the universe works. When God says “Don’t!” what He’s really saying is “Don’t hurt yourself!” Living under God’s rules gives us the greatest freedom.

Long ago God warned His people through His prophet Isaiah:

“This is what the Lord says—your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: ‘I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea. Your descendants would have been like the sand, your children like its numberless grains; their name would never be blotted out nor destroyed from before me.’ . . . ‘There is no peace,’ says the Lord, ‘for the wicked’ ” (Isaiah 48:17-22, NIV).

Those are strong words: sin, death, evil, “no peace,” but God is trying to make a point: choices have consequences (Galatians 6:7)—consequences that are real and painful and many times cannot be undone—so we should take God at His word and choose wisely.

Pastor Henderson wrongly applied Jesus’ teaching about eunuchs in Matthew 19:12 to homosexuality. He extrapolated that this teaching applies to homosexuals who are born or made that way, as well as those who choose that orientation.

However, the Bible makes a clear distinction between eunuchs and homosexuals. The two groups are nothing alike. S. Michael Houdmann—Bible teacher, pastor, and founder of gotquestions.org—writes: “Some gay groups argue that Jesus was referring to homosexuals when He mentioned eunuchs who were ‘born that way.’ However, the Bible never uses the words homosexual and eunuch interchangeably. Furthermore, eunuchs are never referred to in Scripture as being in sin, while homosexuality is universally condemned in both the Old and New Testaments (http://www.gotquestions.org/eunuch-eunuchs.html).

By portraying God as changeable, Pastor Henderson cast aspersions upon the immutable character of God and the veracity of His Word, the Bible. He wrongly interpreted and applied key passages of Scripture, and thus he tickled the ears (2 Timothy 4:3) of people who are struggling, confused, or downright OK with same-sex attraction. Pastor Henderson didn’t clarify but further confused an already complex and sensitive issue.

Black and White—or Gray?

At the conclusion of his sermon, Pastor Henderson summarized: “It’s not trying to figure out what is sin and what isn’t—come on! You’ll spend the rest of your lives trying to figure out. . . . Life isn’t black and white, dude—it’s in gray. It’s been in gray for a long, long time. But God simplifies it: ‘I give you two commandments: Trust Me and love one another.’”

In his closing prayer he stated, “Oh, how I wish the Bible was more black and white.”

But the fact is that God’s Bible is indeed black and white on this subject. God has time and time again been very clear about where He stands on sexuality and our sexual identity. God will not and cannot turn a blind eye toward someone living in complete and utter rebellion toward Him and His law.

Henderson diminished the role of sexual perversion and homosexuality in the culture and practices of Sodom and Gomorrah, stating that God destroyed them, not because of their sexual sins and perversity, but because of “how they treated people.” He, in effect, made a topic gray that God has clearly made black and white! Jude 1:7 states, “In a
similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (NIV).

Again, S. Michael Houdmann clarifies this issue:

Ezekiel 16:49-50 declares, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. They were haughty and did detestable things before me…” The Hebrew word translated “detestable” refers to something that is morally disgusting and is the exact same word used in Leviticus 18:22 that refers to homosexuality as an ‘abomination.’ . . . Those who attempt to explain away the biblical condemnations of homosexuality claim that the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was inhospitality. The men of Sodom and Gomorrah were certainly being inhospitable. There is probably nothing more inhospitable than homosexual gang rape. But to say God completely destroyed two cities and all their inhabitants for being inhospitable clearly misses the point. While Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of many other horrendous sins, homosexuality was the reason God poured fiery sulfur on the cities, completely destroying them and all of their inhabitants. . . . Sodom and Gomorrah serve as a powerful example of how God feels about sin in general, and homosexuality specifically” (http://www.gotquestions.org/Sodom-and-Gomorrah.html).

If Jesus was OK with homosexuality, why would the Apostle Paul have so many contradictory “negative” and “black and white” things to say about it? The simple answer is that God is not OK with homosexuality and never will be. I know that a lot of people get really upset and angry with those words, but my counseling experience has taught me that homosexuality is a practice and a mindset—it’s not who somebody is, just as my sex/porn addiction wasn’t who I was, it was behavior I participated in based on a faulty/warped belief and perception of God, others, and the world.

As a counselor I’ve worked with many homosexuals who admit to me that for a long time in their lives they fooled themselves into thinking that that’s just who they were—not what they did or how they thought.[1] The reality is that we end up becoming the things we tell ourselves we become, but just because we tell ourselves that we can never change doesn’t make it so.

If homosexuals can’t change, why does the Apostle Paul boldly and clearly state:

“Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11, NIV).

Lest you dispute what the Apostle Paul writes, you need to know that the words “men who have sex with men” translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts. (For more from Paul, see 1 Timothy 1:9-11.)

Pastor Henderson attributed “conversion therapy” (the counseling approach that helps an individual struggling with feelings of same-sex attraction to work through them and return to heterosexual romantic relationships) as useful and successful for some, but not everyone. This is true. However, he never addressed the important distinction between someone who is same-sex attracted but chooses not to act on those feelings and someone who is living in outright, unabashed, and purposeful same-sex relationships.

I have had clients who report that from the moment they prayed to God and accepted Him, they no longer had any
same-sex attractions... it was literally night and day for them. Then I've had the majority of folks who struggle daily with fighting and understanding these feelings—but they don't give in or act them out.

The bottom line is this: When we become Christians, God makes the old new (2 Corinthians 5:17) and revives what was once dead and makes it alive. But just as Jesus resurrected the once-dead Lazarus and then told the witnesses to unwrap him, so we—through the prompting and power of God’s Holy Spirit (Philippians 2:12-13)—must work daily to actively resist temptations (Romans 6-8), renew our minds (Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:2), and be discerning about who we spend time with (1 Corinthians 5:9-11) and what we do (Philippians 4:8).

God Just Wants Your Happiness!

Pastor Henderson stated that the foundation of every deep relationship is a “heart to heart” connection and stressed that homosexuals are individuals with emotional needs who want and deserve a soul connection—a “oneness” with someone else. They deserve to be happy and fulfilled just like the rest of us!

This, in effect, is Christian hedonism: the idea that what God wants most of all for us is to be happy and fulfilled—at any cost! I disagree. I believe what God wants most for us is to be holy—and in being holy, we will be happiest.

King Solomon spent a large portion of his life apart from God, looking to satisfy his every want, whim, desire, and passion, and, in the midst of it, wishing for peace and fulfillment. God verifies that Solomon was indeed the wisest person ever (1 Kings 3:12). It's great for us that Solomon found the answer to a joyful, peaceful, and fulfilled life. What was that answer? For us to “fear God [respect Him and take Him seriously] and keep His commandments” (Ecclesiastes 12:13, NIV). God’s ways are the best ways, and it's only in following His ways—even when they appear totally opposite to our feelings, wants, passions, or desires—that we can ever be totally and truly joyful, fulfilled, and at peace.

There's a problem with using our feelings and emotions as the standard for right and wrong. Very few of the people who have dealt with these issues—people that I've counseled, befriended, or encountered in my life—have felt that they were, in fact, being evil or doing wicked things. They were just trying to follow their hearts and feelings. But God has told us in His Word that our hearts (aka feelings) are fickle, fleeting, and untrustworthy: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9, NIV).

I can tell you that sexuality, gender identity, and associated issues strike at the heart of who we are—and are rife with powerful feelings! That’s why when someone begins to address these issues, it may take years to dig the hooks of lies and faulty beliefs (based on feelings) out of their souls.

Remember earlier I told you that I was a sex/porn addict and that I was sexually molested as a child? It took me a long time—years—before I could learn to think, perceive, and respond correctly to God and others. I agree with Pastor Henderson when he said that sexual abuse messes people up! When I was actively and openly involved in sex/porn addiction, there was a time when I would get really angry really quickly whenever anybody would talk about God’s wrath, judgment, sin, anything related to sex—and especially pornography. I got to the point where I refused to pray, go to church, read the Bible... all because I felt like people were always “judging me”! I was constantly walking around with a chip on my shoulder—just daring someone to tell me that what I was doing was wrong!

But as God got a hold of me; as I got to know and love my wife; and as several great, godly men in my church got to know and love me and listened to my story and were extremely patient with me, my attitude slowly subsided. After much counseling (years), prayer, Bible study, and continuing relationships with godly people, I can look back and recognize that the lies I believed weren't true. Lies like: "I'll never be able to stop looking at this or stop having sex." Lies like: “God doesn’t address pornography specifically in the Bible and He gave me my sex drive and it feels sooo good, so it must be OK.” Lies like: "So-and-so in the church is doing it, and he doesn’t seem to feel guilty or have a problem with it, so why should I?"

I came to realize a very important principle: the more I denied God’s truth and lied to myself about the fact that I was...
turning my feelings, wants, desires, and passions into my “god,” the more I began to believe those lies—to the point where I tried to mentally justify heinous sins and even potential crimes by telling myself that I deserved to be happy and “get my fix.”

Trust me when I tell you that if you reject God’s voice (aka His Holy Spirit, aka your conscience), His voice becomes softer and softer, and the voices of you, the world, and the devil become louder and louder. If you kick God to the curb long enough and tell Him that you want something bad enough, He’ll ultimately agree, step back, and leave you to yourself—and it won’t be fun or pretty. The Apostle Paul describes this in crystal-clear and disturbing terms in Romans 1:18-32. Read this passage and you will see that it is “scary-spot-on” to what’s happening in our culture right now.

Paul says that when people refuse to acknowledge God, they begin to believe lies and deceptions (2 Thessalonians 2:10-12). The idea that God is OK with anything that makes me “happy” is one of the most potent of these lies.

Don’t Judge Me!

Pastor Henderson took multiple opportunities to lampoon well-meaning but closed-minded Christians’ historically tepid and many times outright negative responses to homosexuals. At the height of this characterization he stated, “Now we live in this world where we still see sin and it’s prevalent. And for some reason in our church we have zeroed in on what we consider one of the worst anomalies ever in the human race!” He suggested that Christians have blown this issue all out of proportion.

The truth is that sexual sins—yes, homosexual behavior is a sin—are sins just like other sins, but that doesn’t make them the same kind of sin. The Apostle Paul tells us to flee from sexual immorality because “all other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18, NIV). The Apostle Paul may not have understood all the complexities of the emotional, physical, physiological, and neurochemical changes that happen during sex acts. However, God did—and He inspired Paul to warn us.

Pastor Henderson angrily stated that sexuality/same-sex attraction is complicated (and it is) and that others don’t understand it, but they want to “judge” it. Henderson went on to question how his hearers could “judge” another person about not “living right, when 95 percent of you aren’t living right!”

By this logic, the only people who could be qualified to speak with someone about any issue are those persons who have experienced that specific issue—and have overcome all sin in their own lives. Henderson might as well say that he doesn’t want anybody telling anybody anything about what God says about any kind of sin.

Wrapped up in his sermon is the idea that Christians must have not just grace or tolerance but “hyper-tolerance.” That means not just accepting the individual and whatever lifestyle choices they make, but celebrating their choices and never verbalizing anything negative or disagreeable to them in any way whatsoever—no matter how far away their behavior is from God’s best for them!

Henderson stressed that we should be more understanding of others who are “interpreting the Bible differently” and “leave it up to You [God] to convict.” He chastised well-meaning Christians, stating, “You’re not the vine and you’re not the gardener. Love them. Let the vine nourish them and let the gardener prune them . . . and whatever [Biblical/doctrinal conclusions] they come to, whatever choice they end up making . . . if they choose to be a eunuch . . . it’s not your burden. You love and you keep loving.”

This statement sounds wonderfully sensitive, but it’s not biblical. The Bible is full of instances where people are corrected for wrong doctrinal understandings and wrong behavior. There are entire books of the New Testament dedicated to these issues!

The Bible never says that we should turn a blind eye to someone who is living in outright, consistent, and purposeful sin. In fact, as Christians, we should address it as soon as possible. If that person claims to be a Christian, then we
should not allow those practices to continue. Jesus warned His disciples against allowing a little bit of yeast (the hypocrisy of the Pharisees) and said that they must deal with it immediately and not allow it to spread (Matthew 16:5-12). The Apostle Paul used the same word picture when he wrote to the Christians at Corinth, addressing this very issue of sexual sin in the church (see 1 Corinthians 5). He clearly and emphatically stated that it is indeed the task—and mandate—of the church members to police each other through mutually “judging” each other: that is, lovingly and consistently holding each other accountable, not to tear each other down, but instead, to build each other up and to stop sinful or faulty beliefs and practices from damaging God’s church.

It is true that as Christians we need to move past our own fears, sensitivities, and misgivings about loving people in same-sex relationships and people who are unsure about their sexual identity. We need to be informed about the science and research regarding homosexuality. But accepting and loving them doesn’t mean that you cannot tell them about God’s laws—laws that are loving and have been put in place to protect and preserve them. I assert that to have unqualified acceptance and an “anything goes” attitude toward someone is actually the most unloving and disrespectful thing you can do.

This, however, doesn’t give Christians license to blast other Christians who are dealing with same-sex attraction. I’ve seen plenty of people leave the fellowship of the church and walk away from God because well-meaning but insensitive Christians hammered and abused virtual strangers with “God’s truth” outside of the appropriate situations. What are “appropriate situations”? Well, I’m glad you asked. Sharing God’s heart for someone’s best is most effective under two distinct conditions:

1. You have built an authentic, loving and trusting relationship with the other person.

2. The other person asks you a direct question related to either:
   a. your opinion about their lifestyle choices;
   b. God’s laws, Bible verses/passages.

Other than that, I agree with Pastor Henderson: just love them and accept them.[2] God will open the right time for you to share with them God’s best for them—and you will likely share this information with them multiple times as well as hear their story multiple times. The Apostle Paul tells us, “Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2, NIV). All people need love, but someone seeking to address these complex and difficult issues needs additional love, caring, and gentleness.

Appropriate and godly Christian responses should be a balanced mix of love, grace, and truth, modeled on God’s approach in sending Jesus to us (see John 1:14). It is possible to love someone and still tell them the honest truth. The Apostle Paul, when speaking to the Christians at Ephesus, stressed that by “speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ” (Ephesians 4:15, NIV). The process is simple, but not easy. We must:

1. Speak

2. The truth

3. In love

Jesus, through His interactions with the woman caught in the very act of adultery (John 8:1-11), gives us a beautiful example of how to interact with someone who is living in known sin. The Apostle Peter follows Jesus’ example by topping off a bunch of true, straightforward but hard rebukes with these words: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (2 Peter 4:8, NIV). Peter gives us a great model for sharing a difficult truth: start with something encouraging and loving; tell that much-loved person the difficult truth; end with love. Let love be the hallmark of everything you do.
Pastor Henderson makes it clear that life in this world is only a shadow of what God intended it to be. I agree with him; it is imperfect, painful, and messy stuff. But when we seek to treat others as Jesus did by loving them first, foremost, and fully; then, within the context of that love, telling them the truth; and lastly, continuing to love them through their difficult but worthy journey back to a joyful and fulfilling life of submission to and service for Jesus, we show them and the world the power of Jesus’ love.

Endnotes:

[1] Caleb H. Price writes in his clear, research-based article entitled “Are People Really Born Gay?”: “It’s clear that sexual orientation is, at its core, a matter of how one defines oneself – not a matter of biology or genes” (http://www.focusonthefamily.com/socialissues/defending-your-values/understanding-same-sex-attractio....

[2] The only time when this rule could be broken/waived would be if you are a church leader tasked with providing discipline to church members or if you are addressing this topic during a sermon or other teaching time—in a congregational or group setting. Even then, when presenting this very sensitive topic, it’s important to bathe it in prayer, asking God to show you the most gracious, loving, but truthful way to address it.

Additional Resources

A. Wayne Blakely of Know His Love Ministries, an ex-homosexual and Seventh-day Adventist, also responded to Pastor Henderson’s sermon (http://advindicate.com/articles/2014/10/14/qualified-in-the-journey-a-response-to-adam-and-steve). Wayne has a powerful life story, and I urge you to investigate it.

B. If you want to know more about the scientific and social science research findings about homosexuality and how we can better respond to people who are dealing with same-sex attraction, check out the eight-part series called “Facing Homosexuality” I wrote for Insight magazine several years back when I was their online columnist.

- Part 1: A New Series on Homosexuality
- Part 2: What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?
- Part 3: Homosexuality and Our Culture
- Part 4: Is Homosexuality a Choice or Not?
- Part 5: Is Homosexuality Damaging?
- Part 6: Loving One Out
- Part 7: Confronting the Christian Homosexual, Part 1
- Part 8: Confronting the Christian Homosexual, Part 2

C. Pastor John Piper has a wonderfully gracious, Biblical, and thoughtful response (https://m.soundcloud.com/askpastorjohn/how-do-i-fight-same-sex-desires-episode-454) to the question of dealing with same-sex attraction. Take a few minutes (that’s all it’ll take) and listen to it for yourself.