

A POSITION PAPER ON SEXUALITY

This paper represents the first word, not the last word, in the ongoing conversation about human sexuality. This is no mere intellectual debate - it's about real people and their real lives. We are interested only in trying to love and serve people and families in a way that's helpful, thoughtful, loving and Biblically faithful. We also are attempting to do this with humility, understanding that navigating this conversation is enormously complex. We hope to be a people who move toward understanding, compassion and loving friendship toward all people, including those who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. We believe faithfulness to the way of Jesus Christ - which is the way of love - demands it.

WestGate Church recognizes that conversations regarding human sexuality are complex and multi-layered. Again, conversations are not about issues to fight over or problems to solve; they are primarily about a people to love and becoming a people of love together. In an age of confusion and complexity, we believe that offering our best understanding of the Biblical vision for sexuality is an expression of love through clarity with compassion.

Our church humbly holds a “welcoming but non-affirming” position on sexuality, meaning we welcome and love all, including those who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community, while holding to the Biblical vision of marriage and sexual intimacy being reserved for one man and one woman in the covenant of marriage.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TELL US ABOUT SEXUALITY?

Our best understanding of Scripture reveals several key realities.

IN THE CREATION STORY, SEXUAL INTIMACY IS THE UNION OF TWO DIFFERENT, EQUAL, COMPLEMENTARY PIECES

In the Creation story of Genesis 1-2, male and female are not the only such pair introduced. There are other pairs, a constellation of patterns, which show a specific and intentional structure of Creation, one of harmony, rhythm, and synchronicity, including land/sea, heavens/earth, and night/day. Together, male and female are a microcosm of the world that surrounds us. As the theologian NT Wright wrote:

The man and the woman together are a symbol of something which is profoundly true of creation as a whole.... The coming together of male and female is itself a signpost pointing to that great complementarity of God's whole creation, of heaven and earth belonging together.¹

¹ N.T. Wright, “From Genesis to Revelation,” in *Not Just Good, but Beautiful: The Complementary Relationship Between Man and Woman*, eds. Helen Alvaré and Steven Lopes (New York: Plough, 2015), 87–88.

The Biblical vision of sexual intimacy outlined in Genesis 2:22-24 is the union of these two different, equal, and complementary expressions of Creation. We find this very early on in the Creation story:

Genesis 2:22-24 NIV

²²Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. ²³The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." ²⁴That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

SEX INCLUDES TWO KEY ASPECTS: DIVERSITY AND UNION

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is asked about the topic of divorce, He makes a number of theological points about male/female relationships that clarify the goals of both marriage and sexual union. Jesus says:

Matthew 19:4-6

Haven't you read...that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female," and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Jesus grounds sexual ethics in the story of Creation and includes two aspects. The first aspect is diversity (male and female) and the second is committed union (united + one flesh).

SEXUALITY WITHOUT DIVERSITY AND UNION IS MISALIGNED WITH THE BIBLICAL VISION

In Romans 1, Paul writes:

Romans 1:25-27

They...exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made in the likeness of mortal mankind and birds and animals and reptiles...women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones...men also abandoned natural relations with women.

For Paul, the biological reality of our anatomical particularity speaks, at a foundational level, to the diversity of our nature grounded in the structure of Creation. Men and women are together an icon whose image-bearing bodies make a bold proclamation: God is pro-diversity. The problem with homosexual sex, according to Paul in Romans 1, is that it violates this principle of diversity. When a man exchanges a woman for a male sexual partner or vice versa, diversity is traded for uniformity, complementarity for similarity. As author Rachel Gilson writes:

God has designed sex to communicate about big, beautiful things... God's sex ethic [isn't] primarily a bunch of "no's." God designed sex differences, and sexual union, for some very big "yes's". Yes to diversity.

*Yes to new life... A marriage cannot rightly depict God's relationship with his people if it lacks faithfulness, or pleasure, or fruitfulness—or sex difference. The metaphor demands it.*²

Although quite common in our culture, we believe it is a “disintegrating” act to use another person’s body simply to gratify one’s own sexual desires. In doing so, one debases not only the other person, but also themselves. Therefore, any form of sexual act that does not reflect committed union - that is, deep, lasting commitment and care - violates the intended work of the sexual act. This would include extra-marital affairs, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, pornography and any sexual intimacy done outside the bounds of a committed, life-long covenant called marriage.

WHAT WE DO WITH OUR BODIES MATTERS

In our culture of expressive individualism and hyper-autonomy, the idea that bodies are responsible for each other and collectively joined together is alien at best, and offensive to many sensibilities at worst. But this is the Biblical vision. What we do with our bodies matters - to us and to others. And for followers of Jesus, the command is to use our bodies to honor God (1 Corinthians 6:20). To honor God with my body requires honoring all other bodies, which requires a high view of the body.

LIFE WITH JESUS MEANS SUBMITTING OUR WHOLE SELVES TO GOD, INCLUDING OUR SEXUALITY AND OUR (OFTEN CONFUSING) DESIRES

Our modern world, with the triumph and rise of the individual self, views the definition of freedom as being the ability to stop the repression of any desires that have been repressed. Or, in the words of Sigmund Freud, “The freedom to act as I am acting, to arrange my life as seems right to me, and to me alone.”³ This is not the ethic or philosophy of the Bible. Freedom in the New Testament is defined as freedom to not be enslaved to anything other than Jesus. As Paul writes:

Galatians 5:1

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

And then, using a dramatic metaphor, Paul encourages Christians (in light of Jesus’ sacrifice) to offer their entire selves to God, body, mind and soul.

Romans 12:1

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.

² Rachel Gilson, *Born Again This Way* (Charlotte, N.C.: The Good Book Company, 2020), 42, 38.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Letters of Sigmund Freud* eds. Ernst L. Freud, James Stern & Tania Stern; (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

WHENEVER MARRIAGE IS MENTIONED IN SCRIPTURE, SEX-DIFFERENCE IS EITHER ASSUMED OR EXPLICITLY ASSERTED AS AN ESSENTIAL PART.

In Genesis 2, Matthew 19, Ephesians 5, 1 Corinthians 11 and others where the story of God, creation, and redemption is tethered to gender difference in marriage. One quick example: in Genesis 2:18 and 20, Eve is described as a “suitable” helper. The Hebrew word for “suitable” is “kenegdo” and it captures both similarity and difference. That is, Eve is like Adam since she’s human, but she’s not like Adam since she’s female and Adam is male.

WHENEVER SAME-SEX RELATIONS ARE MENTIONED, THEY ARE PROHIBITED AND/OR DESCRIBED AS SIN–IN SPITE OF THE REMARKABLE BIBLICAL DIVERSITY ON ALL KINDS OF OTHER THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES.

For example, Romans 1:26-27 explains “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.”

THE HISTORIC, MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL, GLOBAL WITNESS OF THE CHURCH HAS AGREED WITH THIS BIBLICAL VISION FOR SEXUALITY, EVEN THOUGH THE HISTORIC, MULTI-DENOMINATIONAL, GLOBAL CHURCH DIVERGES ON THE MAJORITY OF OTHER THEOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES.

Whether Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Coptic Christian, Syrian Orthodox, Charismatic or non-Charismatic, Reformed or Wesleyan, African, Latin American, South American, European, Scandinavian, or Asian Christian, the uniformity on this conversation is unparalleled.

Addendum #1

Since the 1960s, there have been at least five tectonic shifts in sexuality. Of course, not all of these changes are bad, per se, but they all represent radical changes in the ways that modern people in the West think, express and process sexuality in just the last two generations.

Sex has become disconnected from child-bearing. In 1960, the FDA approved the first oral contraceptive. For most of human history, it was simply not an option to experience sexuality with at least a high risk of long-term responsibility. This change has had all sorts of effects on sexuality, but the main one is that it shifted the primary purpose of sexuality for most people – in and outside of marriage – to be pleasure, not procreation.

Sex has been disconnected from marriage. For most people in the world, in almost every single culture in human history - sex has been tied to marriage. Disconnecting sex from this commitment has created an anxiety around sexuality, because so many people now have deep ties (or “soul ties”) without any long-term commitment of “I am with you in this until the end.”

Sex has been disconnected from male-female relationships. In the landmark decision of Obergefell v. Hodges, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that the fundamental right to marry is guaranteed to same-sex couples. This happened in 2015, but the cultural winds had been shifting since the late 1980s and the beginning of LGBTQ+ rights.

Sex has been disconnected from love, emotion and relational commitment of any kind (for some people). This is actually, in some ways, the most radical shift of all. The advent of apps like Tinder, where people swipe right - nearly commodifying sexuality - shows the codification of the ethos of the hook-up culture.

Sex has been disconnected from real people. Because of the ease of accessing pornography and its ubiquity, it's become normative for people to have disembodied, digital sexual experiences. Today, pornography sites generates more traffic than Amazon and Netflix combined.

These changes present real challenges to Christians attempting to navigate through our modern world. The main goals of this position paper are to:

- offer our best understanding of the Biblical vision of the body and human sexuality,
- offer clarity for the confused and compassion for the hurting
- to be formed into Christlikeness, into a people of love, together

Addendum #2

The New Testament authors didn't have a concept of committed, monogamous same-sex relationships. Aren't the Biblical prohibitions against homosexuality really just prohibitions against exploitive sex (things like prostitution, rape and pederasty)?

Some argue that Paul is not forbidding all same-sex relationships but only exploitative ones. The thinking goes that Paul and other 1st Century Biblical authors had no concept of mutual, loving, monogamous same-sex relationships. But this is a very recent argument, first asserted in the 1980s. And the overwhelming majority of scholarship, from liberal and conservative academics alike, rejects this idea. The majority of both secular and religious academics agree there is strong evidence of same-sex orientation and monogamous same-sex relationships in the ancient world.

Plato's "Symposium" (written in the 4th century BC) tells story of Zeus creating humans and splitting them in half. In that story, Zeus creates half with opposite-sex attraction and the other half with same-sex attraction. Both heterosexual and homosexual humans seek reunion with their "lost halves." Mutual, non-exploitative same-sex relationships existed in the ancient world. In Romans 1, Paul uses the phrase "for one another" - this would not have been the phrase used to describe exploitative relationships. "For one another" is a term of mutuality.

Isn't homosexual attraction an immutable and unchangeable characteristic of a person? Are you therefore denying all homosexuals the ability to experience physical love? Is that not oppressive?

While we believe that the Biblical vision of sexuality reserves embodied sexual intimacy to one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage, it does not mean a wholesale suppression of sexuality on the whole for everyone else. But this requires a reorientation and expansion of our understanding of sexuality.

Sexuality is a part of being human because sexuality is ultimately a longing for union. Jesus is God. Jesus was also human. Jesus had a sexuality, and even though Jesus never shared physical sexual intimacy with another person, it doesn't mean Jesus didn't live a fulfilling life. Jesus lived the most fulfilled life. As theologian Carmen Imes wrote, "Jesus is and does what humans were meant to be and do."⁴

Jesus' sexuality was expressed through profound relational commitments that generated so much good in the world; and continues to generate good in our lives today. Therefore, the model of sexuality shown by Jesus is about committed union in order to generate good in the world.

Gay people were born that way. Does that mean they were created "wrong" by God? Simply because a person experiences a desire that appears to be inborn doesn't mean they should act on that desire—no matter how strong or seemingly fixed that desire is.

⁴ Carmen Imes, *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters*, Paperback: IVP Academic, 2023

So even if some people were born with a fixed same-sex orientation, this wouldn't in itself mean they should engage in same-sex behavior.

Does your church's non-affirming stance open the door to societal bigotry or injustice?

We need to make a clear distinction between a societal ethic and an ethic for the church. Although the church has a role in the public square, it is not the job or role of the church to enforce the Christian ethic on the rest of society. When we talk about same-sex sexual relations or same-sex marriage, we are only talking about embodying and articulating a distinctive Christian ethic for the church—one that's based on Scripture and confirmed by tradition. Christians should be able to love people without forcing them to adhere to a Christian ethic.

Additionally, as Christians based in the United States, we hold to the Constitutional right of equal protection under the law for all people. This means that all laws should be equally applied to all people, including religious, ethnic and sexual minorities. We see no basis, legally, constitutionally, ethically, or theologically for any form of embedded legal discrimination against anyone.

SOURCES:

Beautiful Union by Joshua Ryan Butler

Love Thy Body by Nancy Pearcy

Jay Kim's sermon at WestGate Church, "Thinking More of Sex"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5dnmdT3DRw&t=396s>

The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender: 15 Responses to Arguments Affirming Same-Sex Relationships

<https://www.centerforfaith.com/resources/pastoral-papers/05-15-responses-to-arguments-affirming-same-sex-sexual-relationships>