

I. Introduction

Synod 2016, in response to multiple overtures, adopted the following:

That synod appoint a new study committee to articulate a foundation-laying biblical theology of human sexuality that pays particular attention to biblical conceptions of gender and sexuality. The central aim of this theological task will be to provide concise yet clear ethical guidance for what constitutes a holy and healthy Christian sexual life, and in light of this to serve the church with pastoral, ecclesial, and missional guidance that explains how the gospel provides redemptive affirmation and hope for those experiencing sexual questioning, temptation, and sin.

- a. In addition to these broad outlines, the study will include the following three components:
- 1) Discussion outlining how a Reformed hermeneutic does or does not comport with readings of Scripture being employed to endorse what are, for the historic church, ground-breaking conclusions regarding human sexual behavior and identification.
 - 2) Dialogue with, and potential critique of, untraditional conclusions arising from arguments about a new movement of the Spirit (e.g., Acts 15), as well as conclusions arising from scientific and social scientific studies.
 - 3) Reflection and evaluation of whether or not, with respect to same-sex behavior and other issues identified in the study, it will be advisable for future synods to consider
 - changing the main text of Church Order Article 69 (see Overtures 18, 19, 20, 21, 31, 38).
 - declaring a *status confessionis* (see Overture 16).
 - appointing a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith, perhaps in the style of the Contemporary Testimony, on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the teachings and conclusions of the report (see Overture 28).

(Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 919-20)

- b. The committee will be constituted of up to twelve individuals, CRC members who represent diversity in gender, ethnicity, binationality, and ministry location, and who adhere to the CRC's biblical view on marriage and same-sex relationships. These individuals will be gifted and suited for this task. . . .
- c. That synod provide the study committee with a five-year window to complete their task, such that the committee will present their final report to Synod 2021. In consideration of this extended time frame, a written summary of the committee's work will be provided by February 1, 2019, for inclusion in the *Agenda for Synod 2019* in order for Synod 2019 to dialogue with and provide feedback to the committee.

Grounds:

- 1) The scope of the task assigned to the committee needs more time to be completed than the typical three-year window allows.
- 2) The consideration of *status confessionis* is a weighty matter that requires extended and careful deliberation.

(Acts of Synod 2016, pp. 926-27)

Synod appointed the following people to the committee: Rev. Mary-Lee Bouma, Rev. Charles Kim, Rev. Jose Rayas, Rev. Paula Seales, Dr. Matthew Tuininga, Dr. Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (as *promotor fidei*), Dr. Mary

Vanden Berg, Dr. Jim Vanderwoerd, Mr. Rick Van Manen, Dr. Jeff Weima, and Dr. Al Wolters. In an effort to represent the types of diversity noted in section b of the mandate, these eleven members include persons from the following groups: an African American pastor, a Hispanic pastor, a Korean pastor, three faculty members from Calvin Theological Seminary, a same-sex attracted person, a chaplain, a philosopher, and a social scientist.

At its first meeting in October 2016, the committee chose Drs. Weima and Wolters as cochairs, Dr. Tuininga as reporter, and Dr. Vanderwoerd as recording secretary. Mr. Van Manen resigned from the committee in February 2018, after accepting an academic position in South Korea. After consultation with the denominational executive director, the committee decided not to replace him.

In carrying out its mandate, the committee as a whole has met on the following dates: Oct. 21-22, 2016; Feb. 3-4, June 2-3, Oct. 20-21, 2017; Feb. 16-17, June 15-16, Oct. 19-20, 2018; and Feb. 1-2, 2019. In addition, a subcommittee met via Skype on July 19, 2018, to discuss planning. These meetings typically took place at Calvin Theological Seminary, with most of the members physically present, but two of the meetings were conducted by videoconferencing.

At three of our meetings we set aside time to interact with people in specialized ministries or life situations whose input we sought. On Oct. 21, 2017, we spoke with three CRC-related members of sexual minorities, as well as with Dr. Wendy VanderWal-Gritter, executive director of Generous Space Ministries. On June 18, 2018, we spoke with two representatives of the CRC's Chaplaincy and Care Ministry, and on Oct. 20, 2018, with two CRC university chaplains.

For the present interim report (or summary) we have interpreted our mandate to mean that we should present not only an account of the committee's activities but also enough of our initial conclusions to make it possible for Synod 2019 "to dialogue with and provide feedback to the committee." Accordingly, in the following pages we have included (1) a tentative preamble to the report, (2) a tentative summary of a biblical theology of human sexuality, (3) a description of our tentative plans for the final report, and (4) a copy of the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality.

Delegates to Synod 2019 are urged to read this interim report carefully and to be prepared to participate in a table discussion at synod on it. Summarizing notes from these table discussions will be forwarded to the study committee for consideration as they write their final report for Synod 2021.

II. Preamble

The following are specific stories of actual people in our churches, whose names have been changed to protect identity.

During Sunday worship, Lisa,^{1*} 45, wonders how church members would react if they knew she and her husband each have deep personal relationships with other people which include sexual intimacy, now that they practice polyamory. She and Andrew² know that many biblical figures were polygamous, and the couple believe Jesus preached an ethic of love. They realize they cannot meet all of each other's needs and are happy to have discovered deeper love with more people.

^{1*} Name changed to protect identity.

In another CRC congregation Rebecca,* 36, thanks God that her pastor is preaching a sermon series on sex. She had heard only silence from the church about how to follow Jesus as a sexually healthy woman who is not married. Through seeing a counselor, Rebecca has finally experienced some healing from the shame she's felt about a strange childhood experience and her subsequent porn use. Many of her single Christian friends of all ages are sexually active, whether never married, divorced, or in serially monogamous relationships. She wishes these things had been talked about in her CRC congregations.

From childhood Joshua,* 13 (or Jessica, as Joshua identifies internally), liked dancing, singing, and pretty colors; found the games, clothes, and aggressiveness of most other boys unappealing; and was hurt by their mockery. People in church often separate boys from girls in activities and groups and seem nervous about Joshua's differences. Joshua/Jessica thinks God might have created the wrong body.

Olivia,* 19, believes that most people in her church assume she is gay and knows that some are supportive of gay marriage. She would like to have a sexual relationship with a woman, but so far she has not because she has read Bible passages that seem to condemn it. She is confused about what the church and the Bible teach. She loves Jesus and wants to do the right thing. She has never met another gay Christian who is celibate.

Tomas,* 48, is one of the few Christian men he knows who never use porn. Deeply respectful of his wife and daughter as fellow imagebearers of God, Tomas longs for the church to help his brothers in Christ reject the cultural expectation to treat women as objects for sexual pleasure.

Noah,* 26, has always been sexually attracted to men. Most of his Christian university friends were not gay, but they supported each other to live faithfully with their sexuality. Noah discovered that these believers were also ashamed of many of their desires, and he had felt joy in encouraging them and praying for each other. Together they had learned about suffering for obedience. But it doesn't feel comfortable to talk about his sexuality in his new church, even though Noah chooses to be celibate. He thinks he could be helpful to other younger believers as they struggle with their sexual identity and hopes that will soon be possible.

Madison,* 16, wants to have a boyfriend. But all the girls she knows who have boyfriends get pressured to send naked selfies and to have sex with them. One classmate has started threatening her that he will spread rumors about her if she does not give him a blow job. He is the one the parents like best because he is a leader in the church youth group. She knows her teachers suspect some of these things but her parents have no idea.

A. *Good sex*

God made sex, and, like everything God made, sexual intimacy was designed as a very good thing. The two accounts in the Genesis creation narrative, along with the passionate Song of Songs, reveal God's intention for women and men to come together sexually to populate the earth and to enjoy each other deeply in exclusive physical intimacy.

We are physical creatures, and good sex is full of pleasure and play. Our desire for sexual satisfaction draws us to another, and God fashioned our bodies to respond to a lover's touch with delight, enjoyment, and amusement. Our senses of sight, sound, hearing, taste, smell, and touch are all engaged in sex, and the intensity of arousal and release is unique to sex. The strongly positive response of our bodies to desired sexual stimulus is clear evidence that God meant for sex to feel good. In distinction from some other religious traditions, the Bible highlights the goodness of the body. After creating the earth and the first humans, God proclaimed his creation very good. Jesus was born human and in his glorified body sits at the right hand of the Father as the incarnate God. The Bible teaches the resurrection of the body, and the church has confessed it ever since. God intended the physical sexual act to bring pleasure, and we can assume that God takes joy in our enjoyment of it.

Because God constructed human beings as body and spirit, the sexual act also has spiritual significance and emotional weight. Sex always creates a bond between those participating in it, whether they intend it to or not. This is why good sex is exclusive sex. Couples can open themselves fully to each other when there is no need for self-protection and no fear of abandonment or rejection. The vulnerability of exposing the naked body during sex creates trust and draws a couple into intimacy. An appreciative gaze and gentle caress heals the shame individuals might feel about their bodies or past sexual experiences. The response of a thrilled or welcoming lover encourages the exposure of the naked self. Mutually enjoyable sex helps in the rebuilding of broken relationships. Sexual release even brings relaxation and can result in renewed energy for work.

The exclusive bond that sexual activity engenders explains why God analogizes his relationship with Israel to that of a lover with the beloved and compares the marriage of a man and a woman to the union of Christ the Bridegroom with the church his Bride. Just as we are God's beloved and God is ours, so a woman and man in marriage are meant to belong to each other and only to each other.

B. Current context

But in a sinful world God's good gift of sexuality is tainted. Although God created women and men to be physically attracted to each other, throughout history humans have sinned and been sinned against sexually. Our selfish treatment of others or their treatment of us leaves us with shame, anger, hurt, or fear of intimacy, or it causes us to withdraw.

As powerful as sex is, its misuses can be brutally destructive. The past few years include ongoing international scandals of the Roman Catholic Church covering up for sexually abusive priests; the emergence of the #MeToo movement as women began to speak openly about violent assault and constant low-key sexual harassment in every arena; a #ChurchToo response in which prominent pastors are accused of sexual misconduct and systemic abuse of power; and a multibillion dollar sex industry built on global sex trafficking that is steadily increasing, largely due to the ubiquitous use of online porn.

Perhaps nothing in North American culture has changed more rapidly and dramatically than sexual mores. The now common language of "hooking

up” and “friends with benefits” testifies to the common occurrence of casual sex between friends or acquaintances. The use of pornography by younger people is assumed, couples who marry without having had sex beforehand are deemed unusual, and most couples live together before marriage, if they marry at all. Gay relationships are accepted, and nearly everyone has friends or family members who are gay. Gay, lesbian, and transgender characters in TV and film are standard. Adults and children identify as transgender. Even the vocabulary regarding sexuality and gender has changed from *biological sex*, to *sex* and *gender*, to *gender* only, with biological sex negotiable. New federal laws permit same-sex marriage (Canada, 2005; United States, 2015) and prohibit discrimination based on gender expression or identity (Canada 2017). News constantly breaks regarding school policies, local laws, and personal stories from and about transgender children and adults.

At the same time, we swim in an ocean of sexual images. Sexual imagery, sexual language, and sexual comedy surround us. Wave after wave of sexual expectation and promise washes over us. The movies we watch, the books we read, and the media we consume feed expectations and assumptions about the enviable sex lives of others. They tell us that single people are having lots of sex and that married people constantly struggle to improve their sex lives. Yet some research shows that young people are having less sex than previous generations did, while numerous studies indicate that fully-wired 21st century humans feel increasingly lonely.²

In consequence, many of us have questions about sexuality or about the church’s response to changing realities:

Why is the church so uptight about sex?

If my boy/girlfriend and I are committed to each other, why do we need the church’s blessing on our relationship before we live together?

Why doesn’t the church talk about sexual violence against women, since the news is full of it?

How do I help my daughter, who says she is really a boy? Does the Bible say anything about being transgender?

Can we trust church leaders about sex when the church has just as much sexual abuse as everyone else?

The gay couples I know seem happier than most of the straight couples I know, so how can their love not be from God?

Why can’t the church just be loving and accepting, the way God is?

C. The church’s response

Instead of being salt and light to the world, embodying for our neighbors joyful sexual wholeness in communities of loving marriages and friendships, we in the Christian Reformed Church have been as susceptible to the lures of the evil one as has the rest of the Western church. The more that culture disconnects sexual activity from procreation and marriage, the more quaint or even bizarre Jesus’ teaching on celibate singleness or lifelong monogamous

² J. M. Twenge, R. A. Sherman, and B. E. Wells, “Declines in Sexual Frequency among American Adults, 1989-2014,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46.8 (Nov., 2017): 433-40.

marriage seems to us. The historic teaching of the church feels unnecessarily restrictive or difficult. Sexual relationships outside of marriage have become common in the church, whether before marriage or after divorce or widowhood. Divorce, sexual abuse, and pornography use are as common in the church as they are outside.

Tragically, the church's response to the confusion, questions, and sexual turbulence of a desperate world, and even of its hurting members, has often been silence. Whether because we are caught in our own hidden sexual sins, unsure whether God's grace actually has power, or are afraid to speak unpopular or unaffirming words, we have not offered the healing words of the gospel of grace to fellow sinners.

Although John 1:14 tells us that "grace *and* truth" came with Jesus Christ, when the church *does* speak about sex, it often abandons one or the other. Jesus told the judgmental and hypocritical Pharisees to go and learn mercy, saying, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17, NRSV). With words and by consistent example, Jesus taught his followers to seek out sinners and to welcome all who came to him to be his followers. Tragically, many in the church loudly denounce certain less-common sexual sins while overlooking those sexual sins commonly committed by the majority. Others of us show kindness and welcome to all, humbly acknowledging that all alike need God's forgiving grace, yet without calling confused and needy sinners to repent and follow Jesus in sexual holiness. Sometimes we then condemn one another for failing to demonstrate love or speak truth as we understand it. Our sin leads to division.

1. Yes, we have failed each other.

- a. We have not helped each other to "lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus . . . who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:1-2). We have neglected to confess our sins "to one another and pray for one another," that we might be healed (James 5:16). We have forgotten to "let the Word of Christ dwell in [us] richly" and to "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom" (Col. 3:16). The old have not modeled glorifying God with their bodies or taught the young how and why to resist temptation in their bodies. We have privileged sex and marriage, failing to encourage, support, or offer models of kingdom service to those of us who are single or called to celibacy.
- b. Instead, in our sexual practices, the church has frequently been indistinguishable from the world around us. Rather than honoring marriage and keeping "the marriage bed . . . undefiled" (Heb. 13:4), we have taken sexual partners casually or have not married those with whom we live in sexually intimate relationships. We have not helped the young reject the cultural norm of treating sexual intimacy as a skill to be practiced in dating relationships. We have ignored our ubiquitous pornography use, treating it as a personal problem for individuals, failing to see its complicity in systemic commercial endeavors that degrade and exploit women, denigrate the human body, and destroy the possibility of sexual intimacy. Not daring to ask difficult questions of

estranged spouses, nor caring enough to walk with couples experiencing marital struggles, we have made divorce common.

- c. Meanwhile, the wider community has sinned against the few. Out of fear, discomfort or self-righteousness, we have grossly mistreated persons among us who identify as gay, lesbian, or transgender with mockery, derision, or harsh denunciation. These attitudes and actions have driven many brothers and sisters out of the church. Much like the culture around us, the church has alternated between derision and condemnation toward these believers, making it impossible for those of us who are same-sex attracted or who experience gender dysphoria to learn how to follow Jesus while openly sharing our struggles. The time has come to publicly and privately admit the pain and the alienation that have resulted from these sinful actions and attitudes.

The church is facing a crisis of gospel proportions. Our failure to be salt and light through love, sexuality, marriage, gender, friendship, and mutual accountability has deeply compromised our witness to the gospel. We are not facing just one problem, or even two or three. Our whole way of life has fallen out of step with the Spirit and with the teaching of Scripture, and all of us must be called to account. And yet, in this very realization we have the opportunity, together, to repent. We have the opportunity to reexamine our lives and our communities, to confess the sins we have committed against each other, and to call one another back to the costly path of loving discipleship. By following this path, we once again can find hope and offer hope to a desperate, broken world.

Indeed, let us confess our sin together.

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you with our bodies, our hearts, and our minds, by what we have done and what we have left undone. We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.

God, our Righteousness, we devalue the bodies you have created and exploit those made in your image for our own pleasure. We foster the lust that comes from our hearts by using pornography and closing our eyes to its use among others. We defile our bodies which are your temple, Holy Spirit, by uniting sexually with those to whom we are not married. We have not fled sexual immorality, as you have commanded us.

We do not trust in your power, generous God, to reconcile our broken marriages, giving up on our spouses and on one another through divorce and remarriage. We refuse to deny ourselves sexually, unwilling to undergo the cost of discipleship as you transform us by the renewal of our minds. We forget, Jesus, that you sympathize with us because you were tempted in all ways as we are and yet were without sin. We neglect to remind each other to go boldly to your throne of grace to receive mercy in our time of need. We do not hold one another accountable.

Formed by the culture around us, we put our individual selves, our careers, and our families above the kingdom of God. We make marriage a mechanism for our own pursuit of happiness rather than submitting to it as a calling from you for a man and a woman to unite together in reflection of Christ's union with his church. We neglect the good gift of community you have given

us. Instead of being true family, we offer little or no support to single people, whether straight or gay, in living celibate lives. Instead of confessing our sins and praying for each other, we live in unrepentant sin. Good Shepherd, we have let the little ones fall. We have not lived as one body.

Omniscient God, who sees what is done in secret, we recognize that we ridicule and fear the LGBTQ among us. We admit that we drive our sisters and brothers away. We acknowledge that, like the Pharisee with the tax collector, we scorn and criticize the temptations that are not ours. We confess that we overlook the sexual sins of the majority while harshly judging those of the lesbian and gay minority. We do not show the love and hospitality of Jesus to those whom we deem worse sinners.

Light of the world, teach us to walk from darkness into the light of communion with each other and with you. Take away our shame as you show us how to live in honesty and in mutual dependence. Enable us to unite truth and grace together once again.

Resurrected Christ, thank you for advocating for us with the Father. Thank you, Redeemer, that you repair the broken and use repentant sinners to show others your ways. Will you now give us joy, Creator, in the goodness of the bodies you made?

Cornerstone of the church, we ask you to build these living stones into a family who love one another deeply from the heart, who remind each other of your commands and your rich promises, and who reflect your glory to the world. Heal our divisions. Make us one body.

2. Historic opportunity

God assures his people, “See, I am doing a new thing!” (Isa. 43:19, NIV). In today’s historic moment of great change and of questioning old realities, standards, and teachings, God’s Spirit can lead us as a pillar of fire in the darkness. When we are weak, vulnerable, or weary, the Shepherd tenderly picks up the lambs and “carries them close to his heart” while gently leading the mother sheep (Isa. 40:11).

A new-old way. It turns out that the new way is also the way of our spiritual ancestors. “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way lies, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (Jer. 6:16). What are the next steps as we journey toward sexual wholeness?

a. **If we intend to journey with all of our Christian Reformed brothers and sisters, the church will have to learn from those of us who are not attracted to the opposite sex or do not fit culturally determined gender roles.**

These believers can often alert the church to the unbiblical notion that marriages and families are the core of the church. The first-century writers tell us that Christ’s church is not a collection of biological families but a new family of Jesus’ followers. Since more gay and lesbian people spend at least some portion of their adult lives single, they can help us live into this reality.

Helpfully, too, those who do not fit the culturally prescribed male and female roles are more able to point out the falseness of the polarity

our world assumes between men and women. They can help the whole church see where it wrongly follows the world in setting women and men against each other and slotting people into stereotypical sex roles. Implicitly or explicitly, the church often teaches unbiblical models of manhood or womanhood, while God commands all to pattern themselves after Jesus, the one who is tender, strong, humble, bold, sacrificial, and courageous. Those who differ from the norms have had to struggle to discover this on their own. Having learned to concentrate on following Jesus' example, they can now help the church be reminded of this truth.

b. We can then assume our primary identity as brothers and sisters.

One body in Christ, we are united with each other in a bond of family. Our life circumstances vary significantly, and we are indeed poor and wealthy, husbands and mothers, gay and straight, and of many different ethnicities. Yet, by the cross, "in his flesh," Jesus has "broken down the dividing wall between us" (Eph. 2:14, NRSV), and we must live into our fundamental identity as saints, sisters and brothers, fellow citizens in God's kingdom. We must treat this family as family. Every believer must defend, help, assist, endure, and suffer with our spiritual sisters and brothers as we would with our family of origin.

c. Live as forgiven and forgiving sinners.

In his teaching about forgiveness in the prayer he taught us to pray, Jesus made clear that sisters and brothers would continue to be both sinners and sinned against, and that we should offer grace as freely as we receive it. As Reformed believers who confess the depravity of our natures, we know that every believer will not only be tempted but also succumb to temptation and sin. While supporting each other in the "holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14), we should also treat each other as fellow sinners in constant need of encouragement, forgiveness, and mercy.

d. Take up the cross.

The narrow way that leads to life is the way of the cross, which means death to self. Peter, John, and Paul remind their hearers that although they once lived like the nations around them in sexual indulgence and abandonment, they have been made new. Repeatedly, the apostles encourage the early church in a radical new way of living that was clearly just as baffling to their contemporaries as it is to ours. Choosing to carry the cross means choosing actions that are counter-cultural and frequently scorned or despised by the world around us. Doing what is right, whether standing up against injustice or being celibate except within the covenant of marriage, is risky and often costly. Yet in this we simply walk in the footsteps of our Lord.

e. Be physically present.

The church has erred, fallen, and failed. Wonderfully, however, it is through the church that God's healing power flows. The community of those being saved, variously pictured as the good shepherd's flock, living stones built on the cornerstone into a spiritual house, and the family of God, is one body. None of us follows Jesus alone but as a

member of the family. And because the corporate body of Christ is also the corporeal family of God, sinners damaged by sexual sin done in or to their bodies can be healed as fellow sinners comfort, feed, house, embrace, or simply play with them on a regular basis. Spiritually exploring sinners can walk with recovering sinners who follow Jesus as they volunteer in the neighborhood, pray before their dinner, or play with their children.

3. Hope

Since the Jesus way is the way of the cross, and it is the narrow way that leads to life, it is only in regular physical community that we can trust each other enough to be honest about our weaknesses and care enough for each other to help. Across the continent, CRC communities of Jesus-followers are supporting each other in following Jesus as celibate singles or monogamous married couples. Here are a few of their stories.

Brittany,^{3} 29, loves her Christian roommates but feels a bit lonely and baffled as they each begin to have sex with their boyfriends. A serious Christian, Brittany is also generous and spontaneous, and her work colleagues love to hang out with her. Her church encourages its members to spend time with friends and neighbors who are not yet Christians. With some church friends, she hosts dinners and invites friends from different religious traditions, and she encourages conversations about Jesus and life's questions. Her new friends respect her sexual ethics and often ask her to pray for them and give them advice. To stay spiritually strong, she finds herself gratefully relying on times of intimate prayer in pairs during Sunday worship and the close friendships she has built with other believers.*

Newly divorced, William, 65, is drawn to escorts whom he sometimes picks up when he drives for Uber to make some extra cash. He cares for them and prays for them but also gradually acknowledges that he really wants to have sex with them. In his church, people honestly share their temptations and struggles with each other during worship, in small groups, and when they are serving in their neighborhood. It is not easy for William to be honest about this, but when he is, other sisters and brothers pray for him and begin to call and text to support him. His church also raises money to stop human trafficking, and he learns to see how the women he has met on the street were groomed for the sex industry.*

Various lesbian and gay individuals and couples participate in New Life CRC. A few of them introduce the pastor and other church members to their friends. Others invite their LGB friends to worship. Raised in an evangelical church and a faithful member of a popular campus ministry in university, sociology professor Carol,* 44, has not been in church for years. Her partner of a decade, Kris,* is not a Christian, but Carol believes she is God's answer to Carol's prayer for love and intimacy at a very lonely period of her life. The church invites Carol to speak on an area of her expertise to their adult education class. Because the church people she meets are loving, reflective, and fun, Carol gets involved in the church even though the pastor carefully explains that the church believes the Bible teaches marriage and sex are only for women with men. Kris starts going to a Bible study on Jesus' parables. Although the group talks about Jesus and not about sex, Kris tells Carol she wants to follow Jesus and thinks maybe they should stop having*

^{3*} Name changed to protect identity.

sex together. Slowly, with the support of people in the church, they start talking about what direction to take their relationship as Kris prepares to get baptized.

When Walter,⁶¹ was in his thirties and one of the most faithful members of the church choir and the church adult education program, he told only a few people in church that he deeply longed for sexual intimacy with a man. Over the years, these few sisters and brothers listened as he expressed his rage, grief, and hopelessness. A few times, discouragement and hopelessness overtook him. These friends from his Christian community brought him food and helped him shower when he was isolated in his house, too depressed to cope. Finally, Walter decided to move to a big city, to find a Christian man to marry. In that new city, he joined another CRC and instead found a woman who delighted in him and who chose to share his life. After good counseling, they married, and surrounded themselves with other Jesus-followers with whom they share honestly but also reach out as others have reached out to them.

Desperate for someone to understand, and scared to death, new believer Emily,⁶² tells her pastor she wants to transition to being a man but doesn't know how she could fit in to the church. Knowing that Emily has very little money and is looking for work, her pastor Amanda,⁶³ takes her to the thrift store to buy some pants and jackets she'd feel more comfortable wearing. Some months later, Emily announces that she wants to go back to living as a woman. Amanda is puzzled and is not sure what Emily's future holds, but is glad that the church's acceptance of Emily communicated to her God's unconditional love and respect.

Joshua* and Chloe* were not raised in Christian families, but now that they are planning to marry, they want to live the Jesus Way together. It has not been easy remaining celibate before marriage, nor dealing with Joshua's ongoing commitment to resist the pornography that formerly dominated his life. But every year their church spends time in Sunday sermons and in more intimate settings discussing what it means to follow Jesus with regard to money, sex, and power. These discussions are lively because their church gatherings, large or small, are usually an interesting mix of believers, serious spiritual seekers, and people who just love the food and community. Unbelievers are initially surprised and baffled that Chloe and Joshua are not living together and in fact are not sexually involved with each other. But people are drawn to them, and Joshua and Chloe find that unbelievers are eager to talk with them about Jesus. Impressed by their openness for others, the trust between them, and their honesty about their own weaknesses, a few of their friends accept Jesus' invitation and join the Christian community.

4. Mutual need

As individuals, as congregations, and as a denomination, the entire Christian Reformed Church has something in common. Despite the hurt, anger, division, and failure of the church, despite differences in perspectives and difficulties understanding and trusting each other, we have a mutual need for deep healing. The sexuality the Creator gave us, beautiful and intended for good, has brought sinful humans great pain. In great compassion, Almighty God, our Wonderful Counselor, offers us not only forgiveness but also freedom from shame and restoration in holiness.

God provides that healing primarily through communities of people. By the God who lives in eternal loving community, we were created for the deep joy of physical human community. The whole Bible is a story of

a community of people, whose God calls them to show the world God's nature by living in just and loving relationships with God and each other. The Bible's writers reveal first to the nation of Israel and then later to their spiritual descendants how to live well in human community so as to reflect God to each other and the world.

For our own healing and for the sake of the world, God designed the church as a group of people who meet regularly to eat, play, and pray; who are honest about their failures and sins; and who therefore can sharpen each other "as iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17). As the church, we need to be people who meet not in homogeneous, segregated little groups but as single and married people together, young and old, rich and poor.

Mutually we need forgiveness and grace. Every one of us has been sinned against and has sinned sexually. All of us have exploited others and have been exploited sexually in some ways, whether through word, thought, or deed. Mutually we need sister-brother love to heal us of our distance and mistrust of each other. Mutually we need physical touch. Alienated from our bodies by living in the virtual reality of attention to our technological devices, we need the ordinary physical connections of eating, playing with, and being affectionately touched by human sisters and brothers.

5. Mission together

Just as we have mutual need, the members of the CRC also have a mutual mission. Our physical communities are meant not only to heal the sin, shame, grief, and loneliness of believers but also to offer hope to skeptical and curious unbelievers. In a world where reconciliation is all too rare, the church should be filled with people in messy relationships with stories of hurt and forgiveness. In a culture of individualism, our churches can offer the hope of a different way, a way in which the older mentor the younger, single people and families enjoy one another, the poor and rich serve and learn together, and different ethnic groups seek to understand and appreciate one another. These relationships are unusual in our deeply divided world, and they model God's love to a world that yearns to believe true human community is possible.

The Christian Reformed Church has much to offer the millions who do not yet know Jesus. We are rooted in a tradition that gladly acknowledges the need to learn from the historic and global church as we seek to obey God in our sexuality. In each of our congregations, in various ethnic and economic contexts, the Christian Reformed Church has a living tradition of deep love for the Scriptures coupled with a willingness to engage courageously with the ideas of our time. Because we know the creator who made all things and the reconciler who brings all things together, we can create nurturing spaces for people wrestling with sexual identity, deep brokenness, long-term patterns of sin, and disconcerting cultural changes. Resting in Jesus, our peace, we can provide safe harbor for restless explorers both within and outside the church.

The Holy Spirit leads. God pours out love and grace. May our desire to love one another and our neighbors increase, grounded in confidence that we "belong—body and soul . . . —to [our] faithful Savior, Jesus Christ" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 1). May we learn anew to follow our

Servant-King in the way of the cross, continually receiving and offering hope and healing.

III. A biblical theology of human sexuality

A. Introduction: Matthew 19

Reformed theology reminds us that a good biblical theology follows the outline of the great moments of redemptive history: creation, fall, redemption, consummation. Our Lord himself took this approach when the Pharisees asked him about what in their day was one of the divisive questions of sexual ethics. In Matthew 19:3 they asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" (NIV).

They were looking, perhaps, for a rule or a set of criteria. But Jesus' response moved the discussion in an entirely different direction. He turned their attention to the creation account of Genesis 1-2. "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" (Matt. 19:4-6).

Jesus' perspective, interestingly, does not begin with humanity in its fallen state. His mindset is not, first and foremost, one of accommodation of human sexual weakness. Rather, he grounds the ethic of marriage in the purposes of God from creation. It is just as significant that Jesus does not immediately point his hearers to the nature of human sexuality in the new creation. He understands sexuality in creational terms.

In fact, the Pharisees seem surprised by Jesus' response. "'Why then' they asked, 'did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?'" (19:7). Jesus' rejection of divorce rooted in his theology of creation seemed to call for a sexual ethic much more rigorous than that of the law. And he affirmed that this is, in fact, the case: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery" (19:8-9).

Jesus' approach here is striking. He concedes that the law tolerated sinful behavior because of the *fall*. But he calls his disciples to a higher standard rooted in creation and redemption. The appeal to *creation* is found in his reference to the way it was "at the beginning." The appeal to *redemption* comes in the form of Jesus' assertion of his own messianic authority: "I tell you . . ." The Lord of redemption and the Lord of creation are one and the same Lord.

The disciples, of course, quickly grasp that Jesus is calling them to a practice a very difficult ethic. "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry," they reason (19:10). And Jesus does not dispute the point. The cost of discipleship is high. The way of the cross is difficult. It requires *grace*. He replies, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given" (19:11).

Jesus' teaching here, it must immediately be observed, is difficult for conservatives and progressives alike. There is no deference to traditional ways of life. Jesus is not lifting up culturally accepted practices of marriage and family as the ideal for his disciples. On the contrary, he is calling his disciples to a kingdom ethic that is no less radical in the area of sexuality than it is in

the area of wealth and poverty (see the story of the rich man in 19:16-27). But the reward—and here Jesus points to that ultimate moment of redemptive history, the *consummation*—is great. As he goes on to say later, “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first” (19:29-30).

Who is willing to walk this path? All who would be Jesus’ disciples must count the cost. But we will not always have the luxury of choice. “For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (19:12). The life of singleness—whether freely chosen or not—like that of marriage, requires one to depend on the grace of Christ.

Matthew 19 provides us with the outline of a biblical theology of human sexuality that comes from the lips of Jesus himself. It reveals the mind of Christ on a host of powerfully relevant questions ranging from the place of eunuchs (traditionally deemed sexually unclean) in the kingdom of God to the relationship between Genesis 1:1-2:3 and 2:4-25 (which Jesus explicitly treats as one interdependent unit). It offers us a pattern for the renewing of our own minds, that we may “not conform to the pattern of this world,” but “be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2).

B. Creation: Genesis 1-2

The New Testament consistently points to Genesis 1-2 as the paradigm for human sexuality (see Matt. 19; 1 Cor. 6; Rom. 1, Eph. 5). Contemporary debates about evolution, the age of the earth, and the length of the days of creation often distract us from the central focus of the text, which is on God’s creative work of establishing order in the world. By his word God divides those things that do not belong together: light from darkness, the waters above from the waters below, water and dry land. The result is a creation that is good because it is orderly.

By his word God goes on to fill the heavens, the seas, and the dry land with governing lights, birds and fish, plants and animals. Ultimately he subjects all of this order to human beings, whom he calls to govern it on his behalf.

It is of the utmost significance that from the very beginning human beings are described in sexual terms as “male and female.” None of the animals are described in such terms. Within one sentence of God’s decision to create human beings in his image, that they might govern over his creation, we are told, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27).

The poetic structure of Genesis 1:27 indicates that humanity’s creation as male and female is inextricably linked with humanity’s creation in God’s image. We image God not simply as generic human beings, who happen to be male and female, but as male and female human beings.

Indeed, in the following verses it becomes clear that our sexuality as male and female is *essential* to the way in which we bear God’s image by governing on his behalf. Human beings can only obey God’s command to exercise dominion by practicing their sexuality through procreation. “God blessed them

and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground'" (Gen. 1:28). Only as they are fruitful and increase in number, as male and female, can human beings fill the earth and subdue it. And only when creation is governed in this way does God declare that it is "very good" (1:31). Only at that point does God rest (2:2-3).

It should be noted that the terms *male* and *female* clearly refer to biological sexuality, not merely to gender, although it is safe to say that the very distinction between sex and gender would be alien to the text in its ancient Near Eastern context. The point is that to be male is to possess male sexuality and to be female is to possess female sexuality, and that to exercise one or the other through procreation is absolutely essential to fulfilling God's creation mandate. In other words, it is quite clear, contrary to what some have more recently asserted, that God created human beings with binary, procreative sexuality. The suggestion that God created sexuality as a spectrum, with some human beings falling somewhere *in between* male and female, is not only foreign to the text but also contradicts the obvious meaning and significance of sexuality in the text. To read the notion of sexuality as a spectrum into Genesis 1:27 is to isolate that verse and rip it from its context.

While many biblical scholars point out that Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-33 are separate creation accounts, their placement together at the beginning of Genesis requires us to interpret them in interaction with one another. Indeed, were we in doubt about this, Jesus' appeal to the two passages as one unit should lay our doubts to rest. It is not simply that Jesus quotes from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24 in the same sentence. It is that he explains the meaning of Genesis 2:24 by virtue of its relationship to Genesis 1:27. In Jesus' words, "at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' [1:27] 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' [2:24]" (Matt. 19:4-5). Scripture interprets Scripture, and this is all the more the case when dealing with the same book of Scripture.

Human sexuality is even more central to the purpose of Genesis 2 than it is to Genesis 1. God creates an isolated human being, *Adam*, but he cannot fulfill his mandate to fill the earth and subdue it because he is alone. As the text puts it, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him" (2:18). Interestingly, this first indication that something is not good in creation stems from the lack of sexuality. The word *helper* does not denote any sort of inferiority. God is quite often described as his people's helper with just this word. The word *suitable*, for its part, is a translation of the Hebrew word *kenegdo*, which is a compound of words meaning "like" and "opposite." In other words, the man needs a partner who is "like-opposite"—or, *equal, yet complementary*—to him.

While some prefer to emphasize the similarity of the partner, and others the difference, the text emphasizes both, and neither can be abandoned without doing damage to its basic purpose. Some scholars argue that all that the man really lacked was essentially a friend. He needed companionship.⁴ But in the context of Genesis 2, as well as of Genesis 1, the man is clearly lacking

⁴ See, for example, James V. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality: Reframing the Church's Debate on Same-Sex Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 29-31.

more than simply friendship. He cannot fulfill the creation mandate. Unlike the animals, he cannot procreate. He needs someone who is sexually “like-opposite” to him. Hence God creates the woman.

It is also highly significant that it is here that the Hebrew text first uses the gendered terms for “man” and “woman.” Until now, the man was always *adam*. But here the man is *ish*, and the woman is *ishah*. The very words communicate similarity and difference, and the man exults when he sees the woman: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’ [*ishah*], for she was taken out of man [*ish*]” (2:23). This exultation appears in the context of the man and woman’s unabashed sexuality. The text goes out of its way to point out that they “were both naked, and they felt no shame” (2:25). Sexuality is good and rightly leads to exultation. It is only the fall that has rendered it a matter of shame, abuse, and suffering.

The text comments on Adam’s joyful exclamation with an explanatory verse that is quoted no less than three times in the New Testament (Matt. 19:5; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31): “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). Sexuality is inseparable from marriage. Just as a man is born from the marital union of his father and mother, so the man must now leave his parents in order to establish a new marital union of man and woman. This will be the ordinary and essential means of propagating human life.

A few scholars have argued that the “one-flesh” union referred to in the text need not require sexual complementarity. At least one scholar claims that two partners might experience a one-flesh union in the sense of kinship rather than sexual complementarity. In other words, it is claimed that the text is merely saying that two persons might unite as one family.⁵ However, this novel interpretation seems to be based on a misreading of the lexicographical and exegetical evidence.

Significantly, the text does not say that the woman will leave her father and mother and be joined to her husband as part of his clan. That would reflect common ancient Near Eastern practice. Rather, Genesis 2:24 highlights the man as the one who leaves his family behind, and it emphasizes that the man and his wife will now constitute a new one-flesh union. In marriage, it would appear that the man and woman find a new identity and a new purpose.

The theological significance of Genesis 2:24 runs far beyond its reference to the nature of marriage, however. As we shall see from the apostle Paul’s discussion of marriage in Ephesians 5, “in Genesis 2:24 lies an unknown or not fully known intention of God which is now revealed in the relationship of Christ and his church.”⁶ Just as the significance of human sexuality is rooted in God’s creation of human beings in his image, so human sexuality finds ultimate meaning in God’s plan for human beings to be united in communion with him.

⁵ See Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, pp. 85-109.

⁶ “Marriage Guidelines,” *Acts of Synod 1980* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Reformed Church, 1980), p. 470.

C. *Fall: Genesis 3*

Genesis 3 describes the fall of the first man and woman into sin in terms of temptation, disobedience against the direct command of God, and the violation of boundaries established by God. The serpent, we are told, challenged the woman about her understanding of God's word. The initial challenge, "Did God really say . . . ?" (3:1) was followed by a stronger challenge, "You will not certainly die . . ." (3:4). The temptation held out to Eve was that of becoming "like God, knowing good and evil" (3:5). The way to get there, however, was by disobeying God's direct command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17), thereby violating the boundary established by God at creation.

Given this rebellion against the created order and against God's commands received at creation, it is no surprise that the very first sign that creation has fallen from its first purpose is the corruption of sexuality. "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves" (3:7). Sin immediately turns what was a source of joy and exultation into a source of shame and fear. Alienation from God immediately turns into the alienation of the man and woman from one another. The vulnerability of nakedness ceases to be a gift. Instead it becomes a threat. "I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid" (3:10).

Fascinatingly, as it appears in the narrative, God draws the conclusion that the man has disobeyed his command from the fact that the man knows he is naked. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The connection between disordered sexuality and the curse of disobedience runs like a thread throughout the passage.

The significance of sexuality also permeates the promises and curses that God begins to declare in verse 14. The enmity that stems from the curse will extend to the "offspring" of both the serpent and the woman, but the offspring of the woman would one day crush the serpent's head (3:14). From this time forward the men and women of Israel would be self-conscious of the way in which their participation in the bringing forth of children would be central to God's purposes for redemption.

On the other hand, childbearing would take place in the context of severe and painful labor. The intimate relationships between husbands and wives would give way to conflict and domineering. Sexuality after the fall will always be plagued with suffering and conflict, unfulfilled desires and exploitation. Oppressive patriarchy would take the place of purposeful marital communion. "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (3:16).

This is precisely the picture that we get in the rest of the book of Genesis and, indeed, in the rest of the Old Testament. In the lives of the patriarchs we see polygamy (including the favoring of one wife over another), the sexual exploitation of slaves (including servants made to serve as concubines), incest, rape, spousal abuse, adultery, divorce, prostitution, sexual harassment, and all manner of conflict, jealousy, and violence stemming from such sexual immorality. Neither the lives of the patriarchs nor the kings of Israel offer Christians a model of God's purpose for sexuality as it was "from the beginning." Indeed, as we have seen, the law of Moses itself permitted such

abuse due to the hardness of human hearts, “but it was not this way from the beginning,” Jesus said (Matt. 19:8).

Just as it was immoral for the patriarchs to treat women in accord with the conventions of their culture, so it is immoral when Christians abandon God’s will from creation by acting in accord with the sexual conventions of our own culture. Premarital sex, cohabitation, divorce, sexual assault, polyamory, and a host of other sexual practices increasingly tolerated by our culture are symptoms of a fallen world that is under the curse of sin. Christians are called to flee all such sexual immorality as we walk not according to the mind of this world, but according to the mind of Christ.

D. Redemption: the Old Testament

1. The Law

For all of the corruption and misery that mars human sexuality throughout the Old Testament, from Genesis 3:16 forward sexuality is also the focal point of the hope of salvation. Every man and every woman is expected to marry, to be fruitful and to multiply. Men and women seek to propagate godly children, that their descendants might share in the future hope of God’s people. Fruitfulness and salvation go hand in hand. Women who struggle to conceive children (such as Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah) virtually equate the blessing of children with salvation itself. It is no overstatement to say that in the Old Testament the failure to produce descendants is the greatest possible curse upon a man or woman. Indeed, a central part of the crisis facing the oppressed Israelites in Egypt was the Pharaoh’s policy of forced infanticide.

After God delivered his people from the oppression of Egypt, he gave them the law of Moses, which included an extensive sexual code and an array of regulations governing marriage and sexuality. It is important to distinguish between regulations that permitted various immoral practices due to the hardness of human hearts (such as divorce [Deut. 24:1-4], polygamy [Deut. 21:15-17], forced marriage of captive women [Deut. 21:10-14], and other practices of ancient Near Eastern patriarchy [i.e., Lev. 19:20-22]), which are not normative for Christians called to follow God’s purpose “from the beginning” (Matt. 19:8), and the sexual code that prohibited practices that the law declares to be “detestable” (Lev. 18:29) and therefore alien to God’s purpose from creation.

Scholars have debated the purpose and significance of the Mosaic sexual code. The key, most agree, is to view God’s purposes for Israel as being a sort of microcosm of his purposes for creation. If Genesis 1-2 teaches that human beings are called to be kings and priests within the temple of creation, Exodus and Leviticus were given to teach the people of Israel how to be kings and priests within the land of Canaan. Thus the people of Israel were commanded to observe proper creational boundaries and so to be holy in reflection of their creator. Much like God’s work of dividing and ordering during the six days of creation, the Levitical sexual codes reminded the people to observe the separations established by God that are essential to goodness of the creation order.

Further, just as Genesis 1-2 called men and women to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, so the Levitical sexual code called men and women to engage only in forms of sexual activity that resulted in

the procreation of godly children. This helps to explain why the prohibition of child sacrifice is mixed in with prohibitions of homosexuality, bestiality, and having sex with a woman during her period, as well as prohibitions of incest (which produces illicit offspring).

The law warns the people that it was for these sorts of “detestable” practices that the Canaanites were purged from the land of Canaan. The Israelites were to be different from other nations. They were to be holy because their God was holy. “Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants” (Lev. 18:24-25). The laws were to apply to both native-born and foreigners. “Everyone who does any of these detestable things—such persons must be cut off from their people” (18:29). Hence it is already in Leviticus that we have the clear association of sexual immorality with the idolatry of the nations who do not know God.

The integral connection between sexuality, fruitfulness, and holiness is also reflected in the law’s declaration that bodily discharges associated with the reproductive system rendered a person unclean. Men or women experiencing such discharges had to undergo rites of purification (Lev. 12 and 15). Furthermore, eunuchs and males with defective genitals were prohibited from entering the temple (Lev. 21:20; 22:24; Deut. 23:1). Because Israel was to be a microcosm of creation, Israelites were called to be orderly and fruitful in their sexual activity in reflection of the orderliness and fruitfulness of creation.

2. The prophets

While the law called the people to engage only in sexual relationships that were orderly and fruitful, the prophets highlighted the significance of human sexuality in an altogether different way. They used marriage as a metaphor for the covenant relationship between God and his people. For example, Isaiah 54:5-6 declares, “‘For your Maker is your husband—the LORD Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The LORD will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit—a wife who married young, only to be rejected,’ says your God” (see also Isa. 62).

The prophets used this metaphor in both positive and negative ways. Often they described Israel as the bride of the Lord, only to go on to point out that Israel had become unfaithful. Often they went so far as to describe Israel in graphic terms as a prostitute who had committed adultery with all of the nations around Israel (Ezek. 16 and 23). The prophet Hosea, in fact, was even called by God to take an adulterous wife as a means of illustrating God’s grace to adulterous Israel. Ultimately, as Hosea makes clear, God will forgive and cleanse his bride, redeeming her from all her adultery (Hos. 1-3).

The use of marriage as a metaphor for the covenant between God and his people gave rise to the additional use of prostitution, adultery, and sexual immorality as metaphors for the sin of idolatry. Just as a prostitute sells herself for money or protection, they argued, so Israel sold herself in idolatry to foreign gods (and foreign nations). Ezekiel 16 addresses

Jerusalem as an adulterous wife, describing the people's idolatry with the gods of other nations as prostitution in shockingly graphic terms:

"The splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect. . . . But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his. You took some of your garments to make gaudy high places, where you carried on your prostitution. . . . You also took the fine jewelry I gave you, the jewelry made of my gold and silver, and you made for yourself male idols and engaged in prostitution with them. . . . And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? . . . In all your detestable practices and your prostitution you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, kicking about in your blood."

(Ezek. 16:14-22)

Ezekiel's description, which becomes all the more graphic in its use of prostitution as an allegory for idolatry, follows Leviticus in identifying Jerusalem's "detestable practices" with the typical practices of the nations around her, including the Canaanites and Sodom. For the prophets, as in the law and (as we shall see) the New Testament, sexual immorality and idolatry were the chief characteristics of the nations that did not know God. Yet when God redeemed his people according to his covenant, he would purify them from all of their sexual immorality and idolatry.

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her. . . .

"In that day," declares the LORD, "you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked. . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD."

(Hos. 2:14-20)

3. Wisdom literature

Israel's wisdom literature vividly described the evils of both adultery and prostitution (Proverbs) and the beauty and joyfulness of a healthy sexual relationship (Song of Songs; Psalm 45). In Proverbs 8-9, Wisdom is personified as a woman who is to be sought at all costs, in contrast to the adulterous woman, Folly (Prov. 7 and 9), who is to be avoided at all costs. Proverbs 7 graphically describes how an adulterous woman skillfully seduces an unsuspecting young man: dressing as a prostitute, she takes hold of him and kisses him, using "persuasive words" and "smooth talk" (7:21) as she describes the allures of her bed. "Come let's drink deeply of love till morning; let's enjoy ourselves with love!" (7:18).

The text describes the young man's destruction so as to elicit horror: "All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life. . . . Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is a highway to the grave, leading down to the chambers of death" (7:22-23, 26-27).

In Proverbs it is the young in particular who need to be warned to flee from the dangers of lust and adultery. The antidote is wisdom, especially the wisdom that comes from one's parents and is rooted in the fear of the Lord.

In contrast, Song of Songs is particularly unabashed in the sensuality of its poetic imagery. The two lovers delight in one another's kisses and physical embrace. The man exults in the beauty of his bride's eyes, hair, teeth, lips, neck, and breasts. "You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you" (4:7). "How beautiful you are and how pleasing, my love, with your delights!" (7:6). Love is more pleasing than wine, he tells her. "Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue" (4:11).

The woman speaks of how she aches for her husband's intimate presence. "My beloved is radiant and ruddy, outstanding among ten thousand" (5:10). She relishes the appearance and smell of his head, eyes, cheeks, lips, arms, legs, and mouth. "His mouth is sweetness itself; he is altogether lovely. This is my beloved, this is my friend, daughters of Jerusalem" (5:16).

And yet, the song warns its hearers repeatedly that when it comes to love one must tread carefully. "Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you: Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (8:4). Love is dangerous because it is powerful. When it is the real thing, its value is without parallel: "For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned" (8:6-7).

It is notable that Song of Songs has traditionally been interpreted by the church not simply as a poem about love between a man and a woman, but as a prophetic allegory of the relationship between Christ and his bride, the church. This is consistent with the biblical theme of marriage as an analogy of the covenant relationship between God and his people.

E. Redemption: the New Testament

1. Celibacy

When he pointed out that Moses permitted divorce because of the hardness of human hearts, Jesus called his disciples to a sexual ethic so demanding that it led them to question whether it might be better for a person not to marry (Matt. 19). It is telling that Christian teaching rarely elicits such a reply in our time. Has the twenty-first-century church simply accommodated cultural expectations regarding sex, marriage, and family to the point that we have lost sight of the radical path of Christian discipleship?

For the disciples to say that it may be better for a person not to marry was to say the unthinkable. As we have seen, to Old Testament Jews, marriage and procreation were deemed to be mandated by God from creation. To be single, to forgo the calling of procreation, was to ensure that one would not have any descendants who shared in the future hope of God's people.

Yet not only does Jesus affirm that his disciples are correct in their judgment that marriage may not be the best path of Christian discipleship. He goes so far as to identify eunuchs, who were prohibited from entering the temple, as paradigmatic Christian disciples!

Jesus appears to have three different kinds of eunuchs in view: (1) persons who are born impotent or who develop without properly functioning sexual organs; (2) men who have been castrated, either deliberately (often for service in a royal court or harem) or accidentally; and (3) people who “choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” Most scholars agree that with the third type Jesus is speaking metaphorically (i.e., he is not suggesting that Christian disciples should castrate themselves).

Jesus’ statement is best interpreted against the backdrop of the messianic promises of Isaiah 56:3-5, in which God promised that foreigners and eunuchs would no longer be excluded from his temple. Isaiah declared, “To the eunuchs . . . who . . . hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters” (56:5). These words anticipate the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8.

Thus understood, the words of Isaiah and Jesus and the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch all point to the good news that with the coming of the kingdom of God, broken or defective sexuality is no longer the obstacle to kingdom membership that it once was. Individuals whose sexual development and flourishing was impaired or incomplete, who had been excluded from God’s presence under the law, are now included in the kingdom of God under the gospel. This truth is clearly of profound significance for Christians who experience disorders of sex development or other forms of sexual dysfunction today.

Jesus’ third category, speaking of those who choose to live a life of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom, likewise points to a greater inclusivity in the kingdom of God and a liberation from Old Testament expectations regarding marriage and procreation. It is a way of life that Jesus and Paul, the two most prominent characters of the New Testament, would choose. Though it is not for everyone, it is clearly a way of honor, befitting special service for the kingdom of God.

In fact, Matthew 19:11-12 is only one of many passages in which Jesus speaks of the diminishing significance of marriage, family, and earthly households. We have already noted his promise that “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (19:29). This promise suggests that those who forgo the blessings of marriage and family in this world will receive even greater blessing both in this age and in the age to come. Jesus appears to be thinking of the bonds of communion that such believers will experience with their brothers and sisters in Christ who are fellow children of God.

A similar statement appears in Luke 14:26-27, where Jesus declares, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.⁷ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me

⁷ In biblical culture, the word hate was often used as a way of saying “love less.” To recognize this idiomatic use is in no way to downplay the demand made here. In a Middle Eastern culture where commitment to parents and family was ranked as the highest social obligation, the challenge for Jesus’ disciples was to be devoted more fully to Jesus than to one’s own family. For similar uses of hate as “love less” or “not love,” see Genesis 29:30-31; Deuteronomy 21:15-17; Judges 14:16; Proverbs 13:24; Isaiah 60:15; Malachi 1:2-3; Luke 16:13.

cannot be my disciple" (cf. Matt. 10:37-39). Those who would be disciples must first count the cost, Jesus goes on to say. They must be willing to give up everything for the sake of the kingdom (Luke 14:33).

Jesus clearly applied this truth to his own life. When told that his mother and brothers were seeking him, he declared, "'Who is my mother and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'" (Matt. 12:48-50). This did not mean that Jesus ceased to care for his mother, as we can see from John 19:26-27. But it does indicate that with the coming of the kingdom the familial bonds of discipleship begin to transcend natural familial bonds in significance.

Yet another declaration by Jesus confirms the diminishing significance of marriage in the coming kingdom of God. In Luke 20:27-40 (see parallel passages in Matt. 22:23-33 and Mark 12:18-27) the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection, questioned Jesus regarding a woman who, during this life, married seven successive husbands (each dying before she married the next). Seeking to catch Jesus with an absurdity, they asked, "Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?" (Luke 20:33).

Jesus' reply undermines the assumption that the future resurrected life will be much like the present life. He said, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (20:34-35). In other words, marriage for men and women and the production of offspring may be important parts of the present order, but they will not be part of the life to come. Sexuality is a positive aspect of God's good creation, but the resurrection and power of God will change human existence such that marriage and procreation are not part of the coming kingdom.

As much as Jesus affirms the creational order regarding marriage, therefore, he puts even stronger emphasis on the limited significance of marriage and family. This does not serve to undermine a creational sexual ethic. On the contrary, as we shall see, if anything, Jesus strengthens it. Still, the good news of the kingdom of God creates a new reality for all who, whether by circumstance or by choice, find themselves giving up the earthly blessings of marriage, family, and household. It is not only a way of life of unexcelled honor; it is a way of anticipating the glorious reality of the future kingdom of God.

Clearly the path of Christian discipleship is not an easy path, especially as it applies to the area of sexuality and marriage. The Christian's sexual life is necessarily a cross-bearing life filled with all kinds of suffering. This is true for all Christians. Although we each experience unique struggles and temptations, all of us are called to count the cost. If there is a part of our sexual or gender identity—or a desire, experience, practice, or relationship—that we are not willing to give up for the sake of Christ, we have made that thing an idol. On the other hand, insofar as we are willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel, we are given Christ's own promise: "whoever loses their life for me will find it" (Matt. 16:25).

The apostle Paul embraced Jesus' teaching about celibacy both in his own life (Paul did not marry) and in his exhortation to young Christians: "I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do" (1 Cor. 7:7-8). In a world where the social pressures to marry, have children, and establish a household were not only immense but definitive and all-encompassing for a person's identity, Paul experienced the life of celibacy as freedom.

Paul's intent was not to negate the goodness of marriage. Rather, his purpose was to direct young Christians' attentions to the coming kingdom. Marriage, he says, is part of the world in its present form that is passing away, but the kingdom is eternal. "What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not. . . . For this world in its present form is passing away" (7:29-31). Marriage, for Paul, is not a permanent union because it ceases with the death of either the husband or the wife, such that the surviving partner is free to marry again (Rom. 7:2-3).

Those who are married, Paul points out, are not able to focus on the work of the kingdom in the same way that single people can:

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

(1 Cor. 7:32-35)

But is Paul thinking only of those who have a special gift that enables them not to "burn with passion" (7:9)? After all, he urges those who "cannot control themselves" to marry, "for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (7:9). If that is the case, how can Christians demand celibacy from those who lack the gift of singleness? This is a question of the utmost urgency for teenagers, persons who are exclusively same-sex attracted, and many others who find themselves unable to get married or unable to enjoy sex in their marriages.

This question has been helpfully explored by the 2002 report on pastoral care for homosexual members. Lewis Smedes, the report observes, defended same-sex marriage as a sort of concession or accommodation to gay men and women who "burn with passion." Others have compared such an accommodation to Moses' allowance of divorce in the Old Testament. The question, then, is what is the gift of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 7:7?

Although many describe the gift Paul is referring to as the gift of celibacy, Paul himself refers to a more specific gift: self-control. The question, therefore, is whether Christians can expect self-control to the point of celibacy from Christians who lack the gift of self-control. Yet as the 2002 report notes, Galatians 5:22-23 describes self-control as a fruit of the Spirit that is given to all Christians, much like love, joy, patience, or kindness. While not all Christians bear such fruit to equal degrees, all are called to bear them.

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 14:1 Paul commands Christians to “strive for the spiritual gifts.” While some gifts (such as tongues or prophecy) are given to some Christians only, the greater gifts are given to all, and all are commanded to seek them through prayer and effort. Thus Christians are not simply to wait for the gift of self-control, practicing it only when it has been given from above. Rather, as Paul declares in 1 Thessalonians 4:4, “each of you should learn to control your own body.” Similar commands appear in Titus 2:11-15; 1 Peter 1:13-15; and 2 Peter 1:5-6.

All Christians, then, must practice self-control when called to it by God. “Married people as well as singles need self-control, including self-control of their sexuality, for a well-disciplined life.”⁸ Not all people who are called to a life of celibacy choose such a life. But all who are called to a life of celibacy are promised the grace and blessing of the Holy Spirit as they walk the path of obedience to Christ’s commands. Indeed, for those who give up the blessings of marriage and family out of devotion to him, Jesus promises a family of brothers and sisters in abundance, both in this life and in the life to come.

This reminds us that the starting point for Christian reflection on sexual morality should not be our cultural context, let alone our fallen sexual desires and intimate experiences as sinful human beings. Rather, the starting point for Christian reflection on sexual morality is our identity in Christ, in whom all of God’s purposes from creation have been fulfilled. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Our identity in Christ transcends all other identities, whether those that are consequences of the fall (such as slave and free, gay and straight) or those that are gifts of creation and redemption (such as male and female, married and celibate). First and foremost we are children of God, “heirs according to the promise,” and we are called to practice our sexuality in accord with this purpose.

Like Jesus, for Paul the Christian’s identity leads one to conceive of suffering differently. Along with the creation we groan, yearning for our redemption. “For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:20-21). We too groan as we experience frustration that does not stem from our own choice, and yet we have hope. We even “glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us” (5:3-5).

2. Marriage

Jesus’ teaching regarding the kingdom of God proclaimed a new inclusion of people with broken or defective sexuality, legitimized and honored the life of singleness, and diminished the significance of marriage and family. However, it did not in any way weaken the Old Testament sexual ethic. On the contrary, all of the evidence suggests that Jesus called his disciples to greater sexual holiness in fidelity to God’s purposes from creation.

⁸ “Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members,” *Acts of Synod 2002* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Reformed Church in North America, 2002), p. 323.

The most obvious expression of this has been skillfully explored in the synodical report on divorce and remarriage. As that report noted, Jesus speaks to the issues of divorce and/or remarriage in four places: Matthew 5:31-32; Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:2-9; and Luke 16:18. Although there are significant differences among these texts, their collective teaching is “unambiguously clear.” “Jesus stressed emphatically the permanence of marriage. Marriage is intended to be binding for life.”⁹

Of the four texts, Mark 10 and Luke 16:18 are the most comprehensive in their prohibition of divorce and remarriage, seeming to allow no exceptions whatsoever. In Matthew 5 and 19, however, Jesus allows for an exception in the case of *porneia*, or “sexual immorality.” Even here, however, it is not entirely clear whether or not the legitimacy of divorce in cases of sexual immorality necessarily renders remarriage appropriate for either of the divorced spouses. Matthew 5:32, taken by itself, implies that divorced persons may not remarry. Only the hotly disputed Matthew 19 gives some hint that remarriage may be permissible in certain cases. “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (19:9).

The 1980 report concludes that the word *porneia* refers to sexual infidelity, including adultery, incest, homosexual intercourse, and similar forms of unchastity. However, it emphasizes that “the accent appears to fall on persistent and unrepentant unchastity rather than on the single act itself.”¹⁰ In other words, while divorce is permissible in some cases of sexual immorality, this is only the case when such immorality is persistent and unrepentant. The report helpfully situates the Christian marital ethic in the context of the gospel of reconciliation, reminding Christians that reconciliation is always the goal when spouses have become estranged through sexual immorality or other causes.

The 1980 report also noted that the exception is best understood not as “a concession to an existing practice which violates the righteousness demanded by the creational norm for marriage.”¹¹ Rather, it reasserts the binding character of the creational norm against such concessions. Indeed, the report rejects the widespread notion that the exception clause is designed to offer “grounds” for divorce at all. Rather, “marriage *should* not be dissolved, for that is contrary to God’s will; but by persistent and unrepentant unchastity people *can* put asunder what God has joined together. Where such has happened, Jesus does not apply his condemnation upon the subsequent remarriage of the one who did not commit adultery.”¹²

Jesus did not simply condemn outward acts of unchastity, however. Like the book of Proverbs, he identified the root of sexual immorality as the lusts that come from the human heart (Matt. 15:19). Such lust, he declared in the Sermon on the Mount, is itself an inward form of adultery: “I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).

⁹ “Marriage Guidelines,” p. 473.

¹⁰ “Marriage Guidelines,” p. 474.

¹¹ “Marriage Guidelines,” pp. 474-75.

¹² “Marriage Guidelines,” p. 477.

The point of Jesus' teaching here is not to condemn the recognition of bodily beauty, nor the experience of being attracted to someone's bodily beauty. Such misinterpretations make a problem of bodily beauty itself. Inevitably they lead to all manner of legalistic regulations designed to hide the body and prevent interaction between men and women. The burden of such an interpretation has tended to fall upon women.

Jesus' purpose, in contrast, is to call his disciples to take responsibility for the way in which they gaze on or think about another person. One does not commit adultery in the heart by looking upon a woman, or even by being attracted to a woman. One commits adultery by looking "lustfully," or with lustful intent. The lustful gaze turns the other person into a mere object of desire and pleasure. It is a form of dehumanization that stems directly from the sinfulness and shame of the fall.

The net effect of Jesus' teaching is to call believers to reserve sex for marriage, as God intended from creation. Some believers may never marry, but all are called to avoid every form of sexual immorality and adultery, whether outwardly or in the thoughts of the heart and the gaze of the eyes. Christians are always to treat one another as brothers and sisters called to communion in the body of Christ.

The apostle Paul reinforces Jesus' teaching regarding sex and marriage by interpreting it in the context of Old Testament teaching. In 1 Thessalonians, thought to be Paul's earliest letter, Paul exhorts Christians, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

Paul's association of sexual immorality with "the pagans, who do not know God," is typical of Jewish assessments of the Gentiles. Paul, like most Jews, believed that the Gentiles were notorious for two kinds of sin in particular: sexual immorality and idolatry. As we have seen, the Old Testament prophets consistently associated sexual immorality with idolatry. Both sins were deemed to be distinctive expressions of rebellion against God. The same thought appears in Romans 1 and in 1 Corinthians, as we shall see.

Paul's antidote is to call the Thessalonian Christians, like the people of Israel of old, to holiness. Indeed, such holiness is essential to what it means to be God's people. To be God's people is to be different from the nations who do not know God. As God puts it to the Israelites in Exodus 19:5-6, "And now if you indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you will be to me a distinctive people out of all the nations. For the whole earth is mine. You will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Septuagint). Similar exhortations appear in Deuteronomy 26:18-19 and in Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7, 26; 22:32.

If the essence of holiness for the Israelites, therefore, was separation from the nations, Paul is urging Christians that for them too, the essence

of holiness consists in separation from the pagans who do not know God. To be sure, the wall between the nations has been broken down (Eph. 2), but God's will for his people has not changed: to be holy as he is holy (1 Peter 1:16). What has changed is that God has now poured out his Spirit on all nations, such that disciples of every nation can walk in the way of holiness. Thus, as this letter to Gentile Christians in Thessalonica testifies, Paul expects from the Thessalonians the same sort of holiness with respect to sexuality as he expects from Jewish Christians.

Paul's instructions here therefore reflect the judgment of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 that although Gentile Christians are not obligated to keep the whole law of Moses, they are nevertheless called "to abstain . . . from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:20).

Some scholars have argued that just as the early church had a hard time accepting the fact that the Spirit was working among Gentiles as well as Jews, so the contemporary church fails to see that the Spirit is working among LGBT persons as well. If such persons share in the fruit of the Spirit, it is argued, they should be welcomed into the church as well.¹³

What this argument ignores, however, is that the Gentiles were embraced into the church on the condition that they submitted to God's will regarding human sexuality. Indeed, in his letter to the Galatians, the major purpose of which was to clarify that Gentiles are saved by faith and not by obedience to the law of Moses, Paul expressly called the Galatians to give up the obvious works of the flesh, including sexual immorality, and to walk in the fruit of the Spirit, including self-control (Gal. 5:19, 23). "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (5:24-25). The mark of the Spirit's work, in short, includes repentance from sexual immorality.

Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians, then, interpreted quite literally, is not that they should separate themselves from the Gentiles. Most of the Thessalonian Christians were Gentiles! Rather, he says, they should separate themselves from "sexual immorality" (1 Thess. 4:3). Separation from sexual immorality, he is saying, is an essential part of Christian holiness. What does Paul mean by "sexual immorality"? Most scholars agree that the term *porneia* as used here by Paul refers in a general way to all kinds of sexual misconduct, no doubt against the backdrop of the sexual code of the law of Moses. To be holy, then, requires one to learn to control one's own body in obedience to the will of God.

Interestingly, for Paul, sexual immorality is not considered a victimless crime. On the contrary, Paul warns that to commit sexual immorality is to "wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister" (4:6). Sexual immorality is not an expression of love for another human being. It is a corruption of love that wrongs another human being.

It's also worth noting that here, as elsewhere, Paul warns the Thessalonians, "The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before" (4:6). Nor is this simply a word from Paul.

¹³ See especially Deirdre J. Good, Willis J. Jenkins, Cynthia B. Kittredge, Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., "A Theology of Marriage Including Same-Sex Couples: A View from the Liberals," *Anglican Theological Review* 93:1 (Winter, 2011): 51-87. Cf. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, pp. 9-10, 190-91.

“Therefore, anyone who rejects this instruction does not reject a human being but God, the very God who gives you his Holy Spirit” (4:8). Paul seems to leave believers with a choice. They can reject God’s call and live like the pagans do, according to the passions of their flesh, or they can embrace the call of God, knowing that he gives the Holy Spirit to those who seek him. This, ultimately, is the hope to which God calls them. God gives his Holy Spirit to all who seek him, as was once prophesied by the prophet Ezekiel, and the Spirit empowers all such disciples to live within the will of God.

Nowhere does Paul address questions of sexual immorality within the church more extensively or clearly than he does in 1 Corinthians, another of his earliest letters. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul commands the Corinthian Christians to expel from among them a man who was guilty of “sexual immorality,” specifically a form of incest that was prohibited by the law of Moses. Paul says that the Corinthians “should have put out of [their] fellowship the man who has been doing this” (5:2), that he has “already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this” (5:3), and that when the Corinthians are “assembled . . . and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, [they should] hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord” (5:4-5). Paul supports his argument by warning the Corinthians that “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough”—and he urges them, “Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch—as you really are” (5:6-7). The entire body is compromised by the failure of one person to repent of his sexual immorality.

Paul reminds them that he had already written to them in a previous letter (now lost) that they should not “associate with sexually immoral people” (5:9). His point, he says, was not that they should disassociate with nonbelievers who commit sexual immorality (or other sins like idolatry, greed, or swindling). Such would be impossible. “But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone *who claims to be a brother or sister* but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler” (5:11). In other words, the focus here is on those who would seek to be members of the church. Paul quotes from the Old Testament: “Expel the wicked person from among you” (5:13; quoting Deut. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,24; 24:7). Here, as in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul insists on repentance from sexual immorality as a definitive mark that distinguishes Christians from the world.

In the process of making the argument that the Corinthian church is to “judge those inside” the church (1 Cor. 5:12), Paul reminds the Corinthians that as saints destined by God to judge the world, believers need to learn to judge and arbitrate disputes for themselves (6:1-8). They are called to develop the wisdom necessary to judge among themselves, anticipating their future reality as those who will reign with Christ.

The point is not that Christians are perfect or do not themselves fall into sin. The point is that Christians, by definition, are those who have repented from their sin. Paul is well aware that believers may be deceived on precisely this point (what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would later call “cheap grace”): “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor

idolaters nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9-10). These sins had characterized the Corinthian Christians: "That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (6:11). Here, as in 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Acts, and in so many other places, it is the Spirit of God who empowers believers to repent from the passions of the flesh and to walk in the fruit of the Spirit.

It is essential to observe that Paul's argument in this section is not simply to show *that* sexual immorality is wrong. Rather, it is to show just *how* wrong sexual immorality is. Paul could not raise the stakes any higher than he does. Here again he treats sexual immorality much like he treats idolatry. He warns believers to "flee" two things: sexual immorality and idolatry. Like idolatry, unrepentant sexual immorality destroys one's place in the church and kingdom of God.

In 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 Paul refutes the claim made by some Corinthians that Christians have sexual freedom because what Christians do with the body does not matter. Paul's response is that the body does matter because it is destined for resurrection and communion with Christ, and sexual immorality is incompatible with this reality.

Paul begins by offering three specific rejoinders to claims being made by some Corinthians. The first two rejoinders Paul offers are to the same slogan: "I have the right to do anything" (see also 1 Cor. 10:23). It could be more literally translated as "All things are permissible." Paul's first response is that not all things are "beneficial" or "helpful" or "edifying." His second rejoinder is that "I will not be mastered by anything" (6:12). By making this argument, Paul brings the question of authority and ownership, as well as self-control, into the discussion. A Christian possesses liberty, but not so that she or he might once again become a slave to sin or to another human being. Rather, a Christian is given liberty so that she or he might be enslaved to God in Christ.

Finally, Paul addresses a slogan that at first glance has nothing to do with sexuality: "Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both." The Corinthians were evidently arguing that the body—or at least its basic functions—is not eternal, so what we do in carrying out our bodily functions—such as eating—is irrelevant for our future in Christ. Paul's response is to offer a statement parallel to the Corinthian slogan, undermining it at every point:

Food for the stomach . . . the stomach for food . . . God will destroy them both.

The body is for the Lord . . . the Lord for the body . . . God will raise them both.

The body is not for sexual immorality in the way that food is for the stomach, Paul says. Rather, the body has a purpose more ultimate than sexuality itself. That purpose is the believers' union with God in Christ. Thus sexuality is not an arena of Christian liberty like eating and drinking. On the contrary, sexuality has ultimate significance because the body is "for the Lord." This significance is enhanced by the astonishing fact that not only is the body for the Lord, but, as most scholars interpret the

second phrase, the Lord Jesus Christ laid down his own life in order to save the human body for communion with God.

Paul continues the argument by reminding the Corinthians that their bodies are members of Christ. Note the plural here. It is not simply that the church is corporately united to Christ. And it is not simply that believers are united to Christ in their souls. Rather, the individual bodies of believers are members of Christ. Each Christian body—including the dimension of its sexuality as male or female—is a part of the body of Christ. What we do with our bodies, therefore, we do with the body of Christ. Paul illustrates his point with the example of prostitution, but the argument itself applies to all forms of sexual immorality.

Like Jesus, Paul draws his argument from an appeal to creation, specifically Genesis 2:24. As appears from the structure of the argument, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24, “The two will become one flesh,” to substantiate his claim that a man who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body. In other words, sex is of profound significance because it establishes a one-flesh union. And that one-flesh union either is or is not consistent with the believer’s bodily union with Christ. Thus sexual immorality is not simply a violation of the will of God. Much more, it is incompatible with union with Christ.

To be sure, all sin is ultimately incompatible with our union with Christ, but Paul’s point here is that sexual immorality is *especially* incompatible with that union. Why? Because, as he has argued from Genesis 2:24, it involves the body in a deeply intimate one-flesh union that is of profound significance for human beings. In other words, sex has meaning—profound meaning. As we have seen, it is wrapped up with our creation in God’s image as male and female, and Paul is now teaching us that it also involves a level of bodily intimacy directly relevant to God’s purposes for us in communion with Christ.

This conclusion is reinforced by what comes next. Scholars do not agree on what Paul means when he says, “Flee from sexual immorality! All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). But the primary reason for their disagreement is that modern readers struggle with the claim that sexual immorality is a particularly grave sin. Yet in context it is clear that this is precisely what Paul is saying. Sexual union is so significant, constituting two human beings as one body, that sexual immorality involves a particularly grave sin against the body that cannot be tolerated within the body of Christ.

This argument is reinforced by the logic of verses 19-20. The body is not just destined for resurrection and union with Christ. The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, the bond of union with Christ. Paul reverses his typical word order here to emphasize the holiness of the Spirit, and hence the holiness of the body. His argument connects the New Testament rationale for sexual holiness to the Old Testament rationale: the presence of God must be manifest in sexual holiness!

Finally, Paul reminds the Corinthians that, having been united with Christ and inhabited by the Holy Spirit, they are no longer their own masters. This brings us back to the original Corinthian slogan, “I have the right to do anything.” On the contrary, Paul uses the metaphor of slavery

(or is it prostitution?) to remind the Corinthians that they were bought with a price. They are slaves of God and slaves of righteousness, and the price was nothing less than the body and blood of Christ, with whom they have been united. At the heart of Paul's concern, then, is a question of ownership and authority. In the way that they exercise their sexuality, human beings demonstrate whether or not they are servants of God.

This is the context for Paul's discussion of marriage and singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, which we partially considered earlier. Paul advises some Christians not to marry, but he instructs those who struggle with self-control to marry. The main point is that all Christians, whether married or single, are called to honor God with their bodies. Those who are married are called to sexual faithfulness and to mutual submission in their sexual relationship. "The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife" (7:4).

Paul also reminds believers that while it is good not to marry, once they are married a husband and a wife may not separate from one another. As he puts it, "A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife" (7:10-11). The report on divorce and remarriage rightly concludes that "Paul commands that if the wife does separate from/divorce her husband, she should either remain single or be reconciled to her husband."¹⁴ Paul says nothing, at least in the case of two believing Christians, about a potential right to remarry.

However, Paul goes on to consider the case in which a Christian is married to a nonbeliever. It is a testimony to the inviolability of marriage within a creational ethic that unbelief on the part of one of the spouses is not considered grounds for divorce. On the contrary, the unbelieving spouse is considered holy by virtue of his or her union with the believing spouse! The same is true for the children of such a union (1 Cor. 7:12-14). It could not be clearer that God does not want human beings to tear apart those whom he has joined together.

Here, however, Paul does offer an exception, although even in this case there is dispute about what exactly he means to allow. He declares that if the unbelieving spouse abandons the believing spouse, the believing spouse is "not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace" (7:15). Here too Paul seems to have the goal of reconciliation in view. He reminds the believing wife or husband that God may use his or her faithfulness and peace as a means of saving the unbelieving spouse (7:16).

Paul called Christians to great sexual holiness in another respect as well. Though the New Testament says relatively little about it, Paul's instructions regarding elders and deacons indicates that Christians were expected to avoid polygamy (1 Tim. 3:2).

3. The ultimate meaning of marriage

All of this is evidence enough that Paul, like Jesus, took marriage seriously as an institution established by God at creation. However, in one respect Paul went beyond Jesus, and even beyond the Old Testament, in articulating the supreme significance of marriage. Building, perhaps,

¹⁴ "Marriage Guidelines," p. 477.

on the Old Testament prophets' tendency to use marriage as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people, Paul argues that, as the report on marriage and divorce puts it, "What has happened in Christ unfolds the meaning of the creational institution of marriage."¹⁵

The context of Paul's declaration about the ultimate meaning of marriage is his instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:22-33. In a manner that was at most implied in the Old Testament, Paul appeals to the union between Christ and the church as a means of elevating the purpose and conduct of men and women within marriage. It is striking that he explicitly invokes the relationship between Christ and the church as the model for marriage in virtually every verse of this passage: 22, 23, 24, 25-27, 28, 29-30, 31-32.

Paul writes that wives are to submit to their husbands as to the Lord, but he says a lot more about the ways in which husbands should love and serve their wives as Christ loved and served the church. Interestingly, Paul describes Christ's love for the church—the model of husbands' love for their wives—in terms of forms of service generally associated with the work of women or servants.

And yet, Paul does not invoke the relationship between Christ and the church as a mere analogy for marriage. In one of the most profound comments on marriage found in Scripture, he points to a meaning of marriage deeper than that found in creation itself, though ultimately foreshadowed from creation. Speaking of Christ's love for the church as a model for a husband's love for his wife, Paul writes, "For we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:30-32).

The report on divorce and remarriage summarized the point this way: "The basic purpose of God for marriage was especially illumined and enriched by the revelation of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul declares that the creational institution of marriage, which affirms that husband and wife become one flesh (Eph. 5:31), contains a mystery (Eph. 5:32). This mystery has now been revealed in the union of Christ and his church. . . . Thus marriage is fully understood and achieves its deepest meaning only when it reflects this spiritual union of Christ and his church."¹⁶

The report rightly explains the meaning of the word *mystery* in the context of Paul's other uses of the word in the letter to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 1:9-10 Paul writes that God has "made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." By *mystery*, the 1980 report explains, "Paul refers to that which was not previously known or fully known but which has now been revealed in Jesus Christ."¹⁷

¹⁵ "Marriage Guidelines," p. 470.

¹⁶ "Marriage Guidelines," p. 469.

¹⁷ "Marriage Guidelines," p. 469.

The word appears again in Ephesians 3:3-4, 6, 9. Paul refers to “the mystery made known to me by revelation . . . which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets . . . that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (3:3-6). Here again the word *mystery* refers to something that was for a long time not understood, but that was finally revealed through the gospel. And here again the mystery points to God’s purpose of bringing unity out of division, in this case unity between Jews and Gentiles in the one body of Christ.

Against this background, it is impossible not to see the same theme in Ephesians 5. Here again we have two different things being brought together in a unity that is identified in a certain sense with the body of Christ. “For we are members of his body. ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church” (5:30-32).

The mystery, then, is that in the union of male and female in marriage, described in Genesis 2:24, God intended to reveal something about his purpose of uniting humanity with Christ. People could not have known this before it was revealed through Christ, but now it has been revealed. And now believers are called to practice this meaning in their marriages. As the 1980 report puts it, “By ‘mystery’ Paul means that in Genesis 2:24 lies an unknown or not fully known intention of God which is now revealed in the relationship of Christ and his church. . . . Thus in the relationship (or marriage) of Christ to his people, *God actually fulfills the basic goal or purpose of the institution of marriage*”¹⁸ (emphasis added).

It is therefore no accident that in its culminating passages the New Testament describes the ultimate union of God with his people as a wedding feast. John describes the new Jerusalem as “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband,” Christ (Rev. 21:2). The angel describes the city descended from heaven as “the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:9). Outside that city, John tells us, are “the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (22:15). Indeed, “the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ because they know that this is the wedding for which they were created, and for which they have been yearning all along.

This truth is of the profoundest significance for a biblical theology of sexuality and marriage. God’s creation of human beings in his image as male and female (Gen. 1:27) was designed to point toward his ultimate purpose for human beings in communion with God in Christ. Thus sexuality was designed all along to reflect this communion. Marriage itself will pass away, but its ultimate meaning will endure in the kingdom and family of God. One need not be married in this life in order to enjoy this ultimate reality.

As the 1980 report puts it, “Scripture indicates that marriage is not necessary as a Christian obligation, nor is it necessary for personal fulfillment. All that is necessary for discipleship and fulfillment is membership in the family of God by which one participates in the marriage between Christ and his church.”¹⁹ It might even be said that those who choose the path of celibacy

¹⁸ “Marriage Guidelines,” p. 470.

¹⁹ “Marriage Guidelines,” p. 471.

for the sake of the kingdom, such as Jesus and Paul, are able to anticipate this ultimate reality in a particularly focused way (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

This does not mean that marriage and family are in any sense less worthy of Christians. It does mean, however, that they find their “highest goal and ultimate purpose” in serving “the establishment and welfare of the family of God.” Thus “marriage and family are not ends in themselves. When marriage and family become ends in themselves or serve only personal goals, they have become idols.”²⁰ This serves as a rebuke to people who are tempted to view marriage as the best life for Christians. It likewise serves as a rebuke to those who are tempted to view marriage as an entitlement that cannot be withheld from those who desire it. It reminds us that marriage cannot be altered at human whim because it is a gift from God grounded in God’s purposes from creation and fulfilled in God’s purposes in Christ.

IV. Tentative plan for the final report

In our final report, to be considered by Synod 2021, we intend to fully satisfy our mandate by adding two additional sections.

The first and larger section will explore numerous issues of human sexuality facing the church today, potentially including, in varying degrees of detail, hookup culture, premarital sex, cohabitation, singleness, celibacy, polyamory, pornography, sexual assault, sexual harassment, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, gender dysphoria, disorders of sex development, and gender transitioning. On some of these topics (pornography, homosexuality, gender dysphoria, disorders of sex development, and gender transitioning) we have already completed a significant portion of our work. Our tentative plan is to explore these issues in three parts: (1) an analysis of the issues in our current cultural context, (2) a presentation of scriptural teaching as it must shape our approach to each issue, and (3) proposals for pastoral care.

The second section will explore the confessional status of church teaching on sexuality in light of our current confessions and the teaching of Scripture. It will also consider the question of whether or not the church should consider adopting a new statement of faith on sexuality. For the purposes of this interim report, we would like the churches to study the Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality (see Appendix below), which has recently been commended for consideration by churches and classes in the Reformed Church in America (<http://images.rca.org/docs/synod/GLCatechism.pdf>).

Committee to Articulate a Foundation-laying Biblical Theology of Human Sexuality

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²⁰ “Marriage Guidelines,” p. 471.

Appendix

Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality

1 Q: Is human sexuality a good thing or not?

A: It is good! We see in Scripture that God created us male and female as part of the creation order, that our sexuality is an inherent part of being human, and that our sexuality is part of what God calls “very good” in the beginning.¹

Moreover, God created man and woman as full partners, together bearing God’s image² and together receiving God’s blessing and call to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth, and subdue it. rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that lives on the ground.”³

2 Q: But isn’t the body or the “flesh” the root cause of our sin and temptation?

A: Certainly not! Our sin problem is not ultimately a body or sex problem; it is a heart problem— we do not desire God as we should and so we desire other things in a way we should not.⁴

3 Q: May we then look to our bodies and sexual desires to learn what is right?

A: No. Our expressions of sexuality are distorted and twisted by sin. Sin warps us in many ways, including our desires, thoughts, and actions pertaining to our sexuality.

Because our sexuality is affected by the fall, we should not act on our desires, inclinations, or thoughts without first testing them by what Scripture teaches is honorable, right, pure, and lovely.⁵

4 Q: So Scripture is the source from which we learn what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in our sexual lives?

A: Yes. Scripture is the infallible rule for our lives.⁶

This means that we look to it to understand who God is and who we are called to be as God’s people.

In this world, we are called to test all teaching about marriage and sexuality by Scripture, and we must not put human writings,

¹ Gen. 1:31

² Gen. 1:27

³ Gen. 1:28

⁴ Jer. 17:9; James 1:14-15

⁵ Phil. 4:8

⁶ Belgic Confession, art. 7

custom or tradition,
the majority opinion,
the thinking of our own time and place,
or even past decisions of the church,
above the truth of God,
For God's truth is above everything.⁷

5 Q: Who should we consider our family?

A: Though many may consider their biological family their first family,
Jesus teaches us that those who are his disciples,
who are united by one Lord and one baptism into God's
covenant people,
should be considered our primary family.

6 Q: Does this mean our earthly families are unimportant?

A: No. In fact, Scripture teaches us that we are to honor our parents,⁸
and that we should faithfully love our spouses and children.⁹

Nevertheless, we are called to seek first the kingdom of God.¹⁰
God's mission and vocation must shape all my relationships.
Though earthly families are good and a blessing,
they may become an idol if we make them our ultimate priority or
loyalty.
All earthly loyalties and obligations,
including those of family,
must be subject to the lordship of Jesus.

7 Q: Since marriage and family are good, is it necessary to be married?

A: No. During his earthly ministry,
Jesus showed us that true human fulfillment does not need to
include marriage or sex.
Yet, the life of Jesus most certainly included close, intimate
relationships with those he called family.

8 Q: But why do many people in my church expect young adults to get married and raise a family?

A: The goal for all Christians is not marriage,
but, whether married or single,
to live decent and chaste lives.¹¹

In the beginning, God blessed marriage and he calls many Christians
to live out their discipleship in the context of marriage.

⁷ Belgic Confession, art. 7

⁸ Ex. 20:12; Eph. 6:1

⁹ Eph. 5:21-6:4

¹⁰ Matt. 6:33; Matt. 12:46-50

¹¹ Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 108

Nevertheless, Christians sometimes idolize marriage and family and promote the unbiblical teaching that a person can only find fulfillment and happiness in the context of a marriage and family.

However, this expectation is contrary to Scripture, which teaches that many Christians will be unmarried,¹² whether through choice or circumstance, and that they live a true, fully human life, as our Savior did.

9 Q: How then should we view the single, celibate life?

A: Singleness can serve as a sign and reminder to married people that our most basic calling is to seek first the kingdom of God,¹³ not our earthly families.

In addition, the single person's life points us ahead to the life to come, when we will neither marry nor be given in marriage.¹⁴

10 Q: Why did God institute marriage between man and woman?

A: Though many see marriage simply as a path to personal fulfillment, happiness, or self-realization, or a relationship that may be dissolved if they are dissatisfied, Scripture teaches that God instituted marriage between a man and woman as a sign of Christ and the church,¹⁵ as a state of mutual help for life's journey,¹⁶ as a relationship in which married Christians are sanctified,¹⁷ and in order to provide for the continuation of the human race¹⁸ and the raising of children into a life of faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁹

11 Q: Should we view the duties and obligations of marriage and family as a hindrance to the truly spiritual life?

A: No. When properly understood, we see that faithful devotion to one's spouse and faithful care of one's children are not merely "earthly" or "natural" matters but are in fact key elements of a faithful walk with Christ.²⁰

Furthermore, the married person is a sign and reminder to single people that, just as a husband or wife has obligations to their spouse and family, so we all have obligations to the family of God.

¹² 1 Cor. 7:29-40

¹³ 1 Cor. 7:33-35; Matt. 6:33

¹⁴ Matt. 22:30

¹⁵ Eph. 5:31-32

¹⁶ Gen. 2:18

¹⁷ John 13:34; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:3; Eph. 5:21; 1 Pet. 5:5; 1 Cor. 7:4-5; Gal. 6:2; 1 Thess. 5:11

¹⁸ Gen. 1:28; Ps. 127:3

¹⁹ Deut. 6:4-9

²⁰ Eph. 5:21-6:4

12 Q: What is the meaning of sexual union?

A: God created man and woman to be able to unite not only our bodies, but our very lives and selves as husband and wife.

In marriage, husbands and wives give themselves completely to one another,
and the one-flesh sexual union embodies the fact
that these two persons are no longer two, but one flesh.²¹

13 Q: But isn't sexual union just a physical act?

A: No. It is certainly more than that.

In fact, when we reduce sex to a merely physical or biological act, we end up reducing other image-bearers of God to mere objects to be used.

We see this abuse and hatred of our neighbor all around us,²²
in pornography,
prostitution,
rape,
promiscuity,
cohabitation apart from marriage,
and sexual union outside of the covenant of marriage.

14 Q: How, then, should we understand sexual union?

A: Sexual union is a part of the total giving of oneself—
body and soul, indeed one's whole self—
to one's spouse,
just as God in Christ gave himself completely to his bride, the Church.²³

And just as God is a faithful God who gives himself to us in covenant,²⁴
so sexual union is a covenantal act
that commits one to faithful, lifelong love to one's spouse.²⁵

Sexual union is also meant to be a free act, entered into without coercion,
but freely and graciously,
as God in Christ freely and graciously loves us.²⁶

²¹ Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; Mark 10:7-8; 1 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:31

²² Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 5

²³ Phil. 2:5-8

²⁴ Ex. 34:6-7

²⁵ Mal. 2:16.

²⁶ Rom. 8:32

And finally, God created husband and wife so that they fruitfully participate in the miracle of new life.²⁷ Just as God's life and creativity brought us forth,²⁸ so children are not to be seen as a nuisance or impediment to the marriage relationship but as gifts of God,²⁹ disciples to be raised in the training and instruction of the Lord.³⁰

15 Q: Does Scripture limit marriage and sexual union to a husband and wife?

A: Scripture consistently teaches that the difference between a woman and man in marriage is essential to properly represent, symbolically, Christ and the church, to the one-flesh act of sexual union and one-flesh relationship of covenantal marriage, and for the bringing of children into the world.

In Scripture, bodies matter.

We are saved by the body of Christ, broken for us, and his blood, shed for our sins.

Without Christ's body, we cannot be saved.

Furthermore, in the sacraments, we see that the material elements matter.

God does not merely give us grace through invisible means

but gives us visible signs and seals,

which are not empty and hollow signs

but which have their truth in Jesus Christ,

without whom they would be nothing.³¹

In a similar way, bodies matter in marriage,

which is defined in part by the sexual difference

of male and female, who together—body and soul—bear the image of God

and symbolize Christ and the church.

Thus, marriage is not defined merely by the will or desire of any individual

but by the recognition that our Creator and Redeemer God has instituted marriage

to take a certain form, with certain kinds of bodies:

“A man leaves his father and mother

and is united to his wife,

and they become one flesh.”³²

²⁷ Gen. 1:28; Ps. 139:13-14

²⁸ Gen. 2:4-7, 18-22; Job 10:8-9.

²⁹ Ps. 127:3-5; Gen. 21:1; Gen. 30:22; 1 Sam. 1:19; Ps. 139:13-14

³⁰ Eph. 6:1-4; Deut. 6:4-9

³¹ Belgic Confession, art. 33

³² Gen. 2:24

16 Q: Does Scripture really condemn all same-sex sexual activity?

A: Yes. Scripture consistently and categorically condemns sexual activity between persons of the same sex as immoral. Genesis 1-2 presents the male-female relationship as God's design for marriage. The Torah given by God to Israel teaches that same-sex sexual activity is wrong.³³ Jesus re-affirms the teaching of Genesis on marriage, that marriage is between a man and woman.³⁴ The early church condemns same-sex sexual activity when they condemn "sexual immorality," a term that points back to Leviticus 18 and encompasses all forms of sexual sin,³⁵ and the New Testament writers re-affirm the sexual ethics of Torah, including specific condemnations of incest, adultery, and same-sex sexual activity.³⁶

17 Q: Does the Bible especially condemn same-sex sexual activity above other sins, sexual or otherwise?

A: No. Scripture never singles out same-sex sexual activity as a worse sin than others.

18 Q: What should characterize our attitudes and actions toward those who are same-sex attracted, whether inside or outside the church?

A. We must first remember that there is a difference between being same-sex attracted, and acting sexually on that attraction. Just as there is a difference between being attracted to people of the opposite sex,
And acting sexually on that attraction.

Furthermore, though Scripture condemns sexual sin, it also condemns all forms of mockery, degrading words and thoughts, economic oppression, abuse, threats, and violence against anyone based on their sexual identity or activity.³⁷

Anyone involved in such behavior must repent and walk in obedience to Jesus' command to love.

³³ Lev. 18:22

³⁴ Matt. 19:1-10

³⁵ Acts 15:19-20

³⁶ 1 Cor. 5:1-2; 1 Cor. 6:9-20; 1 Tim. 1:10

³⁷ Belhar Confession, art. 4. Luke 6:31; Lev. 19:9-18; Prov. 6:16-19

19 Q: What about those who fail to keep fully Scripture’s teaching on marriage and sexuality? How should we view them?

A: We must first remember that “they” are us!³⁸

We are all sinners

saved by God’s extravagant grace.

We must therefore see all people with the eyes of Jesus,
who looks on us with compassion.

We must also remember that we should not expect people who are not
disciples of Jesus to act as though they are.

Indeed, Scripture teaches us that we should expect to interact and
associate with those who are idolaters and sexually immoral
as part of our daily life in this world.³⁹

But as disciples of Jesus, we are also called

to teach, rebuke, correct, and even discipline one another,⁴⁰

for we know that without discipline,

we dare not call ourselves the church of Jesus Christ.⁴¹

And we do not love one another in this way merely

for the sake of following the rules or keeping human traditions

but because God’s life-giving Spirit empowers and equips us

for a life of faith and gratitude,⁴²

for which we were made and to which we are called.

³⁸ Rom. 2:1-4

³⁹ 1 Cor. 5:9-10

⁴⁰ Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:11-13; 2 Cor. 2:5-11

⁴¹ Belgic Confession, art. 29

⁴² Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 32 & 33