

# Love Without the Small Print

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This article is about what Christian love looks like in our daily living.

Love should be without any small print. There should be no terms and conditions which give us an excuse not to love others.

More specifically, this article is about is how we, as Christadelphians, should treat LGBTQ+ people – brothers and sisters inside of our faith community and those whom we meet in our daily lives.

Before we get going, I'd like to make some house-keeping points. Firstly, this article is not about the Bible's perspective on the rights or wrongs of same-sex marriages, LGBTQ+ relationships and matters of gender. That's not a discussion that will be dealt with here.

Secondly, it's important to note that an individual identifying as lesbian, gay or bisexual does not mean that they are actually in a same-sex relationship – just as identifying as straight (heterosexual) does not automatically mean that a person is in a sexual relationship. This might seem an obvious point, but it's something that I've noticed causes confusion in discussion with brothers and sisters.

Thirdly, I use the term LGBTQ+ in this article, acknowledging that, for some, this is politically charged jargon, but it's an acronym that is commonly understood. I also use the term "queer" as it no longer has the negative connotations that it once had, especially in North America; it's now a useful catch-all word for anyone who does not conform to heterosexual norms in terms of sexuality or gender identity.

And now, I'd like to share with you why this topic is so important to me personally. For me, homosexuality is not just an issue which the church needs to take a stance on, and adopt into its doctrinal statements. It's not just an intellectual activity, a problem to be solved. It's about people. People to be loved.

## My Story

From a young age I experienced same sex attraction. It filled me with shame and pain. I had no-one to talk to due to the very real threat of rejection. Growing up in the UK in the 70s, 80s and 90s, it was illegal to discuss or promote homosexuality in schools due to Section 28 brought in by Margaret Thatcher's conservative government. In school, I only ever heard the term "gay" used as an insult and I certainly had never heard of "bisexuality" – the possibility of being attracted to both men and women. Consequently, I never heard any teachers or even my peers discussing sexuality in a sympathetic way. It was a taboo subject. My feelings of fear and shame were compounded.

Factor Christadelphianism into the mix, and the result is a girl, a woman, who can never be authentic without fear of rejection. Additionally, as a teenager, I was certain that homosexual acts were sinful – because the Bible told me so. I didn't ever believe that it was more sinful than being greedy, gossiping, lying, being angry etc. because it showed up in the same lists as these *works of the flesh*,<sup>1</sup> so I didn't believe it was sinful to have same sex attraction, just to act on it.

Science shows that for someone who is truly LGBTQ+, sexual orientation is not a choice but a matter of biology.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, I prayed desperately that God would take these same-sex feelings away, and I had a string of boyfriends in the hope that I might fall in love with someone of the "right" gender. After all, for a bi-sexual, this is possible.

Whilst in the middle of these agonising struggles, all I ever heard at church about sexuality was that gay sex acts were sinful, and people ruing that UK laws were changing to protect the queer community. I even came across brothers and sisters who conflated acts with feelings, and who believed that God "hates people" who are queer. This is an unscriptural and dangerous belief. Indeed, if temptation itself is sin then we're all doomed – it would make the Lord Jesus himself a sinner! Nonetheless, I cannot remember anyone apart from me ever calling that out in discussions.

I never ever heard anyone offer support for those struggling with same-sex attraction, or advise us where we could get help. In fact, there was never even an acknowledgement that up to

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 6, Romans 1

<sup>2</sup> *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why: The Science of Sexual Orientation*, Simon LeVay, 2016

10% of our Christadelphian Community is likely to be queer, or that many have already left due to a lack of compassion and understanding.

I know brothers and young people who have left our community because they're gay and received no support. I've heard of others who have committed suicide because they are gay and couldn't cope with having to hide and struggle alone in our Christadelphian community.

In my 20s, I had phone calls from close friends – brothers who were well known speakers and trusted and respected by ecclesial members – but who were gay and felt forced to hide this. They cried on the phone to me, fearing rejection, judgement, and shunning from our community, just because they were gay. They had chosen celibacy, but they knew that this would not protect them from prejudice. Their mental health was damaged due to a lack of Christ-like compassion.

What about me? I feared rejection. I believed that love in our community was conditional. It had small print: terms and conditions which might prove unfavourable. If people knew the true me, I'd be labelled, marginalised and rejected. I could not talk to my family. They assumed I was straight. I could not talk to friends or brothers and sisters at my ecclesia. All I heard from most was the condemnation of the “gay agenda” and the despising of “promiscuous” homosexuals. I was too ashamed to even speak with those whom I knew were loving. The risk was too great.

Due to a combination of factors, in 1995 I became anxious and was finally diagnosed with clinical depression. The pain of being hidden in my faith community was too great. I didn't think I could ever fit the Christadelphian mould. I wasn't eating. I wasn't sleeping. I couldn't concentrate. Eventually, I was so emotionally crippled that I couldn't get out of bed. I didn't want to kill myself, but I needed the pain to stop. I took an overdose and ended up in hospital having my stomach pumped.

*This was me at 24 years of age.* I was a breath away from death partly because of our community's lack of honest, compassionate conversation on matters of sexuality and gender, combined with my own lack of understanding.

Thankfully, God was with me. I've now been married for 22 years to a wonderful man who supports me 100%. We have two fantastic children and our family is safely cocooned in love. Love without the small print. I have found peace by the lived experience of these words from our Lord:

*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt 11:28-30)*

What I've learned from Jesus is what love without the small print looks like. I might never achieve it, but I know what it looks like.

## Enter Jesus

Jesus spent much of his time with people who were not yet his followers – yet he rarely took a stand on law, but on love. He usually began relationships with love and always showed acceptance, especially towards those rejected by the religious elite.

I'd like to look at two people in the gospels who show us exactly how Jesus loved without terms and conditions: namely, Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman at the well. This in turn will give us a clear understanding of how we should treat our queer siblings in Christ.

## Zacchaeus

We're told in Luke that Zacchaeus was *a chief tax collector and was rich*.<sup>3</sup> In the first century, tax collectors were viewed as traitors, political collaborators with Rome and beyond the pale of redemption. And Zacchaeus was not just any old tax collector – but a chief tax collector. The worst of the worst.

The first century Jews must have felt that they were taxed for the very air that they breathed. There were three types of taxes which were required by the Romans who ruled Israel during the time of Jesus: the land tax, the head tax (which was a tax just for being alive!) and the customs tax system. The taxes were used to pay tribute to Rome, which had conquered Israel in 63BC, so the taxes didn't pay for roads, education or health as our taxes might sometimes do today. The taxes simply paid for Roman oppression to continue.

The tax collector, then, was the very symbol of Israel's subjection to foreign domination.<sup>4</sup> One thing was certain in the first century Jewish mind: there would be no tax collectors in the kingdom of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 19:2

<sup>4</sup> *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, Edersheim, p26, ntslibrary.com; for more on tax collectors, see ch4

The teaching of the Jewish Rabbis confirmed this: the Babylonian Talmud placed tax collectors alongside murderers and robbers;<sup>5</sup> the rabbis taught that tax collectors were disqualified witnesses in court, societal outcasts, and utter disgraces to their own family;<sup>6</sup> the rabbis excommunicated tax collectors from the synagogue;<sup>7</sup> tax collectors weren't allowed to exchange their money at the Temple treasury;<sup>8</sup> and the rabbis even considered it lawful to lie in almost any conceivable way to avoid paying tax collectors.<sup>9</sup>

The rabbis considered tax collectors to be religiously unclean, and their houses and any house they entered were thus considered unclean. The hated tax collectors were often put in the same category as sinners and prostitutes. This then would be how the community in Jericho viewed Zacchaeus. Quite simply he was damned.

The clues in the text – that Zacchaeus was both (a) rich, and (b) promised to return anything he might have taken unlawfully from others – indicate that he was an extortioner. Taking the property or wealth of others by extortion was firmly condemned in the Law of Moses,<sup>10</sup> and we are clearly told by Paul that extortioners will not inherit the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> Jesus himself has a very hard line on extortioners, condemning the Pharisees for their extortion and excess.<sup>12</sup>

But it wasn't Jesus' "stance on extortion" that led to Zacchaeus' repentance. It was Zacchaeus' encounter with the otherworldly love of Christ – love without the small print – that pushed repentance out the other side.

In outrageously inviting himself to Zacchaeus' home (which would have made him unclean) Jesus redirects the crowd's anger from Zacchaeus to himself.<sup>13</sup> Jesus is prepared to become

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<sup>5</sup> Baba Qama 113a; Nedarim 3.4

<sup>6</sup> Sanhedrin, 25b

<sup>7</sup> Nedarim 3.4

<sup>8</sup> Baba Qamma 10.1

<sup>9</sup> Nedarim 27, 28a

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 6:1-7

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:10, KJV

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 23:25, KJV

<sup>13</sup> Luke 19:7

unclean in the eyes of the community in order to reach out to Zacchaeus. This costly love changes Zacchaeus' life. Kenneth Bailey puts it like this:

*The community shuts Zacchaeus out when he wants to see Jesus. But at the dramatic climax of the story, Jesus shifts the crowd's hostility against Zacchaeus to himself. Zacchaeus is the recipient of a costly demonstration of unexpected love... Jesus extends costly grace to the oppressor (Zacchaeus). He neither endorses the oppression nor ostracizes the oppressor. Instead he loves him... no-one tells Zacchaeus what he must do. [He simply] responds to the courageous man who has "crossed the picket line," entered his house as his guest for the night and by doing so has taken on the hostility of an entire town... Zacchaeus receives costly love and is thereby empowered and motivated to offer costly love to others.<sup>14</sup>*

Jesus never had to tell Zacchaeus where he stood on the issue of tax collecting or the "Roman agenda". In fact, Jesus does not even require Zacchaeus to quit his profession. Jesus simply showed Zacchaeus radical love and acceptance – *before* Zacchaeus had even had a chance to respond.

For avoidance of doubt, I'm not comparing LGBTQ+ people with the sin of extortion. The comparison here is just to show how the Lord Jesus treated the outcasts of his day, the people who were believed to be unsaveable. For some in our faith community, LGBTQ+ people are unsaveable. This is the only point of the comparison.

## The Samaritan Woman at the Well

In John 4, Jesus further displays this same radical love and acceptance – love without the small print – to a Samaritan Woman at the well in Sychar. Again, the fact that Jesus speaks to an unknown woman, alone and in public, is not what any self-respecting Rabbi would do and his disciples are shocked by his behaviour.<sup>15</sup> But more than this, the woman is also a hated Samaritan!

It's important that we truly appreciate how deep this animosity between the Jews and Samaritans actually was. It wasn't friendly rivalry; it was a deep seated hatred.

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<sup>14</sup> *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth E. Bailey, p.180-182, 2008

<sup>15</sup> John 4:27

The major issue between Jews and Samaritans has always been the location of the chosen place to worship God: the temple mount of Moriah in Jerusalem according to Judaism, or Mount Gerizim according to Samaritanism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the woman herself brings this up in her conversation with Jesus.<sup>17</sup>

Differences in religious views had led to a strong divide between these two peoples; the Gospel writer notes:

*The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans). (John 4:9)*

The woman herself is shocked that Jesus is talking to her and that he asks her for a drink. She would be well aware of the history between their nations, and how the Jews viewed the Samaritans. The Mishna declares, *He that eats the bread of the Samaritans is like to one that eats the flesh of swine.*<sup>18</sup> At the time of Jesus the bitterness between Jews and Samaritans was intensified by the Samaritans having defiled the temple during a passover just a few years earlier by scattering human bones in the temple court.<sup>19</sup> The Samaritans were publicly cursed in the synagogues; and a petition was daily offered up praying God that the Samaritans might not be partakers of eternal life.<sup>20</sup>

And here was a Rabbi, of all people, who was travelling south, through Samaria, on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem. This was not standard practice. Pious Jews would do a detour so as not to travel through Samaria else they'd be defiled.

Here was a Rabbi who had deliberately sent his disciples into a Samaritan town to buy bread even though the Mishna said that this was like eating the flesh of swine!

Here was a Rabbi who knew that there was daily prayer offered in every synagogue petitioning God that the Samaritans would not be saved! Yet, he was offering this Samaritan

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<sup>16</sup> *Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition*, Lisbeth S. Fried, 2014

<sup>17</sup> John 4:20

<sup>18</sup> Mishna Shebiith 8:10, Danby, 49

<sup>19</sup> *Antiquities*, Josephus, 18:30

<sup>20</sup> Oesterley, 162

woman the very eternal life that his fellow Jews would deny her<sup>21</sup> and chooses her as the first person to whom he intentionally reveals himself as the Messiah!<sup>22</sup>

Like Zacchaeus, the woman is moved by Jesus' radical acceptance and costly love. Jesus tells the woman that he can give her water which wells up to eternal life. The woman, misinterpreting Jesus' words, asks for this miraculous water, hoping she'd never be thirsty again and get her off the onerous chore of well duty! Jesus asks her to go and get her husband, ostensibly so that he can share the water with both of them. The following conversation ensues:

*"I have no husband," she replied.*

*Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." (John 4:17-18)*

Is Jesus criticising the woman for her shocking track record with men? I don't think so. We need to understand that a woman in this culture would not have been in the position to divorce her husband. James McGrath notes:

*Unless Samaritan law was very different from Jewish law, and their culture likewise radically different, there is no possibility that this meant that the woman had divorced five men. Women could not initiate divorce in Judaism, and in this patriarchal cultural context, a woman who divorced a couple of husbands would not be likely to be taken as the wife of yet another. Are we to imagine either that several husbands have divorced the woman, or more plausibly, that the woman has been widowed multiple times? ...a serial widow may struggle to remarry – a man might fear that some curse or demon was associated with her, and that his own life would be at risk if they wed. Such beliefs would of course leave the woman in a more vulnerable position, though she might still become a concubine. It must be pointed out as well that neither divorce, remarriage, nor concubinage were considered immoral in this time period, and so the widespread slandering of the Samaritan woman from the story, so popular in sermons, is inappropriate.<sup>23</sup>*

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<sup>21</sup> John 4:10-14

<sup>22</sup> John 4:25-26

<sup>23</sup> *Woman at the Well*, James F. McGrath, bibleodyssey.org



Whatever the woman's story, she was vulnerable, and may have been viewed as cursed by those who lived in Sychar. It seems that, just as Zacchaeus was an outcast, so was she. In telling the woman that he knows all about her and still chooses to invite her to follow him, Jesus is showing the woman his radical acceptance and love.

Jesus chooses her and appoints her as his witness, to go and tell her community about the Lord. This she does joyfully:

*Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I ever did' (John 4:39).*

## Love without the small print

From these two examples it's easy to see what it means to love like Jesus and how he treats social outcasts. The similarities between Zacchaeus and the Samaritan Woman are powerful:

1. They are both shunned and ostracised by their communities;
2. The Jewish religious elite of the day believed that neither of them would be saved by God;
3. Jesus' acceptance of them demonstrates that tax collectors and Samaritans alike are invited to his kingdom – without the need to stop being a tax collector or the impossibility of changing one's race;
4. Jesus takes their shame and redirects it to himself;
5. Due to their embracing of him, Jesus confirms their salvation;
6. Jesus restores both of them to good standing in their communities – and in the eyes of his disciples.

## So what?

What does this have to do with us and how we treat LGBTQ+ people?

We've considered how Jesus approached people whom his religious community considered to be sinners. The fact is that religious people today treat people with same-sex attraction in the same way that ancient religious people treated tax collectors and Samaritans. Therefore, Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus and the Samaritan Woman should inform and challenge our approach to queer people – or indeed anyone whom our Christadelphian community believes God will not save.

As Preston Sprinkle notes:

*Our “stand” against homosexuality has been perceived as a stand not against sin but against humanity. Jesus – the biblical Jesus – took a stand. But it was a stand on love.*

*If... you truly desire to follow Jesus, you should have more LGBT friends and not less... If Jesus could dine with a person like Zacchaeus, then certainly you could bring yourself to enter into a humanity-affirming relationship with [queer] people. A relationship without footnotes.*

*A loving friendship that doesn't begin with “where you stand” on the issue of homosexuality, since Jesus didn't take this approach. Take a stand – yes. But take a stand on love. That radical, countercultural grace that drew sinners and tax collectors to Jesus.<sup>24</sup>*

This is the challenge to our Christadelphian Community. We need to love without the small print as Jesus did, because we have queer brothers, sisters, young people and friends who are going through the same experiences as I did over 25 years ago.

The fear of rejection is very real. The damage to mental health ending in attempted suicide is very real. It's still happening. We can stop this and make our ecclesias the safe places that they should be. But only if we choose to love as Jesus loved.

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<sup>24</sup> *People to Be Loved*, Preston M. Sprinkle, p. 73 80. Kindle Edition.