

Concerns With Certain Doctrinal Teachings in AG Fellowships

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Abstract

The modern issue of the church's response to the LGBT community continues to be at the forefront of doctrinal debates. The Assemblies of God has clarified its positions with respect to these issues in two separate position papers, *Homosexuality, Marriage, and Sexual Identity* and *Transgenderism, Transsexuality, and Gender Identity*. Dr. Preston Sprinkle, a non-Assemblies teacher, has been invited to speak at several fellowships within the Assemblies, and has soteriological teachings with respect to these issues that contradict both of the Assemblies' position papers noted above, as well as the general soteriological statement on *Sanctification* from the *Statement of Fundamental Truths*. This paper outlines such discrepancies, and recommends that fellowships be cautioned to use alternative resources when educating congregations on these issues.

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Concerns With Certain Doctrinal Teachings in AG Fellowships

The Assemblies of God explicitly affirms the following with respect to individuals who identify as non-heterosexual:

“Christians should also do all they can to assist the person who has struggled with homosexual behaviors and desires to change and find deliverance. Change is not always easy but it is possible. It may require the help of others in the body of Christ, such as counselors and pastors, as well as a supportive church fellowship. Christian organizations are also available to help those who seek to change their lifestyles.”¹

Dr. Preston Sprinkle appears to have carefully avoided the topic of change and the ex-gay community in his published writings. However, he openly opposes any assistance that may be offered to help someone experience change, categorically writing them off as harmful.² This flatly defies the teaching of the scriptures. While Dr. Sprinkle’s other teachings on the NT provide valuable contributions and insights to scholarship, it is clear that he has deviated from a transformative view of sanctification, and is therefore in danger of misleading people with respect to this issue. The consequences of this type of teaching, whether intended or not, is a stunted spiritual growth that is capped a priori based on experiential rather than theological data. Such teaching ought not be permitted or endorsed in congregations of the Assemblies of God.

¹ *Homosexuality, Marriage, and Sexual Identity*, Page 7

² These teachings become increasingly clear in the digital media and conferences that Sprinkle participates in, including interviews on his own channel. Citations will be provided throughout the remainder of this paper for several of these.

Identity of Believers

Sprinkle's View on Identity

In Sprinkle's published writings, he notes that Christians can still identify as gay, so long as they only use it to refer to their experience of same-sex attraction rather than their primary identity.³ He makes a distinction between primary and secondary identities for believers, and affirms that a Christian's primary identity is a follower of Christ, but that "gay" is a legitimate secondary identity for those who experience same-sex attraction.⁴ He notes if a believer does choose to self-identify in this way, that it may lead to confusion for others.⁵ However, in more recent interviews, he makes claims that such identifications are indeed ontological rather than experiential. For example, in an interview with Tony Scarcello, Sprinkle makes it explicit that he does believe that change is possible, but that it is no more likely than an amputee growing a limb back, or than God making someone who is 5'4" be 6'4."⁶ In the context of these statements, Sprinkle and Scarcello are reflecting upon ministries or therapies that focus on a person's desires being changed to exclude same-sex attraction. It is clear from his statements that follow that he does not see a fundamental distinction between temptation and desire, and he therefore conflates the two. However, it would surely be incorrect for a Christian to self-identify as "lustful," "prideful," or any such other identification with sin. Therefore, using "gay" as a self-identifier, even in a soft sense with no ontological commitment, does not seem appropriate.

³Sprinkle, *People to be Loved*, 2015. Pgs. 141-142.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Sprinkle, Scarcello, *Netflix's "Pray Away" Documentary and the Ex-Gay Movement*, 2021.

Moreover, Sprinkle assumes that there should be an “expectation” for what amount of change is possible, and that the expected probability with respect to change in sexual orientation, if any, is low.⁷ In the interview, Johnson states that the success rate of Exodus International had no actual success rate in change in orientation.⁸ He extrapolates this onto all conversion therapies, stating that the rate of success is negligible.⁹ However, these statistics are patently false.¹⁰ A doctrine for change in desires as a result of sanctification should not be in dispute. However, the veracity of such a doctrine is confirmed by statistical data.

Teaching that change is improbable strips believers of hope with regard to their moral experience of the world around them. Even if not all people do not experience such change, that is no argument to say that no one does, especially given both theological and statistical data to the contrary.

Discrepancies with the Assemblies of God

Firstly, The Assemblies of God affirms on the basis of the grammar of I Corinthians 6:9-11 that certain members of the Corinthian church did undergo change, including in sexual orientation.¹¹ I concur with this analysis.¹² There is no justification for limiting the scope of the

⁷ Sprinkle, *Same-Sex Attracted, Sexually Pure, and...and Unfit for Ministry?* Dr. Greg Johnson, 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Michelle Cretella, M.D. indicated in a legal testimony that change is possible. She quotes Dr. Neil Whitehead from *My Genes Made Me Do It* who stated that “About half of the homosexual/bisexual population (in a non-therapeutic environment) moves towards heterosexuality over a lifetime.” A second citation from Dr. Judd Marmor in *Homosexuality and Sexual Orientation Disturbance* confirms a success rate for conversion therapy between 20-50%, which is comparable with other types of therapy.

¹¹ *Homosexuality, Marriage, and Sexual Identity*, pg. 4.

¹² While ητε is imperfect in verse 11, which could include ongoing identity, this interpretation is ruled out by the following verbs, which are aorist indicative forms, and therefore are best seen as past in time: απελουσασθε (middle voice), ηγιασθητε (passive voice), and εδικαιωθητε (passive voice). It is also significant to note that in verse 9, Paul lists nouns that make ontological claims rather than simple behavioral claims.

types of change that the Holy Spirit can work in a person's life on the basis of the NT; Sprinkle is forced to appeal to extrabiblical experience to justify his position.¹³

Secondly, the Assemblies of God Constitution and Bylaws includes a section on doctrines and practices that are disapproved. With respect to divine healing and professional medicine, the following is stated:

“The General Council of the Assemblies of God disapproves of any credentialed minister counseling a believer to exclude medical advice and/or treatment when seeking prayer for physical healing. Assemblies of God ministers shall not represent medical advice and/or treatment as a lack of faith in God's healing power.”

While Sprinkle is not a credentialed minister with the Assemblies of God, he openly teaches (as noted before) that seeking psychotherapy, biblical counseling, and prayer with respect to these issues is inappropriate. Inasmuch as non-heterosexual challenges have medical factors involved,¹⁴ any teaching forbidding professional help, including but not limited to professional psychotherapy, should be rejected. The forbidden doctrine in the Constitution and Bylaws is purposed towards preventing abuse with respect to divine healing. However, it seems prudent to forbid other teachings that would prohibit seeking professional medical help. Bringing in Sprinkle as a speaker on these issues presents potential for exposure his teachings on this, and

¹³ Sprinkle, Scarcello, Netflix's "Pray Away" Documentary and the Ex-Gay Movement, 2021. Sprinkle notes in here that for whatever reason, it seems that God has not (at least not primarily) interacted with non-heterosexual individuals by changing their desires as believers. On this basis, Sprinkle and Scarcello both argue that offering "conversion therapy," a pejorative term, only provides individuals with false hope, and no real change can be expected from any of these methods. As noted before, this is unjustified both theologically and on the basis of statistical data with respect to the outcomes of therapy and counseling.

¹⁴ Gender Identity Disorder, is listed in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, IV, Revised*. In the *DSM-5*, it is labelled as Gender Dysphoria.

may be viewed by congregations as an endorsement of his teachings. At a minimum, a strict non-endorsement of Sprinkle's doctrines with respect to the intersection of sanctification with those who have these struggles needs to be made clear.

Thirdly, Sprinkle's teaching seems to go against the general doctrine of sanctification as outlined in fundamental truth #9:

“Sanctification is realized in the believer by recognizing his identification with Christ in His death and resurrection, and by faith reckoning daily upon the fact of that union, and by offering every faculty continually to the dominion of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁵

Sprinkle does affirm that sexual immorality is sin, and he is non-affirming with respect to that issue. However, he denies that a genuine change in desires will take place in most individuals exhibiting SSA (same-sex attraction). This position is multiply flawed:

1. It arbitrarily assigns a scope limitation to the effects of the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification.
2. A denial of change in desires with respect to SSA causes one to question whether any desires can be genuinely changed as a result of sanctification, a theologically unacceptable and untenable position.
3. It strips believers struggling with SSA of any hope of deliverance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

On the basis of the above concerns, it is recommended that fellowships within the AG be notified that Preston Sprinkle is not an appropriate resource for these issues. While Sprinkle has made many helpful contributions to NT scholarship with respect to the non-affirming view, his

¹⁵ *Statement of Fundamental Truths*, pgs. 4-5.

soteriological views are not acceptable. Since these soteriological matters comprise a material portion of LGBT challenges in the church, an endorsement of his works could bring confusion and a lack of hope to those who are struggling with these matters. Instead, churches ought to seek out resources that share a Pentecostal perspective and can offer sound teaching with respect to these issues. The following individuals may be a good fit for this:

1. Joe Dallas
2. Linda Seiler
3. Janet Boynes
4. Daren Mehl

These individuals all share the view that change is possible, and are better resources for equipping the saints on these matters.

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