



Human Sexuality and AIDS: An Ethiopian Church Perspective

ESHETU ABATE

*Mekane Yesus Seminary
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

I. HUMAN SEXUALITY IN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

A. The Bible and sexuality

According to the Christian faith, God, in the beginning, created human beings in his own image, male and female. On the basis of the creation story in the Scriptures, we can say that sexual differentiation among human beings is the will of God and derives from him. Our sexuality is the creation and gift of God.

As creatures made in the image of God, we were made with a sensitivity to what is right and wrong, holy and unholy. Thus, we have the responsibility to use our whole bodies, including our sexuality, in a responsible way. Otherwise, not knowing the purpose for which we were created, we can misuse or harm the body given to us by God.

Our God is a God of fellowship and mutuality. God created human beings as male and female because he saw such a pair to be very good. God said, "It is not

ESHETU ABATE is dean of theology at Mekane Yesus Seminary, the primary site for theological education for the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus.

AIDS continues to ravage Africa. In this report, we hear the concern of Lutherans in Ethiopia as they try to lead people in the paths of righteousness to avoid the disease and, with very limited resources, to care for those who contract it.

good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner” (Gen 2:18). The one-to-one relationship that God created between Adam and Eve is the most suitable and most intimate relationship humans can have on this earth. The strength of the relationship between husband and wife and the depth of its commitment is far greater than in the relationship one has to parents (“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh”—Gen 2:24). If the unity of the opposite sexes (“one flesh”) has such a significant place in the sight of the Creator, then such union should be exercised in human communities with a full understanding of its importance and meaning.

The expression “one flesh” has another important implication. One cannot tear down one’s own body or flesh. The unity, once given, cannot be broken at will. To do so will harm one’s own body (“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate”—Matt 19:5).

Helping each other implies unity and love, but not merely sentimental or emotional love. True love is unconditional love, sacrificial love. Our Lord said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). The marital relationship between committed people of opposite sexes should exemplify this kind of love. An “if...” love loves the other person because of something one gets. In other words, it is connected with selfishness. Unconditional love on the other hand does not set a condition to love the other person. God created the sexual bond so that it could culminate in such unconditional love.

In this kind of lifelong marital bond God has allowed reproduction. It is the second purpose of God in creating human beings male and female. God said, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Gen 1:28). The children born in the image of their parents look up to the parents for education and good example. In other words, the lifelong commitment between couples has its effect not only on the couple themselves but also upon their children. Eventually, in fact, unfaithfulness in marriage is not only a problem of the immediate couple and their children but also a problem of the society as a whole. Therefore, societies, to be healthy and sound, should show utmost care for the stability of their families.

B. Christian sexual norms

Everybody desires to know how to behave. The Scriptures, as the word of God, give us God’s own norms and directions about how to act sexually.

1. The Scriptures presuppose maturity before sexual intercourse (Gen 2:24). Couples must be mature before they can commit themselves to one another fully. The maturity should be physical, mental, and social. According to the Scriptures a boy and girl are under the care of their “father and mother” until the time of maturity. Commitment to a person of the opposite sex in sexual relationship is right only after the time of maturity.

2. The time before maturity is the time of learning. The responsibility for teaching correct sexual behavior lies with parents, teachers, and the community at large.

3. Once the time of maturity is reached, the Scriptures endorse a one-to-one relationship between people of opposite sex as the proper setting for sexual expression. This one-to-one relationship is a lifelong commitment.

4. The Scriptures oppose extra-marital sex. Sex outside the one-to-one relationship of marriage works against the order and safety that God has created for man and woman.

5. In the Scriptures God commanded his people that they “shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14). The Bible, however, does not limit adultery or sexual immorality to married people. Any intercourse that does not occur within the one-to-one commitment of marriage is contrary to the will of God. This means that married people have to remain faithfully in their marriage commitment and that unmarried single persons cannot have sexual intercourse before their marriage.

6. In the New Testament our Lord taught that divorce is permitted only for the single reason of adultery. Sexual faithfulness between the two partners is the most important ingredient of married life. The Apostle Paul advised both married and single Christians about their sexual life. Single persons who are tempted and cannot control themselves should marry. Those who want to remain single and think they can control themselves can remain single. On the other hand, the advice of the apostle to the married is very clear: “The wife should not separate from her husband...the husband should not divorce his wife” (1 Cor 7:10-11).

7. Marriage constitutes “one body” or “one flesh” (Gen 2:24; Matt 19:5-6; Eph 5:28-31). Nobody wants his or her own body to be cut, wounded, or torn. It will be quite painful, harmful, and eventually fatal. At best it will leave a person handicapped. In the same way breaking the one-to-one bond of marriage will make the couple, in fact all of the immediate family, wounded—psychologically, physically, and socially. Among the worst consequences are sexually transmitted diseases, the deadly AIDS, and unwanted pregnancy.

8. The Scriptures prohibit not only adultery but also the very thought and desire of adultery (Matt 5:27). Every evil deed is the result of premeditated thought (James 1:14-15). It is, therefore, extremely important for a person to control his or her thoughts or desires. It is only by self-control and by exercising our God-given sexuality in the right way, which is God’s way, that we can live safely.

II. SEXUALITY AND THE EECMY

The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) serves the whole person, caring for the physical as well as the spiritual needs of people. Human beings are a unity, made up of body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess 5:23). It is this whole person that the church is called by God to serve.

The EECMY believes in Jesus Christ, who is her head and foundation (Eph 5:23; 1 Cor 3:11). In its constitution the EECMY declares that it accepts the word of the triune God, the three ecumenical creeds, the unaltered Augsburg confession, and Luther’s catechisms as the basis of her faith. The work of the EECMY in rela-

tion to HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) will be congruent with the biblical understanding of human sexuality described above and with the calling and confessional commitments of the church.

A. Why the EECMY deals with HIV/AIDS

The word of God says, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3:16-18).

The basis of the EECMY concern for people in physical need is God’s concern for his creation. Human beings, made by God, are a unity, comprised of body, soul, and spirit. God cares for every aspect of creation, giving rain and providing whatever is needed for human life here on earth. Jesus in his earthly ministry showed his care for people’s physical as well as eternal needs. The church, following the Lord, cares for the well-being of people in all aspects, including their physical health. For this reason the EECMY, in cooperation with mission partners from abroad, is engaged in health services, education, and other development activities beneficial to the community. This includes creating awareness of HIV/AIDS so that people can protect themselves from the virus as well as care for people who are living with the disease, their orphans, and relatives.

B. On the use of the condom

For the EECMY, sex is something given by God to human beings that must be practiced in a responsible way. Our use of the gift of sexuality can be safe and bring us joy only when it is exercised in the right way, with one partner in a lasting one-to-one commitment. Whether one uses condoms or not, sexual intercourse outside of marriage is sinful before God. Even if a man who practices sexual intercourse outside of marriage manages to protect himself from sexually transmitted diseases through the use of a condom (though the protection is not 100% reliable), he has damaged his conscience and soul by being unfaithful to his partner (even risking her very life, should he contract the disease) and to God. Therefore our church does not accept any sex outside the marriage bond, with or without condom. Sex within a one-to-one lasting commitment is the only safe sex, both for the protection of the body as well as the psyche, which are united and influence one another.

The EECMY does not deny the externally protective role that condoms may play. However our church addresses the question of sexual faithfulness and sexual purity according to the Scriptures. That does not mean the church opposes a scientific discovery (such as the condom) that enhances or protects people’s physical well-being. The church claims, however, to have a message from God that will keep those who receive it and live in it healthy and whole, physically as well as spiritually. The church’s concern is for the physical well-being as well as the spiritual well-being of people, and so it proclaims its message to that end.

The church believes that the counsel of God, with which the church is en-

trusted, can work attitudinal change. This work is necessary, because, as long as people's attitudes and behaviors are not changed, condoms cannot give a secure and lasting solution to the risk of HIV/AIDS, neither in the life of an individual nor in the society.

The condom is like the fig leaves that Adam and Eve sewed to cover themselves when they found themselves naked after their disobedience (Gen 3:7). They used their best wisdom to cover their nakedness. Their remedy was useful, but insufficient. Character and relational problems are best rectified by following the Creator God and his counsel. God made a lasting and enduring garment for them by shedding the blood of an animal (Gen 3:21). Therefore, the EECMY promotes and teaches the lasting solution for the problem of AIDS and STD, which is the character change brought about by turning to the ways of the Creator. On the basis of the word of God, the church teaches the requirement of an absolute one-to-one sexual fidelity.

C. On premarital sex

As we have seen earlier, children are under the care of their parents until they reach the age of maturity. According to Scripture one can only engage in sexual intercourse after the age of maturity and only in a lifelong one-to-one relationship. Therefore the EECMY cannot approve premarital sex.

The advice given by the elderly Paul to the young Timothy indicates a scriptural perspective on Christian character and premarital sex. Timothy was advised, "Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity" (1 Tim 5:1-2). Again, "Shun youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart" (2 Tim 2:22). Therefore our church teaches young boys and girls to keep themselves sexually pure before marriage for their own benefit.

It should be stressed that keeping oneself sexually pure before marriage is a gain and not a loss. The law is given by God for one's advantage and not disadvantage in view of the psychological agony of broken relationships and the many sexually transmitted diseases, especially the deadly HIV/AIDS. God is not against our use or enjoyment of sex. However he wants all his people to use sex in a proper way, i.e., in a way that will not bring harm to them. Enjoyment is not enjoyment in the wrong context. It will be like a foolish man climbing up a falling tree near a lake to eat the honey hanging over the water. As he climbs up, the tree bends down into the lake because of the weight and the man loses his life, either by drowning or being eaten by crocodiles. He should have counted the cost of the honey. The consequences of premarital sex are similar. The remedy is the one-to-one lasting commitment of opposite sexes that is marriage.

D. On the one-to-one relationship

The EECMY fully supports and teaches the one-to-one relationship that is

supported by the Scriptures. The agreement to live in such a relationship should be made officially before God and his people. After the marriage vow is made before God and his people, it should be kept until death. This is the safest, surest, and God-approved way to keep individuals, families, and the community at large from HIV/AIDS and STDs. Such a family will produce healthy children who will then be good citizens when they grow.

III. PASTORAL CARE FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV/AIDS AND THEIR FAMILIES

In the exercise of pastoral care, the church takes the role of the good shepherd caring for the flock. The flock are people who are in any need of help, care, and attention, physically as well as psychologically. In the process of counseling it is important for the caregiver to listen to the patient and create an atmosphere where he or she can express himself or herself freely. Thus, it is very important to win the trust of the people whom we want to counsel—a process that will take time and patience.

AIDS is a disease for which no cure has been found. In Africa, AIDS is transmitted primarily through sexual intercourse with a person who is infected by the HIV virus. The pastor or counselor has to help the patient come to terms with having a terminal illness, understanding the patient's psychological, biological, and social needs.

People living with HIV/AIDS will often respond initially with disbelief, fear, and agitation. The counselor must provide practical and emotional support. Later, when the patient starts to adjust to the new situation, he or she might be filled with anger, depression, guilt, or anxiety. Sometimes he or she might withdraw from work, family, and home. At this point it is important to encourage the involvement of family and friends. Eventually, the patient can reach a stage of acceptance of the situation. Pastoral contacts should be strengthened and continued. Discussions from the Bible and prayers can be part of the care. The final stage, for people without life-prolonging medications, is preparation for death. Patients could have feelings of abandonment, isolation, and pain. It is important to talk to the patient and be alert to unfinished tasks and things they may need to make straight in their own lives and family.

The counselor should understand that from the view of God's forgiveness in the gospel, people living with HIV/AIDS are no different from any other person. In God's sight, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are in need of forgiveness. Some may have contracted the disease through their own sin or carelessness; others may have been innocent victims. The pastor will reach out to each appropriately in the name of Jesus. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to this world to help and save people exactly with such needs. "Those who are well have no need of a physician," he said, "but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Matt 9:12-13).

Therefore, whether HIV/AIDS has come into one's life by improper sexual relations or otherwise, it must be made clear that Jesus is very near to such people. The counselor can assure the patient and tell the truth of God's acceptance through Jesus Christ. In short, God loves the patient.

The second area of counseling is in regard to the necessary external precautions. First, of course, the person has to admit that he or she has the virus or the disease. Pre-test and post-test counseling can help towards this end. Once the diagnosis is accepted, the patient must learn the necessary precautions to avoid transmitting the disease to his or her sexual partner and other people.

The third area for counseling involves the immediate family and relatives of the patient. They need to know that the disease is not transmitted by normal contacts, but only through sexual contact or the exchange of blood. This kind of counseling needs to be extended to the neighborhood and the community at large.

The pastor can tell clients that they are in God's hand, that God knows their past, present, and future. The pastor can also tell them that they are the focus of God's love in Jesus Christ, regardless of past wrongs or past experiences of abuse and exploitation. The pastor can also encourage the client to accept the situation and trust in God.

IV. HOME-BASED CARE

Since sick people often stay with their families or relatives, it is important for us to know why and how we should care for the sick with us. We care for the sick, of course, because they are our relatives, because they are created in the image of God, and because God calls us to provide for those in need.

There are models already available of how to care for sick people without ourselves being infected. For example, a tuberculosis patient is cared for by isolating him or her and the utensils they use. A patient who is sick with jaundice is also cared for with good hygiene so that no transmission of the disease occurs. With simple precautions, HIV/AIDS is less contagious than many communicable diseases. Therefore, families, close relatives, and communities have no reason to panic.

Caring for the destitute, the poor, and the sick has been the primary way of expressing and living Christian love by Christian communities throughout the centuries. This extends not only to the care of the sick but also to the widows and orphans. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27). Therefore, it is very important for all of us to care for orphans who have lost their parents because of HIV/AIDS by giving them shelter, food, clothing, and the necessities of life. Likewise, widows who have lost their husbands or men who have lost their wives should be comforted and helped in all their needs.

At home, people with HIV/AIDS should be treated like any other patient with a terminal illness, such as cancer. They should be approached in love and given all

the services they need, while exercising proper care to avoid the kinds of contact that make possible the transmission of the HIV virus. Scripture praises those who care for the sick and the destitute. Our Lord speaks the final word when he says, “Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, *I was sick and you took care of me...*” (Matt 25:34-36). ⊕