

Why Christians Should Extend Grace and so not Support the “Promotion of Proper human sexual rights and Ghanaian family values” Bill

Today is Sunday, the day of my birth, and importantly, the day most Christians set aside to worship God in community. So, this is a good day to reflect on Christian community.

Religious Communities and Grace

Religious communities are sites where we express God’s call for us to love our neighbors, especially the marginalized among us, as Jesus illustrated so clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan (among others; see Luke 10: 25-37). In that parable Jesus responds to a moral question by a lawyer, *"And who is my neighbor?"* The conclusion is that the neighbor is not necessarily the one who shares ethnicity or creed with you, but the one who shows mercy towards another human being. Indeed, the one who showed mercy in that story was not (as one might have hoped or expected) the religious leaders, but rather the hated ethnic outsider, the Samaritan. We see similar grace extended by Jesus to the woman caught in adultery—here too the religious lawyers of the day were the ones who came forward with a moral issue. The woman so caught, but with no sign of the man she was “caught” committing adultery with, is thrown before Jesus as he teaches in the temple (John 8: 1-11). One may ask, how could the woman have been “caught” if she was alone? These religious leaders brought a woman to the most holy place to shame her in front of a crowd and elicit her stoning, while hopefully also catching Jesus committing a religious faux pas. We are told, “they were trying to trap him into saying something they could use against him.” (John 8:6) Jesus silenced them when he asked that the one without sin could carry out the stoning.

Sadly, many of our religious communities have lost their ability, or is it their willingness, to be their brothers and sisters’ keepers and to do unto others as we would have others do unto us. Taken from Jesus’s sermon on the mount, this concept is commonly referred to as the “Golden Rule.” Jesus said, *"so in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets"* (Matthew 7:12) and *"do to others as you would have them do to you"* (Luke 6:31). If we are to express God’s love and live justly in this world, we need to express this love for others in ways that they can feel. And this is why Christians should reject the “Promotion of Proper human sexual rights and Ghanaian family values” Bill (hereafter, “the Bill”). I refer to Christians because the lead promoters of the Bill claim to be an “amalgamation of Christian and para-Christian bodies”.

Thankfully several groups and individuals (Including NETRIGHT, of which I am a member) have submitted memoranda to parliament that outline in detail, the legal flaws with the Bill; its inherent contradictions; the human rights violations and dangers it poses to *all* Ghanaians irrespective of their biological make up, sexual orientation, sexual preference, gender identities, and their faith; and the high level of ignorance about the distinctions among LGBTQIA persons. For example, an asexual person is someone who doesn’t experience sexual attraction and/or doesn’t desire sexual contact—what sexual behaviour could possibly be of concern here? The issue of being intersex is also woefully misunderstood scientifically. We need only read the sad story of the South African athlete [Caster Semenya to understand how someone can be destroyed through flawed medical intervention](#). The groups that have criticized the Bill include Christians so let it not be said that those against the Bill are all “non-believers”. The responses to the Bill alert us to the fact that, if you think this is not your problem because you are not gay, queer, intersex, trans-gender (etc.) the Bill is also dangerous for “straight” Ghanaian Christians and other religious people. And it is because the Bill purports to come from a place of faith-based concerns, that I cannot be silent as a Christian. To fairly respond to this piece, you will need to 1) read the draft bill; and 2) read my piece to the very end. And please also follow the additional embedded links for further reading. You may still end up disagreeing with me, but hopefully you will understand where I am coming from, pause and ask yourself, “what would Jesus *really* do? And what kinds of actions would truly resonate with the spirit of Christ”?

The Bill claims that its object is “to provide for proper human sexual rights and Ghanaian family values...” and yet it is filled with clauses that criminalize a variety of identities, private actions and human interactions, and goes so far as to expect citizens to report each other on the mere suspicion of being LGBTQIA—at the risk of imprisonment. Even though the drivers of the Bill say they are motivated by concern and a desire to “correct” what are deemed to be abnormal sexualities and identities, 34 out of its 36 pages are devoted to criminalizing peoples’ identities and behaviours, while only 2 pages reflect on how to “assist” people who are gay, transgender, intersex or pansexual. I am persuaded that the Bill is not based on love or concern for our neighbours, but on anxieties and even hatred. When I read the Bill, I cannot find grace or compassion. What I find is judgement, and condemnation. The language and focus of the Bill displays a determination to exclude from society those the framers of the Bill cannot understand and disapprove of. Anecdotal evidence shows that individuals and groups who have submitted memoranda or spoken to the media against the Bill have been subjected to threats and insults. Surely this is not the way of Christ!

In Christian theology one of the most grievous sins is the sin of pride—the same one that caused Satan’s rebellion against God (Isaiah 14:12-15). Interestingly, both John the Baptist and Jesus reserved their harshest condemnation for the religious people, Pharisees, teachers of the law, Scribes, who, filled with pride, saw themselves as more holy than others, sitting in judgement over them—and yet would not extend grace to those they felt were in error. In Matthew 23: 4 Jesus condemned the scribes and Pharisees who “tie up heavy loads [that are hard to bear] and place them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves will not lift a finger [to make them lighter].” John even referred to them as a brood of vipers (Mathew 12:34). And in Luke 11:42 Jesus called down “woe” upon them: *“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone”*. The Pharisees were so diligent in Jewish practice that they even tithed spices. They also resented Jesus extending mercy to heal the sick on the sabbath, for that was breaking the law. Their theology was to be legalistic and catch people in sin, and yet mercy to support a brother or sister was absent.

Two main threads run through the Christian Bible from Genesis to Revelations. The first is the sinful (i.e., human) state of all of us, that could only be redeemed through the ultimate act of grace and not the works of us humans. To wit, *“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23) and *“for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast”* (Ephesians 2: 8-9). The second thread is the love and grace of God. Humility enables us to accept say, “there, but for the grace of God, go I”. Pride makes us measure others against ourselves because we basically see ourselves as more righteous than them. We then develop a hierarchy of sins, become the gatekeepers of morality, develop a list of moral laws, and ultimately, we become the ones who determine who will receive the grace of God—the grace that God extends *for free to all*.

Using the Law to legislate Morality: Tangle with Hypocrisy

Over four decades ago, an agnostic friend of mine became a Christian, and his changed life so impressed me that I researched and studied and one day I found I had enough evidence to convince me of the truth of the gospel message. Like the Christian intellectual C.S Lewis, very reluctantly, in Christian parlance, I “gave my life to Christ”. I was a reluctant convert for several reasons, a significant one being that I perceived Christians to be very hypocritical. This hypocrisy often centered around matters that were sexual in nature—a condemnation, for example, of “pre-marital sex” often evidenced by a young woman’s pregnancy, but a failure to call out married men for their extra marital affairs or “big men” for corruption.

Over the last several years these issues of hypocrisy have loomed large: so-called Christians have been silent when Christian leaders have sexually abused young women (and men) in the church; many are silent as brazen corruption among political, civic and religious leaders takes place; and as for issues such as

women dying in child birth due to poor access to medical services; the murder of women for being alleged witches; the rape of children; the pollution of our water bodies through poor mining whether by galamsey or large mining concessions; the destruction of our forests; unemployment and frustration of the youth—the silences have been loud. And yet law makers who could have attended to these issues are so passionate about so-called LGBTQIA+ issues that they have become guardians of our morality and in record time they have whipped up a bill so that we can criminalize other human beings for their sexual and gender identities.

Clause 1 of the Bill says that every Ghanaian should promote and protect the “proper human sexual rights and Ghanaian family values”. The Bill goes further to include the Executive, Judiciary, Legislature, the media and creative arts industry among those responsible for ensuring this education. While there are universal standards of good citizenship that the state and society can help inculcate, it would be dangerous for the state to tell all citizens which “Ghanaian” values are legitimate. As a Christian I believe that it is my duty to “train up my children in the way they should go”; and so, as I watch the state of political leadership in our nation, I shudder to hand over the role of determining moral standards to our lawmakers. Is it a Ghanaian family value to abandon children to the streets? If not, why are there so many street children with no sign of state or church intervention? Is it a Ghanaian family value for men to have affairs outside marriage with such latitude that it can be a source of jokes in public meetings? Is it a Ghanaian family value to leave orphans, the elderly, the physically and intellectually “disabled” without safety nets? Take the simple act of driving—every time I venture out on to our streets, I am in danger of being killed by “big men” in their big cars, defying every traffic rule, sometimes as they speak on their cell phones, with their children in their cars. What kind of Ghanaian family value are they passing on, I wonder? Sadly, it is difficult for me to discern what our values and morals as a nation are these days, and the focus on some issues to the exclusion of others makes the level of hypocrisy deeply saddening.

While as a society we need laws to protect people from being harmed by their fellow citizens, seeking to legislate morality or decency is a very dangerous and slippery slope to travel. Whose morals become the benchmark, and who becomes the judge? While we are surely called upon to evaluate *behaviours*, there is a difference between evaluating and judging. In Matthew 7: 1-3 Jesus says, “*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?*” The danger in passing judgment on others is that whether we are dealing with sinful behaviour or just behaviour that is different from our own standard, we almost never use the proper standard of judgment. When we condemn (or by this Bill, criminalize) someone’s behavior, we pass judgment according to our own strengths and opinions. We end up trying to remove the speck from our brother’s eye while we have a big log hanging out of our own eye. Perhaps I “only” struggle with anger management and see LGBTQIA+ issues as the ultimate sin. Yet, if I have never struggled with gender identity what right do I have to condemn someone who believes they are a different gender from the one assigned them at birth? Until we have walked a mile in someone’s shoes to understand where they pinch or how they fit, until we view others in all their unique but flawed humanity, trying to “fix” them (more so with a prison sentence) is not only lacking in love, but it is also futile. If anyone truly needs “fixing” in any way, Christian doctrine teaches us that only God can do this. For us to try to do so by way of forced “conversion” or other therapies is an ultimate act of pride, for only God can convert anyone. It is also a cruel treatment with some research showing a high rate of both “relapse” but also suicide among LGB people who have undergone this. Also read here a story from India. If we truly believe that we were all made in the image of God, can we not trust that the same omnipotent and sovereign God will not waste the investment made in our redemption through the death of the son of God, Jesus Christ, and perform any “fixing” that may be necessary?

To be clear from a Christian perspective, I am not saying that sin is relative. But when God judges a person, that judgment flows out of God's omniscience. God's judgment is perfectly just because God knows ALL things. When God evaluates a person, he takes into account *everything* about that person including their:

- biology
- sinful tendencies
- weaknesses
- family history
- current struggles
- and a thousand other factors in their life.

Your judgment and mine are terribly skewed because we have limited, imperfect knowledge. And how sad that we should seek to turn our judgements into law that criminalises others as the Bill does. There is a difference between what I do to someone that affects their wellbeing and safety—say, if I rob them—and whether a man decides to dress like a woman, or two women decide to show affection for each other (both of which the Bill criminalizes). Further, the God of the Bible also extends to humans free will. We are left with the freedom to decide how we will live. Christian ethics call people to ideas of freedom that are not about the absence of restraint, but the ability to live justly. In the book of Galatians, the apostle Paul, after an extended treatise on liberation, concludes “serve one another humbly in love” (Galatians 5:13). We have obligations to each other, even those people whose lives and beliefs may be at odds with our standards and personal preferences—these differences must be set aside for the purpose of loving our neighbour.

It has been noted by some that the LGBTQIA+ community has an agenda. We all have agendas. The Environmental movement, the digital industry, the Far Right, the Far Left, White supremacists, the pharmaceutical industry, the mining sector, the Pro-life movement, the Pro-Choice movement, the followers of Mohammed, the followers of Jesus, etc—we all have an agenda. However, we would not condone singling out an environmental activist for being an environmental activist. We would, however, arrest them immediately if they blew up or attempted to blow up a coal mine. The same can be said of any adherent of any of the other movements. If the Environmental (or any other movement) had some sinister plans to deprive people of their wellbeing to force their agenda, we should deal with that movement and its leaders.

Where is Christ in The Bill?

Before anyone takes a position on the Bill, they must read it. The Ghanaian constitution assures everyone that they are deserving of the right to life with all that it has to offer, including the freedom of beliefs and association. This Bill seeks to take those rights directly away from selected people, and indirectly from others who refuse to report them or who advocate on their behalf. We may not agree with someone's lifestyle choices and beliefs, but we have no right, as Christians, to take away their humanity and send them to prison for those choices and beliefs. One of our Christian denominations tweeted that “support for this bill should not be seen as a promotion of hate towards LGBTQ+ persons, but against their immoral activities. This is why the bill also offer reformatory measures for persons with such disorders” and “God loves the sinner but hates the sin”. So, if we are dealing with sin, why don't we have a Bill to criminalize lying, cheating, stealing, fornication, adultery, pride, anger, jealousy etc. and offer ways to reform those who practice these? Let us be reminded that Jesus warned that hatred was equivalent to murder (1 John3:15). The only difference is that hate cannot be seen until expressed. And if the church knows that God loves the sinner, and Jesus is the answer, why send them to jail? Do we really expect the sinner to believe this? Maya Angelou, the famous African American author famously said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” In the last several weeks, many young people have told me that they have been made to feel that they are not welcome in the church, that the Christian God we serve does not care about them. The church, indeed, the world, is a place for flawed human beings. Jesus came to save sinners and not the righteous.

The Bill criminalizes people for who they are, how they dress, who they love, who they have sexual relations with, who they express affection for in public, who they associate with, who they advocate for, what information they share, and their failure to report people who are considered to have fallen foul of the Bill. The penalty for committing any of the above crimes is a fine or prison sentence, ranging up to 10 years. Clause 1 targets a long list of people, including those with issues from birth, and allies of the LGBTQIA+ persons. Ultimately the Bill potentially criminalizes all Ghanaians, because if I fail to report my family member, colleague, or student for any of the offences, I too become a criminal. Clause 5 provides a duty to report an offender if the offence is committed in your presence. When I read scripture, I can find no evidence that we are to go fishing for sins and reporting these for civil censure. A few more examples should suffice:

Clause 10 2(a) refers to gross indecency, namely, a public showing of amorous relations between people of the same sex—would that include two girls hugging or two men walking hand in hand, both common in Ghana? Who will decide what is amorous?

Clause 10 2(c) refers to “intentional cross dressing to portray that the person is of a different gender than the one assigned at birth with an intent to engage in an act prohibited under this Act”. Ghanaians must now become judges not only of peoples’ actions but also of their intentions. As some have asked, will our favorite concert party artists be guilty? What about if I, a woman, wear a suit and tie? Why does anyone care how people dress and why?

The Just shall live by Faith

The full verse reads, “But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident, for “the just shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11). As a Christian, I firmly believe that God gave us a free will and everyone should come to their own convictions as I did. Forced convictions are not convictions at all and they are not sustainable. Jesus did not force anyone to a place of belief, and neither should we. The gospel message is one of love—calling people into the fold, not beating them into submission. Christians believe that we achieve this through sharing the gospel, letting our lights shine, and prayer. Afterall, it is only with conviction that we can live by what we can prescribe—it is impossible for anyone to live using the fuel of another’s faith. Nowhere in scripture do we see Jesus asking us to go hunting for alleged sins in people’s lives and bringing them out for shame and condemnation. God expects us, by our lives, to attract people to our faith. We are to be light and salt (Matthew 5:14). Furthermore, we may wish to remind ourselves of Paul’s injunction about looking out for the weaker brother and sister (see Romans 14).

Let me end with a famous quote by Martin Niemöller (1892–1984). He was a prominent Lutheran pastor in Germany who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. He is perhaps best remembered for his words after WW2:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out— because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me”.

The quotation and its variants express Niemöller’s belief that Germans had been complicit through their silence in the Nazi imprisonment, persecution, and murder of millions of people. He felt this to be especially true of the leaders of the Protestant churches.

I am sure pastor Niemöller would add, today, “Then they came for the LGBTQIA+ people, and I did not speak out because I was not one.” Some will argue that there is a difference. Let me remind you that some Christians believe that socialism is ungodly or demonic, and some believe the Jews are evil for crucifying Christ. Niemöller exhorted us to look out and stand up for people irrespective of differences in belief—due to their humanity.

I hope Christians, especially Christian leaders truly motivated by love, will speak out about the inhumanity and un-Christlikeness of this Bill and extend grace to all. Let us hold discussions to understand what the real issues are; let us be kind to each other across the divisions. Let Christ be seen in us—surely, if we believe in a God who came to save sinners, which we all are, there is a way.

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