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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)

The following people were appointed to the committee: Rev. Mary-Lee Bouma, Pastor 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 item 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 met on the following dates: October 21-22, 2016; February 3-4, June 2-3, October 20-21, 2017; February 16-17, June 15-16, October 19-20, 2018; February 1-2, June 21-22, October 25-26, 2019; January 31-February 1, 2020. With two exceptions, these meetings took place at Calvin Theological Seminary until February 2020. After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee met by Zoom on June 13, July 30, August 20, and September 11, 2020.

At four of our meetings we set aside time to interact with people in specialized ministries or life situations whose input we sought. On October 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 October 20, 2018, with two CRC university chaplains. On May 28, 2020, we met via Zoom with a FtM (female to male) transgender person and his father.

In fulfillment of item c of our mandate, we submitted an interim report to Synod 2019 (see *Agenda for Synod 2019*, pp. 403-44; *Acts of Synod 2019*, pp. 716-17). Three of our members (Mary-Lee Bouma, Matt Tuininga, and Jeff Weima) were present to facilitate discussions at table groups to solicit feedback. Each table group provided written feedback, which was collected and sent to our committee. In addition, we received email feedback from approximately forty-five persons. We reviewed this feedback as part of our work on the final report.

Dr. Tuininga participated extensively in the committee's work, but he withdrew from the committee before that work was complete. He affirms that the sections of the report summarizing biblical teaching on human sexuality and its confessional status are accurate. However, he believes the pastoral care sections fail to provide the church with much-needed guidance on how to discipline erring members with love and grace and incorporate them into the sacramental community of the body of Christ.

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, Andrew,^{*} each have deep personal relationships with other people that include sexual intimacy, now that they practice polyamory. She and Andrew 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 The names of the people in these stories have been 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 use of porn. 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 done so 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 in their 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 that her teachers suspect some of these things, but her parents have no idea what these teens are doing or thinking.

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. In sex, our senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch are all engaged, 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 human beings, God proclaimed his creation very good. Jesus was born human, and in his glorified body he 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 as the bridegroom of 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 have begun 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 describing 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 as much sexual abuse as every other organization?
- 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 marriage, the more quaint or even bizarre Jesus’ teaching on celibate singleness or lifelong monogamous 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.

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), pp. 433-40.

Divorce, sexual abuse, and pornography use are only marginally less common in the church than 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 we 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 de-grade 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, 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 we 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 re-marriage. 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 people 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 you 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 “those that have young” (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 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 gender

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 cultural 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. Affirm 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, wives and husbands, 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 countercultural 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.

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 (white), 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 (white), 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 (white, Asian, and Latino) participate in New Life CRC.^{*} Some are Jesus-followers; others are spiritually seeking. Meanwhile, longtime church member Michelle, 45 (white), has quietly lived with a female lover—a member of a different church. Michelle becomes friends with a new church member who left her own lover to follow Jesus. Amazed at the honest conversations they have about life and sexuality, Michelle finds herself cultivating an intimate relationship with Jesus. To participate more fully in church life, Michelle rearranges her work travel schedule as a regional nurse; she begins introducing the pastor and others from church to friends and colleagues. Some months later, she tells her life partner that she can no longer be her lover but plans to stay in the relationship since her partner is now elderly.

^{3*} Name changed to protect identity.

When Walter,* 61 (black), was in his thirties and one of the most faithful members of the church choir and the church adult education program, he dared tell only one person in church that he deeply longed for sexual intimacy with a man. Over the years, this woman listened as he expressed his rage, grief, and hopelessness. A few times, discouragement and hopelessness overtook him. Although not knowing the reason for his despair, 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 bigger city, to find a Christian man to marry. In that new city, where he joined another CRC, he instead found a woman who delighted in him and who chose to share his life. After good counseling, they married, and they 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,* 22 (white), tells her pastor she wants to transition to being a man but doesn't know how she could fit into the church. Knowing that Emily has very little money and is looking for work, her pastor, Amanda,* takes her to the thrift store to buy some pants and jackets she would 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,* Korean Americans and new believers, 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 or 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, whom God calls 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, NIV). 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 with, 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. They asked him, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3, 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 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 19:16-26). 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 cosmos. 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 the designation of male and female points forward to the following verse: "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). Here the humans are blessed with fertility and instructed to multiply, fill, and subdue. The humans are created in the image of God for the purpose of ruling the earth. The blessing of God will enable the realization of that rule.

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 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 2:4-25 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' [Gen. 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' [Gen. 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 receives even more attention in Genesis 2 than it does in Genesis 1. God creates an isolated human being, *adam*. In contrast to the repeated "it is good" in Genesis 1, after placing the man in the garden in Genesis 2 God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18a). Drawing on Genesis 1, at least part of the problem is that on his own, the man cannot be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth. So God determines to "make a helper suitable for him" (Gen. 2:18b). 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-his-opposite"—or *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 the reason why it was not good for the man to be alone was that he lacked intimate companionship.⁴ Genesis 2 certainly seems to strongly imply that need. But in the context of Genesis 1, the man is clearly lacking more than this. 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 interesting that at this point, the Hebrew text first uses the gendered terms for *man* and *woman*. Now 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*]” (Gen. 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). Sexual intimacy is intended for 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 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.⁶

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,

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.

⁵ See Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, pp. 32-34, 85-109.

⁶ Brownson bases his exegetical proposal on two authorities: the Hebrew lexicon of Brown, Driver, and Briggs and the Genesis commentary of Gordon Wenham. The first refers to “flesh” (Hebrew *basar*) as meaning “kindred” in the sense of “blood relations,” but this does not apply to married couples after the first few generations following Adam and Eve. The second states that “just as blood relations are one’s flesh and bone, so marriage creates a *similar* relation between man and wife.” To say that the marriage relationship is in some ways similar to that of blood relations is not to say that it itself is such a relationship. It should also be pointed out that Wenham here explicitly speaks of the marriage relationship as one between man and wife.

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."⁷ 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.

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?" (3:11). 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 (3:15). From this time forward God-fearing men and women 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 relationship between husband and wife would give way to conflict and domineering. Sexuality after the fall would

⁷ "Marriage Guidelines," *Acts of Synod 1980* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Reformed Church, 1980), p. 470.

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 still 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 rulers and priests within the temple of creation, Exodus and Leviticus were given to teach the people of Israel how to be rulers and priests within the promised 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 the 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 had the potential to result 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 already in Leviticus 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). Further, 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 young men 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 lover’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 21st-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 exemplary 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 sexual 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. Although 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.⁸ And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me 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?’ Pointing to 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; 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” (Luke 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.⁹

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 that ethic. Still, the good news of the kingdom of God creates a new reality for

⁸ 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.

⁹ Some exegetes and theologians make the case that Jesus’ words refer to the transformation, not the abolition, of marriage in the eschaton. See, for example, the Reformed theologian Hans Schaeffer, *Createdness and Ethics: The Doctrine of Creation and Theological Ethics in the Theology of Colin E. Gunton and Oswald Bayer* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), pp. 331-40.

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 sexuality—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" (1 Cor. 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" (1 Cor. 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 this gift? 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 (NRSV) 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 (NIV), “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.”¹⁰ 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” (Gal. 3:29), and we are called to practice our sexuality in accord with this purpose.

For Paul, as for Jesus, the Christian’s identity leads one to conceive of suffering differently. Along with the creation we groan, yearning for

¹⁰ “Pastoral Care for Homosexual Members,” *Acts of Synod 2002*, p. 323.

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” (Rom. 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.

The most obvious expression of this calling has been skillfully explored in the 1980 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.”¹¹

Of the four texts, Mark 10:2-9 and Luke 16:18 are the most comprehensive in their prohibition of divorce and remarriage, seeming to allow no exceptions whatsoever. In Matthew 5:31-32 and 19:3-9, 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 rendered 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 19:9 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.”

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.”¹² In other words, while divorce is permissible in some cases of sexual immorality, that 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

¹¹ “Marriage Guidelines,” *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 473.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 474.

demanded by the creational norm for marriage."¹³ 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."¹⁴

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).

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

¹³ Ibid., pp. 474-75.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 477.

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; and 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. 2:14), but God's will for his people has not changed: to be holy as he is holy (1 Pet. 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 those in same-sex sexual relationships as well. If such persons share in the fruit of the Spirit, it is argued, they should be considered members in good standing in the church as well.¹⁵

What that 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.

¹⁵ 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), pp. 51-87. Cf. Brownson, *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, pp. 9-10, 190-91.

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" (1 Thess. 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" (1 Thess. 4:6). Nor is this simply a word from Paul. "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), and Paul adds that he has "already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this" (5:3). Further, he says 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; see 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” (1 Cor. 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 so many other passages, 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 are to the same slogan: “I have the right to do anything” (see also 1 Cor. 10:23). This slogan 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 “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” (1 Cor. 6:13). 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 each point (6:13-14): “The body . . . is . . . for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,” and as “God raised the Lord from the dead . . . he will raise us also” (i.e., 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” (1 Cor. 6:16). 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 in the next two verses: 1 Cor. 6:19-20. There Paul explains that 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 Corinthian slogan mentioned earlier: "I have the right to do anything" (1 Cor. 6:12). To drive his point home, Paul uses the metaphor of slavery (or is it prostitution?) to remind the Corinthians that they were "bought at a price" (6:20). Instead of being their own masters, 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" (1 Cor. 7:10-11). The 1980 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."¹⁶ 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).

¹⁶ *Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 477.

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. Paul 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” (1 Cor. 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).

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, 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.”¹⁷

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 (see vv. 22, 23, 24, 25-27, 28-30, 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

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 470.

marriage is fully understood and achieves its deepest meaning only when it reflects this spiritual union of Christ and his church.”¹⁸

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.”¹⁹

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*”²⁰ (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!’” (22:17), because they know that this is the

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 469.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 470.

wedding for which human beings 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."²¹ It might even be said that those who choose the path of celibacy 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."²² 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. Note on science and general revelation

Our mandate includes "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" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920). In fulfillment of the second part of this point regarding scientific knowledge, we surveyed the available scientific evidence regarding various matters of sexuality addressed in the following sections (and in the appendices). Readers should note that our review and interpretation of the scientific evidence in the following sections of this report on pornography, gender identity, and homosexuality is not "objective" or "neutral" but, rather, viewed through the lens of Scripture.

In discussions about the relationship between science and biblical interpretation it is important to remind ourselves of the Reformed understanding of the relationship of general and special revelation. As Article 2 of the Belgic Confession reminds us, God reveals himself in two ways: through his written Word and through creation. These two revelations of God, special and

²¹ Ibid., p. 471.

²² Ibid.

general, must be read in the light of one another, but *special revelation has a cognitive priority* because it is couched in human language that can be readily understood. To borrow a strikingly helpful image from John Calvin, the special revelation of Scripture functions as a pair of eyeglasses without which we cannot properly read the book of creation.

In a landmark report to Synod 1972 on “The Nature and Extent of Biblical Authority” the matter is put plainly:

In both creation and Scripture God addresses us with full authority. The conflicts that sometimes arise are due to discrepancies in our responses to these two modes of revelation. As Reformed Christians we must take both revelations seriously. Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing science as a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate. Therefore we must seek to profit from and make thankful use of the findings of science as seen in the light of Scripture. Motivated by these convictions we often discover that the results of scientific investigation become the occasion for reviewing and sometimes, upon further biblical reflection, even revising certain standing interpretations of the Bible. When in faithful obedience to God’s full-orbed revelation we are led to a re-evaluation of certain biblical data, we should not resist such insights as lead us to a clearer understanding of both Scripture and creation in their revelational unity.

(*Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 540)

This forthright acknowledgement of the value of science is then immediately followed by an equally forthright warning against giving science as much weight as Scripture:

The church may not, however, allow its message to be made dependent upon the scientific enterprise, nor allow scientific findings to dictate its interpretation of the Bible, nor allow the claims of science to call into question its confession of biblical authority, nor allow any science, including theology, to determine what is believable and what is not believable in the Bible. For such concessions to science would mean reversing the right order of Christian thinking. Scripture itself is the lamp to our feet and the light upon our path as we walk through the various fields of academic inquiry.

We find a similar balanced treatment of the relationship between the claims of science and Scripture in the study report to Synod 1991 on “Creation and Science.” Against the reservations of Reformed theologians like G. C. Berkouwer, who was skeptical about linking science and general revelation, that report reaffirms that science (and human knowledge in general) can be understood as a legitimate cultural *response* to general revelation, but it warns against identifying the two. Instead it stresses that science itself is “at bottom a religious affair,” governed by presuppositions and control beliefs that may be quite alien to God’s revelation (*Agenda for Synod 1991*, pp. 374-76).

Unfortunately, the mistaken idea that science can simply be equated with general revelation continues to appear in Reformed circles. We find a striking example in the Classis Grand Rapids East Study Report on “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage.” It cites the above-mentioned 1972 report as follows: “Taking Scripture seriously leads to recognizing science as *a form of revelation given by God and a legitimate expression of the cultural mandate*” (*Acts of Synod 1972*, p. 540). Significantly, the words here italicized are not found in the original synodical report but were added to the original sentence (see classisgreast.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ssmRevised.pdf, p. 43). To thus equate science with God’s revelation, thereby giving it divine authority, is a

serious error and makes a mockery of the Reformation teaching concerning *sola Scriptura*.

Rather than investing science with divine authority, it is better to stress that science is provisional, that its theories involve various levels of uncertainty, that its authority is that of the consensus of the scientific community, and that it focuses strictly on physical processes. These cautionary attributes of science are rightly stressed by the study report to Synod 2012 on “Creation Stewardship” (see *Agenda for Synod 2012*, pp. 292-94). If these qualifications apply to the physical sciences, they apply even more to the social sciences and humanities. As Reformed Christians, we have long recognized—indeed, stressed—that science is not a religiously neutral affair. Although we may speak of a general revelation (and even divine authority) which comes through in the data and phenomena with which the sciences deal, those data and phenomena are to be sharply distinguished from the consensus theories that scientists develop about them.

V. Pornography: Cultural context

A. Current context

Pornography is widely used and accepted in contemporary North American culture. Comedians, TV shows, and films refer to online pornography as a normal part of everyday life. People can consume it in any private or public setting through phones or other small devices. Porn has become accessible, anonymous, and affordable.

Studies suggest that most men and growing numbers of women and children regularly use pornography. Empowered by staggering profits, the porn industry funds constant development of innovative and persistent lures to potential consumers, including unsuspecting children. Some free porn sites produce pop-up ads after viewers click on their links in order to turn new or casual users into regular viewers. Although children are often exposed to pornography without their own intent, by puberty many boys and some girls are regular pornography users. Although church attenders are less likely to use porn than the general population, porn has permeated the church. For example, in a 2016 Barna study, the majority of pastors reported being former or current porn users, most practicing Christians felt no guilt about their porn use, and few of those had made any attempts to stop using porn.²³

As prevalent as porn usage is, so are the attendant painful or unjust consequences for virtually every segment of society. Pornography hurts everyone.

What is pornography? The word itself comes from the Greek words *porne* (prostitute) and *graphein* (drawing or writing) and was used to describe words or pictures depicting prostitution. Many dictionaries define pornography as the portrayal of sexual activity with the design of producing sexual arousal. For example, the Oxford online dictionary defines pornography as “printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings.” It is therefore important to note that artistic expressions or depictions of nudity are not necessarily pornographic.

²³ “Porn in the Digital Age: New Research Reveals 10 Trends,” *Barna*, April 6, 2016; barna.com/research/porn-in-the-digital-age-new-research-reveals-10-trends.

Pornography has evolved over the years, from the paintings, carvings, drawings, and literature of the ancient world to the photographs and films of the modern era. However, today's internet pornography is unique in several important ways.

First, actual people engage in sexual activity with actual other people in online porn. Sexually explicit pornography—what used to be referred to as hardcore pornography—is now the standard, while less graphic material—once known as softcore pornography—surrounds us in ads, films, and TV shows. All such pornography commodifies human beings made in God's image. It entails the physical, emotional, and spiritual abuse of the women and men involved.

Second, almost all online porn is sexualized brutality toward women. The most frequently watched online pornography is men using women (or women made to look like girls) and could best be described as sexual assault or torture.²⁴ Nearly all the most commonly viewed porn scenes contain physical abuse of a woman, including vomit-inducing oral sex, choking, and hitting, often with multiple men using one woman at the same time. Usually women are called vulgar names throughout. Rape is common, including child rape and incest themes, and women raped by animals.²⁵ Googling the phrase "rape porn" brings up more than 300 million results.

Third, online pornography reinforces racist stereotypes. Porn users can order the kind of woman they want based on her ethnicity, bodily characteristics, and hair color. Women of various ethnicities are referred to with the crudest of racial slurs and depicted acting out racist tropes. Black men are filmed enacting racially stereotypical violence against women.

Fourth, online pornography is designed to create habitual users. Although porn addiction is not a recognized addiction by the American Psychological Association, addiction treatment centers report increased numbers of clients seeking help for compulsive porn use. Psychiatrist and researcher Norman Doidge explains part of what happens when we watch porn:

Pornography, by offering an endless harem of sexual objects, hyper-activates the appetitive system. Porn viewers develop new maps in their brains based on the photos and videos they see. Because it is a use-it-or-lose-it brain, when we develop a map area, we long to keep it activated. Just as our muscles become impatient for exercise if we've been sitting all day, so too our senses hunger to be stimulated. . . . The men at their computers compulsively looking at porn are uncannily like the rats (fitted with brain-stimulating electrodes) pressing the bar to get a shot of dopamine or its equivalent. Though they don't know it, they have been seduced into pornographic training sessions that meet all the conditions required for plastic change of their brains' maps.²⁶

Fifth, pornography is a multibillion dollar industry and also fuels other industries. The industry monetizes free porn with ads for paid websites and by selling email addresses to spammers and others. Deriving enormous revenues from pornography, many persons and institutions have a vested

²⁴ A.J. Bridges, R. Wosnitzer, E. Scharrer, C. Sun, and R. Liberman (2010), "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update," *Violence Against Women*, 16, 16, 1065-1085; DOI: 10.1177/1077801210382866.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself* (London: Viking, 2007), p. 80.

interest in keeping the profit machine healthy. They shape not only the sexual practices of our culture, but our politics and law as well.²⁷

Christopher,* 20 (white): “Even though I started using porn so compulsively and regularly that I was in physical pain, I didn’t stop. The university health center psychologist and the campus pastor I approached wanted to make sure I did not feel guilty about my porn use. I told them what I really wanted was help quitting.”

B. Effects of pornography

1. Harms to women filmed

Most women filmed in the pornography industry do so for no more than six months to a year, often because of the great damage done to their bodies.²⁸ Because of the no-condom industry standard, these women routinely contract sexually transmitted diseases, including in the mouth and eyes, and develop dental abscesses. They experience tearing of tissues and damage to joints in necks, backs, and knees due to painful positions during the sex acts.²⁹

The reputations and job prospects of women used in pornography are jeopardized because images of their faces and bodies are publicly available online. They are sexually harassed and bullied. They experience severe emotional trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder. They suffer from depression and other mental illnesses.³⁰ Many women used in porn report abusing drugs and alcohol to cope with the trauma. Some die prematurely from suicide and drug overdoses.³¹

It is also important to note the close relationship between pornography and human trafficking. The pornography industry exploits women made vulnerable by homelessness, sexual abuse, and trafficking. Those used in porn are often themselves prostituted. When children are groomed for prostitution, porn is used to break down their resistance. Prostituted women and youth are taught to perform the acts buyers will expect of them by watching porn. To coerce prostituted people to remain in the industry or to advertise their services, pimps often make pornography of

²⁷ Gail Dines. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), p. 51. See also Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 62-75.

²⁸ Eric Jay, “Gonzo: Taking a Toll,” XBIZ News; Sept. 10, 2007; xbiz.com/features/83870/gonzo-taking-a-toll. See also Ashley Soley-Cerro, “Former Porn Star and CSUN student Jennie Katcham Discusses”; Mar. 13, 2013, Sundial; sundial.csun.edu/staff_profile/ashley-soley-cerro/

²⁹ As recounted by various porn industry survivors. See Jenna Jameson, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale* (New York: It Books, 2004).

³⁰ Seiya Morita, “Pornography, Prostitution, and Women’s Human Rights in Japan,” *Not For Sale*, ed. Christine Stark, Rebecca Whisnat (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex, 2004), p. 69. See also Melissa Farley, “Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress,” *Woman and Health*, 3 (1997); doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03_a.

³¹ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 30.

those they prostitute. Prostituted girls and women report that men ask them to replicate porn scenes with them when their partners will not.³²

In its essence, internet pornography is filmed prostitution and modified sexual violence. The sex traffickers and pornography producers actually commit the crimes, but pornography is created to satisfy the demands of its consumers. Our pornography use directly supports the exploitation of the vulnerable women who are abused by it, even though it may cost us nothing, because ads pay for it.³³

2. Harms to children

The average child sees internet pornography for the first time by age 13. Many are exposed to it much earlier than that. Often this first exposure is unintentional on the part of children. According to one commonly cited study, 70 percent of children ages 7 through 18 have accidentally stumbled on pornography online. Reports from psychotherapists, teachers, childcare workers, and other professionals report the impact of children's use of pornography. Preschool-age children have been observed acting out pornographic videos, and children not much older are discovered downloading pornographic materials in libraries. Increasing numbers of children are asking for help.

When a boy keys in the word *porn*, he does not expect the images we have just described. Since on-screen women appear to enjoy the violent domination in porn, boys assume that it is an ordinary part of good sex. They think pornography reflects what women want done to them.

One therapist observed that pornography "doesn't show how a real couple negotiates conflict or creates intimacy" but too often is "rape-like . . . a brutal way to be introduced to sexuality."³⁴ As John Foubert puts it, "porn teaches boys to hit girls and tells girls they should like it."³⁵

Increased interest in child porn and child prostitution puts all children at risk. Pediatricians describe a new phenomenon of preteen girls needing anorectal surgeries because boys are doing to them what they see in pornography. And pornography is used by children in assaults of other children.³⁶ A meta-analysis of 22 studies between 1978 and 2014 from seven different countries concluded that pornography consumption is associated with an increased likelihood of committing acts of verbal or physical sexual aggression, regardless of age.³⁷

³² Melissa Farley, "Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress," *Woman and Health*, 3 (1997); doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n03_a.

³³ Ann Simonton, "Who Are Women in Pornography?" *Not For Sale*, pp. 352-61.

³⁴ Quoted in *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations* (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), p. 29.

³⁵ John D. Foubert, "The Public Health Harms of Pornography: The Brain, Erectile Dysfunction, and Sexual Violence," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*, Vol. 2: Iss. 3, Art. 6 (2017); DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2017.02.03.06

³⁶ Bridges, et al.

³⁷ Paul J. Wright, Robert S. Tokunaga, and Ashley Kraus, "A Meta-Analysis of Pornography: Consumption and Actual Acts of Sexual Aggression in General Population Studies," *Journal of Communication*, Feb. 2016, pp. 183-205; onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcom.12201

3. Harms to girls and women

Boys who are used to pornography pressure girls into sending them nude photos. Girls and young women are pressured into participating in amateur pornographic videos. These photos and videos are then published online, where they are permanently accessible to the public, causing untold emotional, spiritual, and physical harm.

Porn fosters and nurtures a culture of rape and sadomasochism. Pornography tells the lie that women like to be debased or even assaulted, and that women should take whatever they are given. Girls and women are surrounded by pornographic images and by boys and men using porn on their devices. In this context, sadomasochistic books and movies such as the *Twilight* and *50 Shades of Grey* series have become mainstream among preteens, teenagers, and adults.

When a man hits a woman in pornography, she typically responds with pleasure or has no response at all.³⁸ Since women in pornography usually appear to happily consent to the abuse they endure, boys and men expect the same from their partners. And because women in pornography are raped or are assaulted without their consent, men assume that a woman's no doesn't actually mean no. Thus girls and women feel pressure to agree to all manner of destructive sexual behavior.

The frequency of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape on university campuses reveals a climate of sexual violence in which pornography plays an important role. All too often women are not believed when they make claims of sexual assault, as was painfully revealed by the #MeToo movement. In fact, when women make allegations of rape, the spotlight typically turns on them instead of on the man who assaulted them.

A rapidly growing percentage of girls and young women now consume pornography alone or are asked to do so by their male partners. Yet whether or not girls use porn, repeated exposure to hypersexualized messages and images leads them to objectify themselves, making them more vulnerable to depression and anxiety, self-harming behaviors, and shame. Such images tell girls they should be thin, made up, have hairless bodies, and always be polished and groomed. If a girl finds herself differing from the "ideal" image, which most girls and women do, she may develop anxiety or hatred toward her own body. They suffer from depression, anxiety, bulimia, anorexia, and other mental and bodily disorders.³⁹

Use of pornography is also correlated with greater insecurity among women with respect to their relationships and sexual activity. It reduces sexual satisfaction and promotes loneliness. The large numbers of rapes on campuses and the high incidence of hook-ups demonstrate both a climate of sexual violence toward women and an inability to have real-time physical-space intimacy and connection with their male peers, many of whom are using pornography.⁴⁰

³⁸ Bridges, et al.

³⁹ D.E. Levin and J. Kilbourne, *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect Their Kids* (New York: Ballantine, 2008), pp. 155-56.

⁴⁰ Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Now married and the father of a young son, Cameron,* 40 (white), talks openly about his eureka moment. Cameron became a porn user in his early teens but didn't like how it affected his relationships, sexual abilities, and fantasies. Still, he couldn't seem to stop. Then his church community started seeking justice for trafficked women. "When I realized that the women I was watching are real people whose bodies are damaged by the violent treatment in most porn, I started advocating with women, for women. And quitting using porn was much easier. Once I understood that I was buying an on-screen prostitute (although it was free), my whole mindset changed."

4. Harms to boys and men

Boys who are in the court system because they have sexually harassed or assaulted another child are more likely to have been porn users.⁴¹ A substantial body of research on youth and adults shows that the visual combination of sexual arousal and violence raises the risk of misogynist attitudes and behaviors more than either of these alone.⁴²

Boys exposed to pornography from a young age are more likely to have attitudes that support sexual harassment and violence against women. They have decreased empathy for rape victims, increasingly aggressive behavioral tendencies, and are more likely to pressure their partners to engage in the sort of harmful, painful, degrading, and aggressive sex they see in pornography. They experience difficulty in developing intimate relationships, develop sexual preoccupation and compulsive internet use, and have increased levels of erectile dysfunction. They experience anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. They struggle more in school.⁴³

Gail Dines, a leading scholar of pornography, recounts the anxiety she hears from young men who recognize how pornography has shaped the way they think about sex. "Porn users are caught in the cross-hairs of this predatory industry, one that has a huge financial stake in habituating them to a product that dehumanizes all involved."⁴⁴ According to prominent psychiatrist Norman Doidge, the release of dopamine in sexual excitement causes users to crave porn. Doidge argues that as tolerance to sexual excitement develops, it no longer satisfies. Only by releasing an aggressive drive, can the regular porn user be excited.⁴⁵

While doctors report that in the 20th century erectile dysfunction was virtually unheard of for men under 40, current studies show at least 30 percent of 15- to 40-year-old men experience erectile dysfunction.

⁴¹ *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations* (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), p. 30.

⁴² Neil Malamuth and Edward Donnerstein, eds., *Pornography and Sexual Aggression* (New York: Academic Press, 1984).

⁴³ "Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions? A Review with Clinical Reports," Brian Y. Park, Gary Wilson, Jonathan Berger, Matthew Christman, Bryn Reina, Frank Bishop, Warren P. Klam, and Andrew P. Doan, 10.3390/bs6030017; "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research," Eric W. Owens, Richard J. Behun, Jill C. Manning, and Rory C. Reid, 10.1080/10720162.2012.660431; Pages 99-122 | Published online: 09 Apr 2012.

⁴⁴ Gail Dines, xi-xii.

⁴⁵ Norman Doidge, *The Brain's Way of Healing* (New York: Penguin, 2007), pp. 102-24.

Dependent on arousal via technology, young men are increasingly unable to have real intimacy with women.⁴⁶ Like their female cohorts, they struggle with loneliness and an inability to enter into committed, sexual relationships.

Although Ryan,* 34 (Chinese Canadian), tried to obey God in his sexuality by not having sex before marriage, he developed a serious pornography habit. A parachurch ministry helped him reduce his pornography use, but it was not until his church exposed him to the link between pornography and human trafficking that he understood what porn really was. Years later, when his pastor asked in premarital counseling about pornography's impact on him, Ryan responded, "I had to realize [that] what was going on [in] porn wasn't real. That those scenes are not actually what sex normally looks like or what a woman wants."

5. Harms to marriages

The destructive effects of pornography extend to married relationships as well. As early as 2003, in a survey of several hundred U.S. divorce lawyers, 62 percent reported that the internet had been a factor in the divorces they had handled that year. More specifically, an average of 56 percent of their divorce cases involved one party (almost always the husband) having an obsessive interest in pornographic websites.⁴⁷ According to the president of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, until the late 1990s, "pornography played almost no role in divorces. Today there are a significant number of cases where it plays a definite part in marriages breaking up."⁴⁸

A 2014 study of data from 20,000 adults who had ever been married (from the U.S. General Social Survey) found that those who had watched any pornography in the previous year were more likely to be divorced, more likely to have had an extramarital affair, and less likely to be happy in their marriage or with their overall life. Based on successive waves of General Social Survey data, the study showed that the negative correlation between pornography use and marital satisfaction has become stronger as pornography becomes more explicit and more easily available online.⁴⁹ Consuming pornography can cause users to be less interested in sex with their actual physical partner. A significant percentage of male porn users experience erectile dysfunction or are unable to have sex without simultaneously consuming porn. Thus they deprive their spouses of sexual pleasure and the joy of physical and emotional intimacy.

The use of pornography often leads one spouse into a secret life in which deception becomes a way of life. People who hide their pornography use from their spouses bring darkness into their relationships. Once the sin is discovered, their partners often feel not only shock but

⁴⁶ John Foubert, "The Public Health Harms of Pornography."

⁴⁷ Quoted by Pamela Paul, "From Pornography to Porno to Porn: How Porn Became the Norm," in Stoner and Hughes, *The Social Costs of Pornography*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ Pamela Paul, "The Porn Factor," *Time*, Jan. 19, 2004.

⁴⁹ Kirk Doran and Joseph Price, "The Effect of Pornography on Marital Intimacy," *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2014), pp. 488-89.

also anger and shame. While the pornography user may convince him or herself that porn use doesn't affect his or her partner, the partner usually feels quite differently.

VI. Pornography: Scripture

The Bible does not address pornography directly, and neither photography nor the internet existed in antiquity. However, Scripture has much to say about the lustful, sexually immoral, violent, racist, and abusive attitudes and actions fostered by online porn; about the bodies and spirits of the human beings affected by porn; and about the purpose of sex, which porn tragically mischaracterizes.

A. Violence

God, who made all people in his image, makes it quite clear that he hates violence, especially when violence is done to the vulnerable. God flooded the world and drowned its inhabitants because "the earth [was] filled with violence" (Gen. 6:13). Proverbs frequently exhorts God's people not to choose violence (cf. Prov. 3:31). The psalmists often decry violence, even explaining that God's "soul hates the lover of violence" (Ps. 11:5, NRSV). The prophet Isaiah warns Israel that God is powerful enough to save them but that their violence erects a barrier between them and God (Isa. 59:1-2). God eventually allows the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of his people as punishment for their idolatry and their violent, unjust behavior (Isa. 59; Jer. 22; Ezek. 8; Joel 3; Amos 3). The early church is told not to put people in leadership if they are violent (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7).

We have noted that the most commonly consumed porn is filmed sexual violence. Although sex traffickers and porn producers actually commit the crimes, porn is created to satisfy the demands of its consumers. Each time we use porn, we participate in this violence against women and girls. And when we use porn, we tend more toward violence ourselves.⁵⁰

B. Exploitation of the poor

God advocates for the poor and the afflicted throughout Scripture. And God threatens anyone who threatens the poor (Prov. 22:22-23). The prophets specifically warn Israel against oppressing and abusing the needy and the vulnerable. To everyone who "trample[s] on the needy, and bring[s] to ruin the poor of the land," God promises judgment (Amos 8:4ff).

Yet our porn use directly supports the exploitation of the financially needy women who are physically abused in it, even though it may cost us nothing because ads pay for it.⁵¹ Instead, God confronts the exploitative nature of a mostly male audience using anonymous poor and marginalized women for online sex with a call to be a people who practice both justice and mercy (Mic. 6:8). Just as 19th-century Christians worked to abolish the slave trade, so Christians today can work to abolish the sex industry and to offer support to those who are harmed by it. In so doing, we will love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev. 19:18), defend the poor and weak (Ps. 82:3-4; Prov. 31:8-9), and treat others the way we would want to be treated (Matt. 7:12).

⁵⁰ Wright, et al., pp. 183-205.

⁵¹ Ann Simonton, "Who Are Women in Pornography?" *Not For Sale*, ed. Rebecca Whisnant, Christine Stark (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2004), pp. 352-61.

C. *Racism*

From the scattering of the peoples so that they would fulfill God's mandate to fill the earth (Gen. 11:1-9) to the entering of the Holy City of God by all the nations (Rev. 21-22), the Bible portrays God's design for an all-nations tapestry of language and tribes. God insisted on this inclusive vision when the first disciples hesitated to preach the gospel to Gentiles (Acts 10), and when the early church racially discriminated (Acts 6:1-7). Where alienation and brokenness continued to threaten the church, Paul made clear that Jesus, by his death, reconciled not only people to God but also warring and hostile nations and tribes to each other (Gal. 2:1-14; Eph. 2:11-22; Col. 3:11). By cultivating the worst racial stereotypes, mocking and degrading men and women based on ethnicity, online porn dehumanizes people made in God's image and promotes division and contempt.

D. *Sexual sin*

1. Adultery

The Law, the Prophets, Wisdom literature, and the New Testament all condemn adultery. Additionally, Paul specifically enjoins believers from uniting with prostitutes because participation in the sexual act makes one flesh out of the man and woman involved (1 Cor. 6:15-20). While we might not ourselves commit adultery with another person physically while using porn, the product we consume is created by filming men and women copulating who are not married to each other, and online porn is itself filmed prostitution. Porn scenes also commonly include rape, orgies, and bestiality and portray scenes of incest—all acts strongly and repeatedly condemned in Scripture (Lev. 18; Gal. 5:19-21). We indirectly cause others to commit these sins when we consume such porn. Additionally, when we use porn, those of us who are married introduce other sexual partners into our marriage, destroying the oneness of our intimate physical union.

2. Lust

Porn exists to foster lust. And Jesus says that it's not first of all the actions we take with our body but the evil desires of our hearts that are sinful: "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person" (Mark 7:20-23).

Jesus' proclamation that "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:27-28) surprises and challenges us today just as it did his original audience. Jesus means that to even envision a sexual act with someone to whom we are not married is sinful because we have no marriage covenant with that person. By imagining sexual activity with people on screen, we reduce them to objects we use for our pleasure. Our lust also influences our marriages or other relationships because it affects the way we see and respond to our partners. Finally, the apostle James cautions us against lust when he analogizes the act of lust to the act of procreation. Then lust, "when it

has conceived gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full-grown brings forth death” (James 1:15, RSV).

3. Masturbation in the context of porn

The Bible does not forbid—or even mention—the practice of stimulating one’s own sexual organs to orgasm. However, masturbation is often accompanied by lust. Those who use porn to masturbate consciously choose to lust. Thus self-absorption and objectification of another replaces the sexual act designed to draw two people together in intimacy.

The apostle Paul counsels husbands and wives to satisfy each other sexually. “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. . . . Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again” (1 Cor. 7:3-5, NRSV). Masturbating while consuming porn can cause the user to be less interested in sex with their actual physical partner because they have already satisfied themselves. And since a significant percentage of male porn users experience erectile dysfunction or are unable to have sex without simultaneously consuming porn, they deprive their spouses of sexual pleasure and the joy of physical and emotional intimacy.

4. Deceit

Throughout the Old and New Testaments God’s people are repeatedly called to speak and live honestly to reflect the God of light and to build healthy relationships. “If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7). People who hide the fact or the frequency of their porn use from their spouses or dating partners bring darkness into their relationships. And because of this darkness, their partners often feel not only shock but anger and shame. While the porn user may convince himself or herself that porn use doesn’t affect his or her partner, the partner usually feels quite differently. Entire websites exist for partners of porn users who feel the betrayal of adultery while their partner is oblivious to their pain.

E. *Creation restored, relationships redeemed*

1. The pattern of Creation

The bad news God gave to the woman after the fall into sin—that the man will “rule over you” (Gen. 3:16)—couldn’t be more painfully exemplified than in online pornography. But while our porn-saturated culture presents men and women as objects to be used sexually, and it encourages the violent domination of women for men’s sexual pleasure, Jesus came to restore our relationships to their creational intent. Genesis 1:26-31 tells us that men and women share God’s image as partners. God commanded them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over all creatures. Together they reflected the image of God, and together they were sent to rule over it as God’s representatives. The second half of the creation story in Genesis 2:18-24 portrays a man lonely for company although he had animal companions and was intimate with God. A woman was created to be his help. Genesis 2:18 uses the Hebrew word *ezer*, which is ordinarily used to describe the rescuing God

in the Old Testament, as in “Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our *help* and shield” (Ps. 33:20).

God values human bodies and the sexual act. Humans are not only made in God’s image; the Creator described them as very good (Gen. 1:31; 5:1). When the first man and woman were together, they “were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Human bodies are so valuable to God that Jesus was born in a human body (Matt. 1:18ff; Luke 2:1-20), and after his death he was the first to experience the bodily resurrection that awaits all his sisters and brothers (1 Cor. 15). Sexual desire for a partner and enjoyment of sexual activity is alluded to at the creation of woman (Gen. 2:18-25). It is encouraged in Proverbs (5:18-19) and the first letter to the Corinthians (7:3-5). While most porn eliminates lovemaking activities such as kissing, stroking, and caressing—replacing them solely with penetration and orgasms—these tender touches are celebrated in the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs.

While porn trains us to view sex for our own pleasure, God designed sexual pleasure to push us toward the other. God intended the sex act to provide pleasure for both man and woman. For those Christians who will have a sexual relationship in marriage, the Song of Songs portrays a man and woman in equitable relationship. Their passion for each other demonstrates that while healthy, loving sex can be fun, joyful, deep, vulnerable, and playful, it will always be mutual, exclusive, and intimate.

2. The new community

Jesus presents a picture of human and human-divine intimacy the night before his crucifixion. In John 14-17 Jesus pictures the Trinity as God-in-community. He speaks of the loving communion that he, the Spirit, and the Father have had for all eternity, and he explains that his followers will now join into that intimacy with God and with each other. Rather than being objects to be used by each other, as in porn, God created each of us for human intimacy, whether sexual or not.

Jesus’ loving life and sacrificial death inaugurated a servant community. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). And he teaches his disciples that they should serve each other and the world in the same way. “The greatest among you will be your servant” (Matt. 23:11). Paul exhorts the Galatian church similarly, “You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (Gal. 5:13). As sisters and brothers in a new spiritual family, God commands all believers to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21, NIV).

Although she’d watched porn since childhood, Megan,* 30 (white), never heard about other women using porn. By her early twenties, she felt deep shame about it and about a sexual experience long ago with another child. But talking about it with a nonjudgmental believer released her of the shame and freed her, she said, “to look at myself and see how God sees me. God began to heal me from my past and give me hope for a positive sexual relationship.”

VII. Pornography: Pastoral care

How staggering is the extent of God's mercy. Yet as great as the shame, exploitation, frustration, darkness, and violence from porn are, far greater is God's mercy and power to transform and heal. "All the wickedness in the world that man might do or say was no more to the mercy of God than a live coal dropped in the sea" (William Langland, 14th century).

A. Pastoral care for the whole congregation

Since porn consumption is now so routine, no group or individual is untouched by its effects. Porn's victims are many:

- women prostituted into, and violently abused by, the porn industry
- children exposed to porn and trained by its violence to enact or receive violence
- baffled, angry and hurt parents and families
- intimates of porn users betrayed by their partner's virtual infidelity
- male and female porn users, many of whose brains begin to crave the stimulus of violence
- male porn users suffering erectile dysfunction
- women conditioned to be objects for men's violence and men primed to be sexually violent

Yet our churches only typically address the problem of porn, if at all, primarily as a problem of lust or of healing for porn users; only tangentially as a difficulty for wives, husbands, and others in relationship with porn users; and almost never as a concern for the women being violently mistreated in porn videos or the children and women in our churches suffering from the increase in male sexual violence against them. Therefore, although porn usage is a deeply personal issue, as churches we can no longer allow it to be a private issue.

The gospel of grace speaks directly to the pastoral needs of all who are harmed by the production and the use of porn. Offering the hope and power of God the healer and the great physician is an immediate necessity, yet this human damage will only increase until we confront the root of the problem. Why have we tolerated pornography use in our churches? We have tolerated it because the lusts of our hearts are dear to us. We have tolerated it because we are comfortable with the objectification and domination of women. The sins that lie closest to our hearts are those for which it is the most difficult to repent.

Members and leaders of the church will continue to treat porn casually until the church faces and repents of allowing objectification of women and male dominance to be part of the church culture. We objectify women's bodies when we imply that their primary purpose in life is that of mother or wife as much as when we tolerate comments about female bodies and disparaging jokes about women in sermons, classes, and small groups of all ages.

In his speech and actions with women, Jesus modeled a different path. He directly challenged his own patriarchal and lustful culture in three significant ways. Jesus invited all people to follow him and specifically encouraged women who did so (Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 8:1-3; 10:38-42; John 20:1-18); he corrected those who prioritized Mary's role as mother over that of other women as disciples (Matt. 12:46-50; Luke 11:27-28); and he told men that even to gaze at a woman lustfully was to commit adultery (Matt. 5:26-27).

At this moment when pediatricians, psychiatrists, parents, and politicians identify North American porn use as a health crisis, and the #MeToo movement exposes the increasing numbers of women routinely experiencing sexual violence, the church can serve as a model of living in the light. Porn's primary power is in its hiddenness. God's children know the power of God's light to drive away darkness and bring freedom. Those filmed in porn, those using porn, and those in relationships with porn consumers are all harmed, though in different ways, and all experience shame.

If we expose the darkness to God's light, we can all be healed. In God's redemptive light, we can make the connection between porn and human trafficking and freely face the relationship of porn to the increasing numbers of women reporting male violence. We can admit that porn makes inequality sexually arousing.⁵² And we can be honest about the extent of the harms to young and old porn users and to those with whom they relate.

B. Practical next steps

1. Preaching and teaching

Pastors, teachers, and youth leaders: Regularly address the positive theme of sexuality as it pervades Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, including the generally ignored Song of Songs, with its beautiful depiction of a healthy sexual relationship. Explore the rich biblical teaching on the blessings and joys of celibacy. Constantly challenge us to exercise self-control, to put to death the lusts of the flesh. Far too much of the church's teaching in the area of sexuality has consisted of negative prohibitions against various sins, including pornography. Yet faithful gospel teaching and leadership points toward the rich calling that God has given to us as men and women made in his image. Encourage us to use our bodies in ways that reflect God's purposes for us as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Since wife abuse is so common, and since the majority of all men as well as most young women now do or have used porn, we must address this regularly in our churches. The Bible speaks often and powerfully about God's perspective on violence and sexual sin, so our clear and frequent teaching will encourage the oppressed, as well as those who are willing to change, and it will confront the unrepentant sinner.

When the church fails to offer biblical, gospel-centered teaching on the sin of pornography, it is not able to offer hope to those who are devastated by it. If our pastors remain silent on Sunday mornings, those of us who use pornography or suffer from its use will remain silent as well. But this is not the way of the gospel. Instead, proclaim the good news as it relates to sexuality in order that all people, female and male, may once again enjoy the fullness of communion in him.

2. Public worship

Publicly and collectively acknowledge the many sins of pornography. Lament our guilt and the catastrophic consequences of our sin in the lives of so many people. Mourn with the victims of pornography, some of whom live and worship among us. Intercede regularly for porn users, their partners, parents, and those who suffer abuse because of pornography.

⁵² [washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/05/25/how-porn-makes-inequality-sexually-arousing/?utm_term=.c491e7bf10c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2016/05/25/how-porn-makes-inequality-sexually-arousing/?utm_term=.c491e7bf10c)

3. Care for those abused in porn production

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people” (Luke 4:18-19, Good News Translation). Our churches likely include girls and women who currently or previously participated in porn videos or whose photos or videos to partners were uploaded onto porn sites, and some men or boys who have been used in these ways. The Christian community can help.

a. Model coming into the presence of God, who sees the sexually exploited and cares

Explain that a just and compassionate God understands the wrong that was done to those abused. “But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand. The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. . . . Call the evildoer to account for his wickedness that would not otherwise be found out. . . . You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry” (Ps. 10:14-18, NIV).

b. Help with undeserved shame

Because what was done to their bodies—and the uses made of their images—was evil, people who have been involved in porn often feel guilty for having participated, even though others exploited their trust and in many cases coerced them into sending images or being filmed. And because those digital images might be permanently publicly available, they feel shame at their exposure. We can introduce them to Jesus, the Suffering Servant, who was also mocked, scorned, and rejected for sins he did not bear, who took away our shame, and in whose wounds we can be healed. “He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and . . . one from whom others hide their faces. . . . Upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:3-5, NRSV).

c. Nonjudgmental presence and support

In addition to loss of reputation because of permanent digital imagery, people who have been involved in porn might face long-term physical effects in the form of body memories, inability to sleep, and sexually transmitted diseases. They may need practical supports such as help to find childcare, paid employment, and medical/dental care. As their sisters and brothers, we can fulfill God’s call to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

d. Lament and pray with them

Introduce these people to the psalms—which cry out in sadness, anger, and betrayal—and be willing to suffer their pain with them. “Weep with those who weep” (Rom. 12:15). Repeatedly the Bible tells us to pray for those who are sick, weak, suffering, persecuted, or tempted, and God’s Word promises healing. “He heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds” (Ps. 147:3). As prayer teams and as individuals, we can offer deeply wounded people the gift of approaching the Healer, Redeemer, Advocate, and Comforter on their behalf.

4. Pastoral care for intimates of porn users

Partners of porn users are often lost in the recovery process. The porn user who chooses to confess and repent will likely receive support and encouragement. Their wives, husbands, and dating partners usually suffer alone and may be baffled by the trauma of betrayal. Loving individuals, supportive groups, and professionals can enable them to understand why they are so devastated by the shame, anger, and grief of realizing their partner has been repeatedly unfaithful with strangers online. Compassionate church members can help.

a. Words of comfort

Finding out that a partner has been using porn feels like betrayal and adultery because looking at another person with lust is a form of adultery, just as Jesus taught (Matt. 5:27-28). Studies find that explicit material can do far more harm than most people think. Porn use destroys intimacy in marriage and is one of the most frequent causes of divorce.⁵³

b. Support to confront the porn user

Spouses and intimates can insist on having no-porn households and relationships. But spouses need encouragement by pastoral counselors, elders, and others that the history of their relationship usually provides a great deal of leverage. When churches support spouses who choose to give an ultimatum to porn-using spouses—because of this ongoing form of adultery—God can dramatically turn broken marriages around. In this way, we “admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col. 3:16) and obey Jesus’ teaching to hold accountable any member who sins against another (Matt. 18:15-20). Partners may also need help dealing with any violence the porn user may have brought into the relationship. For example, the most common behavior men ask female partners to do, based on their porn usage, is to engage in anal sex. Females describe this as painful, risky, and coercive.⁵⁴

How to Stop Using Porn

- Solicit the prayers and support of a non-porn user. Confess your sin and ask to pray for their temptations as well.
- Immediately tell your spouse or girl/boyfriend.
- Take a 30-day porn fast. Historically Christians have fasted from food, sex, and other things.
- Learn about the relationship of porn to sex trafficking and tell someone else what you learned.
- Draw near to Jesus. Nourish a friendship with Jesus by talking to him, reading the Bible, singing songs of worship. God, who is your Help, loves you and wants to be with you.
- Block internet access on your devices. Try out various strategies until you find one that works.

⁵³ psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/tech-support/201407/what-porn-does-intimacy-core.ac.uk/download/pdf/144149558.pdf

⁵⁴ C. Marston and R. Lewis, “Anal heterosex among young people and implications for health promotion: a qualitative study in the UK” (2014), *BMJ Open*, 4(8), e004996-e004996; DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-004996.

- Substitute enjoyable and healthy activities like physical exercise, a new hobby, regular time with good friends or family. Old habits get broken in part by filling the vacuum with new ones.
- Remind yourself that Jesus' death on the cross set you free from sin.
- Celebrate successes. Reward yourself by sharing your milestones with affirming others and by giving yourself a healthy treat.

5. Pastoral care for porn users

After extended porn use, male and female porn users of all ages share some common needs that elders or other mature believers can help them address. Because porn often has such a grip on its users, they need real help from God and other believers.

a. Repentance

Many long-term porn users are unwilling to see porn use as harmful. Like David, who took Bathsheba for his own sexual pleasure and then killed her husband to cover up his own sin (like every other sinful human), porn users often need to be confronted by someone like the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 11-12). Although, as a consequence of his sin, David suffered the death of his infant son, wonderfully God later answered his prayer to be used to help others also come to repentance and to experience the joy of renewed relationship with God, who has the power to heal and forgive. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. . . . Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you" (Ps. 51:10-14).

b. Intercessory prayer and hope for healing of compulsive behavior

While not every porn user is addicted, a greedy porn industry has designed porn to be addictive. "Neurons that fire together wire together," psychiatrist Norman Doidge famously said when discussing the sadomasochistic nature of most porn.⁵⁵ The good news is that while porn use actually changes the brains of men and women who use it, brain scientists describe brains as "plastic" with the ability to heal.⁵⁶ The Creator designed our physical bodies to heal and also made it possible for us to be delivered of sinful patterns, shame, isolation, anger, and hurt. God promises that when we confess our sins to each other and pray for each other, we will be healed (James 5:13-18). And when we live in the light of repentance and honesty, God's new community of fellow forgiven sinners will restore us (1 John 1:5-10). (A number of organizations also now offer support and practical help to those who want to stop using porn.)

c. Block access to internet porn on their devices

Just as a smoker will not quit smoking if she keeps cigarettes in the house or if he stands outside with his smoker buddies, so a porn user cannot have easy access to porn and expect to quit. (Various companies offer individual or family plans for their porn-blocking or accountability services.)

⁵⁵ Norman Doidge, *The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), p. 117.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 207ff.

d. Physical affection

While loneliness, stress, or boredom can drive people to porn, we have seen that compulsive porn use also isolates people and decreases their ability to build healthy relationships. If we have used porn excessively, we may feel disconnection from or hatred toward our bodies. For these reasons, communal recreational activities and physical affection in the form of hugs and encouraging pats on the back provide emotional nourishment to recovering porn users.

e. Biblically based teaching about sex and relationships

Because porn has been a primary source of sexual education for an entire generation, porn users need Bible studies, small group discussions, and sermons about mutual sexual relationships and healthy intimacy. Porn studies reveal that male and female porn users begin to believe that women are weaker and less intelligent than men, and that women are willing to be raped, assaulted, or dominated sexually. This coincides with the belief that men are more dominant, powerful, and have greater sexual needs than women.⁵⁷ Obviously this way of thinking can be and is problematic and harmful to both sexes. But where the culture of porn has malformed us, God can transform our minds. Paul calls us to present our bodies to God “as a living sacrifice. . . . Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:1-2). Additionally, when images displeasing to God persist in our minds, we are invited to think instead on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure . . . and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:8-10).

Wilma* and Henk,* 70 (white), attend a film and panel hosted by a local church on internet porn’s impact on society. Horrified by what they learn about sex trafficking and kids’ easy access to porn, they begin to pray. They also get up their courage to ask their grandchildren some questions. Gradually, through their advocacy, parents in Wilma and Henk’s church discover their children’s porn use. Some are shamed and grieved to understand the reason for their children’s inexplicable changes in behavior. The church supports these families with prayer and with establishing mentoring relationships for parents and kids. With a friend, Wilma also encourages the church into seeking justice for sexually exploited girls.

6. Special word to parents of child and teen porn users

a. Understand the effects of porn use on your child

We saw earlier that boys exposed to porn from a young age are more likely to have attitudes that support sexual harassment and violence against women, and to pressure their partners to engage in porn-style sex (harmful, painful, degrading, aggressive, etc.). Research has also shown that exposure to porn leads girls to objectify themselves, hate their own bodies, experience depression and anxiety, and harm themselves. Child porn users may have lower academic performance,

⁵⁷ projectknow.com/porn-addiction/women/?utm_term=p_addiction.

develop sexual preoccupation and compulsive internet use, and experience anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and loss of intimacy.⁵⁸

b. Compassionately confront

Although you may feel guilty, angry, or terrified about the effects of porn use on your child, what he or she needs is strong parental love filled with grace. Your child likely also feels great shame and fear, as well as anger that he or she is now struggling with an incredibly powerful temptation.⁵⁹ Model yourself on the God of Psalm 103, who knows our weakness, forgives our sins, is slow to anger, and has compassion on us, his children.

c. Deal with the technology

Since many young children and most teens carry a computer around with them via their smartphone, parents can get porn-blocking services and should be wise and consistent when denying or limiting access to phones and other devices. A number of organizations offer help to parents, beginning with identifying the signs that your child uses porn. (See resource listed below.)

d. Describe the reality of a healthy sexual relationship

Because porn has been their primary source of sexual education, young porn users need a new education. Uncomfortable as it may feel, contrast the actual physical details in a sexual intimate relationship with what goes on in porn. Explain how God designed sex for mutual pleasure, never for violence, and that it involves give and take (Song of Songs).

During a church council discussion about the porn use of certain young people in their church, one elder noticed the especially heartfelt and compassionate response of Mark,* 60 (white). That elder later helped Mark to open up about his own porn use. Since then Mark's wife Karen told him, "I won't live with you until you stop using porn and you are able to understand the effect it's had on me and our marriage." There is hope for this marriage because the elders and their small group are church members backing Karen up, and Mark is facing what he's done.

7. Special word for women

Because many more men than women have traditionally used porn, and because the Christian community often suggests that men have more sexual desire than women, women who struggle to stop using porn often feel an additional burden of shame. Yet since porn has become normalized, a large minority of young women now use porn and need support to stop using it. Like their brothers, these women can be comforted by the fact that Jesus is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses . . . in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15-16).

⁵⁸ Eric W. Owens, Richard J. Behun, Jill C. Manning, and Rory C. Reid, "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research," 10.1080/10720162.2012.660431, pp. 99-122; published online: 09 Apr 2012.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

8. Special word for men

Christian men who stop consuming porn describe a kind of eureka moment (see Cameron's* story earlier) that impelled them to stop. Some realize how horrified, hurt, or angry their wives or girlfriends are by their betrayal; others make the connection between sex trafficking and porn and then understand what the filmed women suffer. Christian human rights and antitrafficking organizations report that men who join antitrafficking efforts find themselves able to give up their porn use. Focusing on advocating for women, many men are freed from the guilty rationalization, self-absorption, and shame of being a Christian who also uses porn.

9. Special word to pastors and teachers

Polls show that many North American pastors refer to themselves as porn addicts. If so, they cannot in good conscience help others while living in this sin. The time is now for us all to heed God's command to "lay aside . . . the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus. . . . Consider him who endured . . . so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as children. . . . Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed" (Heb. 12:1-2, 4-5, 12-13).

Sarah,* 30 (white), laments, "I would like to have a no-porn relationship. But every Christian man I have dated, all of whom were pastors or Christian leaders, used porn. Most of them refused to quit, either saying they'd already tried unsuccessfully or that it wasn't a big deal. All the women I know say the same thing about their boyfriends.

C. *Mission*

Many health professionals, teachers, and parents in your community are deeply concerned about the impact of porn usage. Churches who begin to learn more about online porn's effects on society and its relationship to sex trafficking will find unchurched neighbors interested in your ministries of both care and justice. Whether you address youth groups, parents, or partners of porn users or you choose to educate your church and community on the links between pornography and sex trafficking, you will be encouraged to find that local health, counseling, and justice professionals will gladly participate. Hosting film nights with panels of such experts or lectures followed by small groups can benefit your church and connect your ministry with the needs of a hurting community around you. If you advocate for the poor and marginalized locally and globally, others will join you, and some will meet Jesus, the just and compassionate One.

The Holy Spirit, who "has compassion on all he has made" (Ps. 145:9, NIV) gives spiritual gifts in sufficient supply so that we can offer the love, healing community, and pastoral care that is needed. People affected by porn will be challenged, nourished, bolstered, and restored by our ministries of prayer, small groups, preaching, worship, potlucks, diaconal help, elder care, and much more. And those receiving care will be able to heal as they in turn are encouraged to use their spiritual gifts to serve others.

D. *In conclusion*

The porn industry flourishes while the church falters. If the church can courageously admit the ubiquity of porn, its far-reaching consequences on every demographic, and its nature as a purveyor of male violence against women, the Lamb of God who is the Lion of Judah can lead the way to healing for our churches and our society. May God's kingdom of shalom come.

E. *Selected resources*

1. Books

- Dines, Gail. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2010).
- Foubert, John. *How Pornography Harms: What Teens, Young Adults, Parents, and Pastors Need to Know* (Bloomington, Ind.: LifeRich Publishing, 2017).
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
- Jensen, Robert. *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 2007).
- Jensen, Robert. *The End of Patriarchy* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2017).
- Perrin, Benjamin. *Invisible Chains: Canada's Underground World of Human Trafficking* (Toronto: Penguin Group, 2010).
- Struthers, William M. *Wired for Intimacy: How Pornography Hijacks the Male Brain* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009).
- Tankard Reist, Melinda. *Big Porn, Inc.: Exposing the Harms of the Pornography Industry* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2011).

2. Films

- Red Light, Green Light*. Documentary about sex trafficking and prostitution.
- Over18*. An examination of porn's effects on children, parents, and those filmed in porn.
- Pornland: How the Porn Industry Has Hijacked our Sexuality*.
- The Sex Trade*. A documentary on the sex industry. (National Film Board of Canada)
- Buying Sex*. (National Film Board of Canada)

3. Websites

- culturereframed.org; building resilience and resistance to hypersexualized culture; resources, tools for people of all ages
- network.crcna.org/safe-church/pornography-awareness-supplemental-resources; help for porn users, parents, and leaders
- protectyoungeyes.com; internet safety information
- goforgreatness.org; positive effects of quitting porn
- nofap.com; community-based porn recovery
- iitap.com; International Institute for Trauma and Addiction Professionals
- defenddignity.ca; catalyst for individuals and churches to end sexual exploitation
- endsexualexploitation.org; National Center on Sexual Exploitation
- fightthenewdrug.org; antipornography nonprofit
- cbeinternational.org; Christian for Biblical Equality International

4. Blog posts and articles

crcna.org/SafeChurch/about-us/1989-survey-abuse-crc
pornharmsresearch.com/2011/12/internet-porn-stats-should-parents-be-concerned-news/
cbeinternational.org/blogs/church-crisis-pornography-and-patriarchy
cbeinternational.org/blogs/metoo-and-churchtoo-perfect-storm
barna.com/fast-facts/porn-in-the-digital-age-new-research-reveals-10-trends/
covenanteyes.com/2016/05/10/betrayal-trauma-the-side-of-pornography-use-no-one-is-talking-about/
crcna.org/SafeChurch/about-us/1989-survey-abuse-crc

5. Porn blocking or accountability services

covenanteyes.com; screen accountability
netnanny.com; porn blocking for parents or adult users
qustodio.com; porn blocking for parents or adult users

VIII. Gender identity: Cultural context

We begin with some opening stories. The names of the persons in these stories have been changed.

Tee*, an Afro-Latino, who presented as a gender-fluid person, was rejected by family, became homeless, and bounced around several emergency shelters before finding supportive housing. Since transitioning, it became difficult for Tee to find a job, and Tee was sexually harassed at work. When Tee asked to be referred to as male, the staff and counselors continued to use Tee's original pronouns, and Tee felt unsupported. Tee felt isolated and alone, suffered high levels of anxiety, and incurred other medical conditions after this experience.

When Colin's* former work colleague Stephen,* now Serena,* began to transition, he shared this information with Colin. Colin wasn't sure what to think or how to respond, and he knew Stephen was not a Christian. Colin and his wife, Rachel,* asked their church household group for advice. These other believers affirmed the couple's sense that they should build a stronger relationship with Stephen, if that was what he wanted. Initially Rachel and Colin felt awkward and uncomfortable with Stephen as he more publicly identified as Serena. Their believing friends prayed for them to be led by the Holy Spirit in their relationship with Serena. The couple realized that Serena was getting support from them that was not readily available from friends or family, so they worked to stay regularly in touch, even after they no longer worked together. They took great joy in learning to wait on God as they loved their new friend. They wondered if God might draw Serena into a Christian community and a relationship with Jesus.

A. Introduction

In our study of gender identity, our committee listened to stories from people identifying as trans, gender nonconforming, and queer, and from their families. We did research in theology, including queer theology, and in the biological and social sciences, including queer studies. Because gender

studies is such a new field and the science is still in its infancy, the body of reliable scientific research is smaller than in other areas pertaining to sexuality. Transitioning can include various medical treatments, many of which remain largely experimental. At the same time, few theologians have reflected deeply on questions surrounding gender identity or disorders of sexual development (DSD). Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature in all of these fields that can help the church discern how it should navigate questions of gender identity in a manner that is faithful to the gospel, consistent with the best science, and life-giving for persons who are struggling with questions related to gender identity.

B. *Use of terms*

Barely half a century ago the notion of having a *gender identity* was virtually unheard of. Indeed, the concept of gender identity only makes sense if there is some idea of what *gender* means, and how that may or may not be different from *sex*. In our summary of a biblical theology of sexuality in section II, B of this report, we acknowledged that in the biblical text of Genesis 1:27 “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.” How, then, can the Bible help us to make sense of contemporary questions about gender and gender identity?

Although it is generally accepted today that sex and gender are distinct from one another, this understanding is relatively new. It was only in the 1960s that people began to use the word *gender* to refer to something other than a person’s sex. John Money, a sex researcher who spent his career at Johns Hopkins University, is generally credited with popularizing this use of the term.⁶⁰ Money writes that he “needed a term that did not exist” to explain what people were doing when they took on the roles and identity of a sex different from their biological sex.⁶¹ Hence he used the word *gender* to refer to those roles and sense of identity.

By the 1970s, psychologists had begun to consistently use the words *sex* and *gender* to differentiate between biological characteristics (*sex*) and “non-physiological components of sex that are culturally regarded as appropriate to males and to females” (*gender*).⁶² This distinction is foundational to the way in which a range of terms are currently being used in our culture. Many

⁶⁰ Money notes that gender did appear occasionally in the 18th and 19th centuries as a reference to male and female but was considered colloquial or satirical. John Money, “Gender: History, Theory, and Usage of the Term in Sexology and Its Relationship to Nature/Nurture,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1985), pp. 71-79. See also Margaret H. McCarthy, “Gender Ideology and the Humanum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 43 (2016), pp. 274-298 (retrieved from communio-icr.com/articles/view/gender-ideology-and-the-humanum, p. 285); and L.S. Mayer and P.R. McHugh, “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences,” *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*, No. 50 (2016), p. 91 and note 17.

⁶¹ John Money, “The Concept of Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood and Adolescence after 39 Years,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1994), pp. 163-77.

⁶² Rhoda K. Unger, “Toward a Redefinition of Sex and Gender,” *American Psychologist*, 34 (1976), p. 1086; see also Stephanie A. Shields and Elaine C. Diccio, “The Social Psychology of Sex and Gender: From Gender Differences to Doing Gender,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 35(3) (2011), pp. 491-99. See also J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 13-16.

of these terms are contested, and we are aware that attempting to define them too rigidly risks alienating some persons, minimizing their experiences, or endorsing positions with which they disagree. This is not our intent. Rather, we define the following terms, listed in alphabetical order, to provide necessary clarity as to how we are using them in our report.

- *cisgender*: a sense of having a gender identity that matches one’s sex; understood as the opposite of *transgender*.⁶³
- *desist*: to cease from gender dysphoria. This term is used by medical professionals to describe the response of children or youth who experience gender dysphoria but who no longer persist in wanting to be the other sex. It is also used by gender dysphoric youth or adults who resist pressure to transition.
- *detransition*: when a person transitions back to living in alignment with their sex, after having earlier transitioned to live as the sex that corresponds to their gender identity.
- *disorders of sexual development (DSDs)*: also referred to as *intersex*, and formerly referred to as *hermaphrodite*, DSDs are congenital (biologically based) conditions in which the development of a person’s chromosomal, gonadal, internal, and /or external anatomical sex is atypical. Some DSDs are visible at birth. Others appear at later stages because of the malfunctioning of (estrogen or testosterone) hormones.
- *gender*: categorization of humans as male and female based on culturally sanctioned roles, behaviors, expressions (sometimes also labeled as masculinity and femininity).
- *gender dysphoria (GD)*: distress experienced by persons whose gender identity differs from their sex.
- *gender identity*: a person’s internal sense of being male, female, or other (see *gender nonconforming* below).
- *gender nonconforming*: when a person’s behavior, appearance, expression, or identity does not conform to cultural expectations associated with their sex. Some may also use the terms *queer*, *genderfluid*, or *nonbinary*.
- *physical transition*: when a person undergoes medical treatments such as hormone therapy and /or *sex reassignment surgeries* in order to bring their body into alignment with the gender with which they identify.
- *sex reassignment surgery (SRS)*: surgical procedures to alter a person’s existing sexual characteristics to resemble and /or function like those of the sex that corresponds to their gender identity.
- *sex*: categorization of humans (and animals) as male and female on the basis of physical, biological, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics.
- *social transition*: when a person makes nonmedical changes, such as in clothing, name, or personal pronouns, in order to live in alignment with their gender identity.

⁶³ This is perhaps one of the clearer examples of how terms are not neutral. As described by the *Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission*, “This term cisgender emerged in the 1990s as part of the development of transgender ideology. Although, in itself, it is a neutral descriptor, it is often employed in order to normalise transgender experience; i.e., to convey the idea that it is just as natural for some to be transgender as it is for others to be cisgender.”

- *transgender*: a broad term that includes persons who define themselves as a gender other than their sex, and who may or may not have socially or physically *transitioned* from *male to female* (MtF) or *female to male* (FtM).
- *transition*: when a person changes to live in alignment with the sex that corresponds to their *gender identity*.

C. *Questions of worldview*

These terms might provide some clarity, but they cannot do justice to the complexities, pain, and difficulties of persons who experience the various conditions that these words attempt to convey. For even as we acknowledge that many of us are relatively comfortable with our sense of being male and female and do not experience incongruity between our sex and our gender, we recognize that some among us feel alienated, confused, or ashamed because something doesn't feel quite right. Some of us feel out of sorts with our bodies, for reasons we do not understand, and this is a situation we did not choose. Some of us experience bullying or are condemned for our choices or preferences for dress, occupation, hobbies, literature, food, recreation, and a host of other things, while others of us are judged for our mannerisms, our body shape, our behaviors, or even the sound of our own voice. For still others, a sense of being "trapped in the wrong body" has led to despair, hopelessness, even thoughts of suicide. These difficulties are often exacerbated by rigid cultural expectations about "proper" roles for women and men (and we must acknowledge what is often referred to as the double standard, in which women disproportionately have borne the brunt of condemnation for "violating" gender expectations). Though social scientists have demonstrated wide variations across cultures and throughout history in roles for females and males,⁶⁴ many humans have the stubborn tendency to cling to narrow understandings of the "right" way to live out one's maleness or femaleness. Gender stereotypes persist and are ubiquitous in media, entertainment, industry, sports, politics, religion, and the family. Paradoxically, as much as we celebrate freedom, those who do not conform to narrow gender expectations often find themselves marginalized or discriminated against. It is not so simple to "just be" male and female. The individual challenges we experience spill out beyond our homes and families and have become political and ideological battlefronts pitting various groups against one another. Trying to make sense of gender identity not only requires us to consider the challenges we experience as individuals but also pushes us to dig deeper to understand the assumptions behind various approaches to gender differences.

We are in a cultural moment in North America and Europe when long-standing beliefs and practices about sex and gender have been challenged

⁶⁴ See Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender and Grace: Love, Work, and Parenting in a Changing World* (1990); and *My Brother's Keeper: What the Social Sciences Do (and Don't) Tell Us about Masculinity* (2002). The fact that social scientists have also found enduring patterns of general differences between males and females does not negate this observation. See Su, Rounds, and Armstrong, "Men and Things, Women and People: A Meta-Analysis of Sex Differences in Interests," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 135, No. 6 (2009), pp. 859–84; Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Yanna J. Weisberg, Colin G. DeYoung, and Jacob B. Hirsh, "Gender Differences in Personality across the Ten Aspects of the Big Five," *Frontiers in Psychology | Personality Science and Individual Differences*, Vol. 2, Art. 178 (2011), pp. 1-11.

and questioned, by Christians and non-Christians alike.⁶⁵ *National Geographic*,⁶⁶ *Time* magazine,⁶⁷ and *The Atlantic*⁶⁸ have all featured recent cover stories on gender identity. In September 2019 Merriam-Webster announced the addition of the gender nonbinary use of *they* to its dictionary.⁶⁹ Soon after toy giant Mattel introduced “Creatable World,” which it claims is the first-ever line of gender neutral dolls.⁷⁰ The mainstream approval of such revolutionary changes would scarcely have been imaginable less than a generation ago. Nonetheless these changes continue to be resisted in other parts of the world, including Latin and South America, Africa, and Asia.⁷¹

Ideas once considered radical and extreme permeate our societal consciousness. They are all around us in public policy developments such as gender neutral restrooms, third gender category options on birth certificates and driver’s licenses, requirements for gender neutral pronouns, access to publicly financed hormonal and surgical interventions for gender transitioning, and the demand for affirmation of multiple gender identities as a human right.

In addition to these public policy developments, health, education, and social services have had to adapt to complex dilemmas pitting the claims of persons who have transitioned against the safety and well-being of others, specifically women. For example, women’s shelters have been required to accept transwomen who have not physically transitioned, and who thus pose a threat to women attempting to escape the threat of violence from men⁷²; men who have been convicted of sex crimes have changed their sex and been placed in women’s prisons, putting women inmates at risk of being sexually assaulted by these transwomen.⁷³ The idea of gender identity itself is a recent break from the conventional assumption that sex differences were fixed and normative.

Changes such as these do not occur in a vacuum. They reflect cultural, philosophical, and political developments whose origins go much further

⁶⁵ See, for example, Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). We are living in what some have called the “transgender moment.” See also Ryan Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), p. 1, and note 1, p. 217.

⁶⁶ “Gender Revolution,” Jan. 2017; nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/01/.

⁶⁷ “Beyond He or She,” Mar. 2017; time.com/4703058/time-cover-story-beyond-he-or-she/.

⁶⁸ “Your Child Says She’s Trans,” July / Aug. 2018; theatlantic.com/magazine/toc/2018/07/.

⁶⁹ “A Note on the Nonbinary ‘They’: It’s Now in the Dictionary,” retrieved from merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/nonbinary-they-is-in-the-dictionary.

⁷⁰ Eliana Dockterman, “‘A Doll For Everyone’: Meet Mattel’s Gender-Neutral Doll,” *Time* (Sept. 25, 2019), retrieved from time.com/5684822/mattel-gender-neutral-doll. See also mattel.com/en-ca/creatable-world.

⁷¹ “The Global Divide on Homosexuality,” Pew Research Center (June 4, 2013); pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality. See also “African United Methodists Won’t Trade Bible for Dollars,” *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion and Democracy’s Blog* (Feb. 23, 2019); juicyecumenism.com/2019/02/23/african-united-methodists-wont-trade-bible-for-dollars/#J. See also John Anderson, “Conservative Christianity, the Global South and the Battle over Sexual Orientation,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (2011), pp. 1589-1605.

⁷² See, for example, out.com/transgender/2019/8/28/canadian-shelter-excludes-trans-women-was-vandalized.

⁷³ See, for example, quillette.com/2019/10/12/male-bodied-rapists-are-being-imprisoned-with-women-why-do-so-few-people-care/.

back than a few decades.⁷⁴ They are not simply rooted in science. They rest on assumptions about the nature of the world, how we know what is true, and how we should live and act—what philosophers call ontological, epistemological, and ethical categories. It is therefore impossible to negotiate competing claims about the relationship between sex, gender, and gender identity from any sort of objective, neutral, or scientific standpoint. We cannot escape questions of worldview.

It is arguable that the primary value of modern, Western society is the individual self. In part, this is due to the influence of Christianity.⁷⁵ Christianity cut through the social hierarchies of the ancient world, which philosophers like Aristotle considered natural, and insisted on the dignity and responsibility of every single human being, made in the image of God. Women, children, and men were invited to embrace the gospel regardless of the claims that their husbands, fathers, governments, or masters may have made upon them. In their baptism they were offered a new identity in Christ that transcended every other identity.

Over time, Christian convictions regarding the value of the individual led Western societies to advocate on behalf of the poor, abolish slavery, and establish democracy. Values like love and justice, liberty and equality, human rights and the rule of law became the foundations of the Western moral and political order. The moral order was said to consist in a set of rights granted to every human individual by their sovereign creator. These rights were to be exercised in accord with God's moral will as revealed in Scripture and as embedded in natural law—the created order—or what Abraham Kuyper referred to as God's creation ordinances.

Unfortunately, for far too long women were not given these rights. During the 19th century first-wave feminists, many of whom were Christians, insisted that women should enjoy the same rights as men.⁷⁶ In the course of the 20th century women were accorded many of the legal and civil rights that men enjoyed. Many Christians rightly embraced these developments, all the while assuming that women and men are called to exercise their freedom in a manner consistent with the moral will of God and with the moral order of creation.

At the same time, strands of the Western liberal tradition were beginning to argue for a much more extreme understanding of individual human autonomy. According to this understanding, human rights are inherent to each individual self without regard to a creator. Individuals are free to

⁷⁴ Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015); Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex, and Human Flourishing* (London: IVP, 2017); Scott Yenor, "Sex, Gender, and the Origin of the Culture Wars: An Intellectual History," Heritage Foundation (2017), retrieved from report.heritage.org/fp63.

⁷⁵ Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014).

⁷⁶ John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women" in A. Jaggar and P. Rothenberg, eds., *Feminist Frameworks: Alternative Theoretical Accounts of the Relations Between Women and Men*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984/1869), pp. 104-13; Elizabeth Clay Stanton and Elizabeth Cady, "Address before the U.S. Senate Committee on Woman Suffrage," in J. Kournay, J. Sterba, and R. Tong, eds., *Feminist Philosophies: Problems, Theories, and Applications* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1992/1892), pp. 269-70; Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co./Everyman's Library, (1992/1792).

exercise their rights as they see fit, subject only to the requirement that in the exercise of their rights they may not violate the rights of other persons. Appeals to religious authority, nature, or tradition are subordinate to the autonomy of the individual self.

Over time this logic has been embraced by a growing number of people and applied in increasingly extreme ways. For example, pro-choice advocates argue that women have the right to abort their unborn fetuses. Many gay rights advocates insist that a person has the right to marry any other person, regardless of sex. Some transgender advocates follow this logic by maintaining that a person has the freedom to choose whether or not they should identify as male or female. In the face of such claims, appeals to biology are no more persuasive than appeals to religion.

Christian political theorist David Koyzis argues that small-*l* liberal societies of the early 21st century have evolved into “choice enhancement” states that abandon all pretense to a consensus on what is considered good other than individual choice.⁷⁷ Charles Taylor makes a similar point when he observes the mid-20th-century emergence of “expressive individualism.” He points out that “the sexual revolution . . . was moved by a complex of moral ideas in which discovering one’s authentic identity and demanding that it be recognized was connected to the goal of equality.”⁷⁸ Enhancing the freedom to establish one’s identity extends not only to one’s choices regarding sexual practices and partners but also to one’s identity as male, female, or something else entirely.

Nancy Pearcey demonstrates how this choice, which she associates with postmodernism, depends on a dualistic notion of personhood in which the mind is distinct from the body and more important to one’s identity than the body. She concludes that

Postmodernism is thus the latest, and most extreme version of the body/mind dichotomy—one that treats the body itself as infinitely malleable, with no definite nature of its own. . . . If the body cannot be defined, then it places no constraints on our gender identity. The goal is complete freedom to declare oneself a man or a woman or both or neither. The sovereign self will not tolerate having its options limited by anything it did not choose—not even its own body.⁷⁹

The modern pursuit of human autonomy freed from all constraints to create one’s own identity is one of the radical strands of the sexual revolution. The sharp distinction between sex and gender emerged out of this context. It was not merely a neutral, objective, or scientific classification. It was part of an explicit project to undermine traditional understandings of sex and gender and to pave the way for individual choice and identity freed from the constraints of the body. As Catholic theological anthropologist Margaret McCarthy concludes,

The dominant idea of “gender” . . . has now become the vehicle for challenging *any* identity prior to choice (disordered or otherwise). “Gender” now belongs to the realm of the disembodied will, which stands over its body and chooses

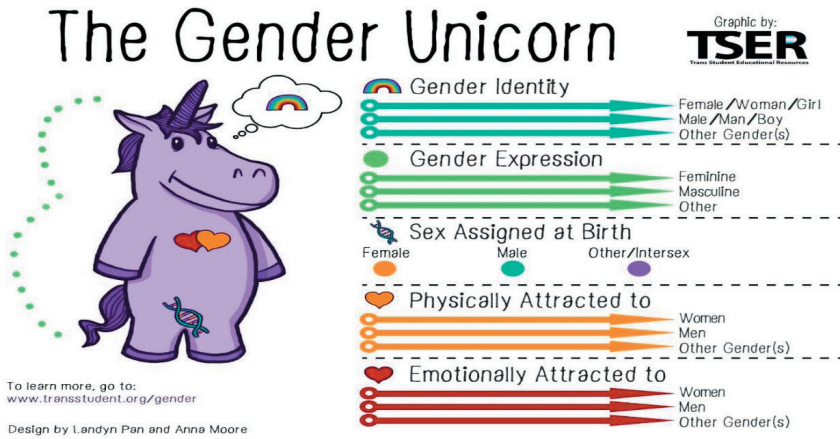
⁷⁷ David Koyzis, *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2019), chap. 2.

⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Self-published, 2007), p. 502.

⁷⁹ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions About Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2018), p. 210.

(“assigns”) an “identity” without any need for justification, especially when such choice is in opposition to its given sex.⁸⁰

Separating gender identity from biological sex and linking these to choice and identity reflects an underlying worldview of humans as creatures whose core sense of identity is not connected to their bodies. As Pearcey notes, this dualistic understanding gives rise to humans as beings who consist of fragmented bits of desires, expressions, and attractions. Such an understanding of gender identity is portrayed by the currently popular “gender unicorn” poster depicted below.⁸¹



The gender unicorn illustrates the range of choices available to individuals in five areas: identity, expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction, and emotional attraction. Even “sex assigned at birth” is seen as a choice: the choice of doctors or parents based on an assessment of the newborn baby’s reproductive organs as male or female. Since, of course, a baby cannot make this choice for her or himself, this “assignment” of sex is often viewed as an external imposition and an infringement of an individual’s freedom. In fact, the gender unicorn’s inclusion of “sex assigned at birth” was developed partly in response to the earlier “genderbread person” poster, which initially used the term “biological sex” but after enduring criticism was revised to refer to “sex assigned at birth.”⁸² From this vantage point,

⁸⁰ Margaret H. McCarthy, “Gender Ideology and the Humanum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 43 (2016), pp. 274-298; retrieved from communio-icr.com/articles/view/gender-ideology-and-the-humanum, p. 288. Michael Walsh similarly observes that shifting from sex to gender was part of the larger strategy of the “Frankfurt School” of critical theorists who sought to undermine the traditional ethics of Western civilization in the wake of World War II; see his *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: The Cult of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West* (New York: Encounter Books, 2015), esp. chap. 6, 11.

⁸¹ *The Gender Unicorn*, Trans Student Educational Resources, www.transstudent.org/gender.

⁸² Mey Rude, “It’s Time for People to Stop Using the Social Construct of “Biological Sex” to Defend Their Transmisogyny” (2014); autostraddle.com/its-time-for-people-to-stop-using-the-social-construct-of-biological-sex-to-defend-their-transmisogyny-240284. Note that there are other critiques leading to other attempts, for example, the “Gender Elephant,” ccgds-ccdgs.org/gender-elephant.

“sex assigned at birth” might be more accurately phrased as “sex imposed at birth.” It is also notable that an individual’s perception of their gender is deemed more authentic and important than their biological sex.

As is clear from the various attempts to display gender diversity (e.g., the gender unicorn, the gender elephant, and the genderbread person), it is now widely accepted as self-evident that sex and gender are not simply male or female but, rather, exist on a continuum. In fact, so common is this understanding that challenging or questioning it is often attacked as discriminatory, bigoted, unscientific, or hateful.⁸³

D. Gender dysphoria

Conversations about gender identity are often complicated by widespread confusion between two significantly different experiences: *gender dysphoria* and *disorders of sexual development (DSD)*.⁸⁴

Mark Yarhouse, a Christian clinical psychologist and director of the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute⁸⁵ at Wheaton College, defines *gender dysphoria* as, “the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female” that “does not correspond to your biological sex.” When a person experiences gender incongruence and it causes significant distress or impairment, they may meet criteria for a formal diagnosis of gender dysphoria.⁸⁶

Yet this understanding has become controversial. Yarhouse notes that changes were recently made to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) to “de-pathologize” gender incongruence and “shift the focus away from biological sex to assigned gender.”⁸⁷ This is in keeping with the broader cultural trends to legitimize and affirm gender fluidity and nonconformity and to deconstruct traditional sex and gender differences.⁸⁸ In addition, some scholars now reject the idea that sex is a fixed biological state. Instead, they argue that it is a product of social and cultural construction.⁸⁹ Others question whether the experience of incongruence is the problem, or whether it is only a problem when it causes anxiety, suffering, or depression.

Yarhouse provides a helpful framework for understanding the different ways in which Christians have responded to the complexity of gender dysphoria. He identifies three distinct frameworks, summarized in the table

⁸³ See for example, Margaret H. McCarthy, p. 276.

⁸⁴ Although some lump these two experiences together, Andrew Walker warns, for example, that “intersexuality and transgenderism are apples and oranges. Those who are pushing the gender revolution have an interest in confusing the categories”; Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2017), p. 158.

⁸⁵ wheaton.edu/academics/school-of-psychology-counseling-and-family-therapy/sexual-and-gender-identity-institute

⁸⁶ Yarhouse, p. 19. Note that the diagnosis refers to what is specified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. [DSM-5], 2013, pp. 451-59. See also Zucker, “The DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for Gender Dysphoria,” in C. Trombetta, G. Liguori, and M. Bertolotto, eds., *Management of Gender Dysphoria* (Switz.: Springer, Milano, 2015), pp. 33-37.

⁸⁷ Yarhouse, p. 62.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Anderson, 2018; Pearcey, 2018; Mayer and McHugh, 2016; Walker, 2017.

⁸⁹ See Anderson, 2018, p. 31; Pearcey, 2018, pp. 194-96.

below.⁹⁰ The Integrity framework views gender as a created reality that is fixed and normative. This perspective regards male and female as categories that are essential to understanding the nature of humans. It views any deviation from these essential categories as disobedience or rebellion that is incompatible with human flourishing.

Three Contrasting Frameworks for How Christians Approach Gender Dysphoria		
Integrity (sacred)	Disability (compassion)	Diversity (identity)
“Identifies the phenomenon of gender incongruence as confusing the sacredness of maleness and femaleness and specific resolutions as violations of that integrity”	“Identifies gender incongruence as a reflection of a fallen world in which the condition is a disability, a nonmoral reality to be addressed with compassion”	“ <i>Strong form</i> : Deconstruction of sex/gender “ <i>Weak form</i> : Highlights transgender issues as reflecting an identity and culture to be celebrated as an expression of diversity”

The Disability framework recognizes the normative nature of male/female differences but acknowledges that in a fallen world an individual’s experience of gender or their physical characteristics (for persons who have a DSD) might be confused or ambivalent through no fault of their own. Whether addressing gender dysphoria or a DSD, the disability framework regards such conditions as evidence of the brokenness of creation, instances in which something has gone awry from God’s intent. Persons who suffer from them are to be regarded with compassion and sensitivity. They should be accommodated in such a way that they can cope with their “disability” as well as possible.

The Diversity approach regards variations of gender expression and characteristics as existing on a continuum that reflects a range of possibilities having no moral or normative foundation. From this point of view, persons whose experiences of their gender do not align with majority categories of male and female are regarded as variations reflecting the beauty and wonder of human possibility. As such, they should be supported and affirmed. In its strong form, the diversity framework insists on the deconstruction of sex and gender altogether.

Yarhouse points out that each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses. He thus argues for what he calls an “integrated” approach in which the integrity of male/female differences is affirmed, but in which Christians respond compassionately in a way that validates the experiences of persons with gender dysphoria.

As difficult as gender dysphoria is for adults, it is even more difficult and controversial for children and youth. Rising public awareness of gender identity has revealed a fault line between those advocating a “gender affirming” approach and those who urge caution or defend traditional understandings of sex differences.

On the one hand, many professional groups and academics now advocate transition treatments for children and youth.⁹¹ Many others, however,

⁹⁰ Yarhouse, Table 2.1, p. 52.

⁹¹ See American Psychological Association, “Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People” (2015); apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf. See also Jason Rafferty, “Ensuring Comprehensive Care and Support for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Children and Adolescents,” *Pediatrics* (Oct. 2018), from the American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement; Hidalgo, et al. (2013).

point out that there is insufficient scientific evidence for the effectiveness and safety of these transitioning treatments.⁹² Even worse, they argue, these treatments are intrusive, irreversible, and harmful.⁹³

Further complicating the challenge of gender dysphoria in children and youth is the influence of popular media and entertainment. Affirming approaches are aided by mainstream shows like the popular reality TV series *I Am Jazz*,⁹⁴ which began in 2015 and as of 2020 was in its sixth season.⁹⁵ *I Am Jazz* follows Jazz Jennings, a boy who at the age of two identifies as a girl and pursues behavioral, hormonal, and surgical transition to become female. This sort of widespread attention to gender identity in popular media and entertainment has raised the question of the extent to which this is influencing children and teens to identify themselves as gender nonconforming as a solution to complex problems of depression, suicide, bullying, and anxiety.⁹⁶

The possible influence of media publicity on the onset of gender identity raises questions about the causes and prevalence of gender dysphoria. As with many other conditions, social and health scientists identify both biological and environmental factors.⁹⁷ For example, “brain sex” theories claim that the development and anatomy of the brains of persons who are transgender are different from those who do not identify as transgender, or that transgender persons are born with the physical sex of one gender and the brain of the opposite gender.⁹⁸

While such explanations have gained popularity, they have significant limitations that warrant caution with respect to certain treatment options.⁹⁹ The neuroscience of sex and brain differences, while still relatively young,¹⁰⁰

⁹² See Mayer and McHughes, pp. 105-107; Yarhouse, 2015, pp. 101-111; Yarhouse and Sadowsky, “A Christian Survey of Sex Reassignment Surgery and Hormone Therapy,” Pastoral Paper #10, Centre for Faith & Sexuality.

⁹³ American College of Pediatricians, “Gender Ideology Harms Children,” acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/gender-ideology-harms-children; Cretella, 2016; Michael Laidlaw, 2018; “The Gender Identity Phantom,” Pediatric and Adolescent Gender Dysphoria Working Group; gdworkinggroup.org/2018/10/24/the-gender-identity-phantom/?fbclid=IwAR37c7N_zqtAec_RI_MTwaMHFiKAudqFLVeGMrUZKvq4AGbw2zZuELAmb0.

⁹⁴ See imdb.com/title/tt4523638

⁹⁵ See womenshealthmag.com/health/a30681082/i-am-jazz-jennings-season-six-premiere-clitoris-surgery

⁹⁶ A recent journal article identifies this growing trend as “rapid onset gender dysphoria,” but it has been criticized for its alleged lack of sensitivity to transgender persons; Lisa Littman, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults: A Study of Parental Reports,” *PLOS ONE* (2018); doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0202330. See also Harriet Hall, “Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria and Squelching Controversial Evidence” (2018); sciencebasedmedicine.org/rapid-onset-gender-dysphoria-and-squelching-controversial-evidence.

⁹⁷ See also Appendix A: What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

⁹⁸ Michael K. Laidlaw, “Gender Dysphoria and Children: An Endocrinologist’s Evaluation of *I Am Jazz*,” *The Public Discourse* (Apr. 5, 2018); thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/04/21220.

⁹⁹ Joe Herbert, “Gender Identity Is in the Brain. What Does This Tell Us?” *Psychology Today* (Aug. 10, 2016); psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/hormones-and-the-brain/201608/gender-identity-is-in-the-brain-what-does-tell-us.

¹⁰⁰ Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, “Sex, Gender, and Transgender Experiences: Part 4—Brain Sex Theory” (Apr. 6, 2019); centerforfaith.com/blog/sex-gender-and-transgender-experiences-part-4-brain-sex-theory.

has demonstrated that although there are some detectable differences between male and female brains, such differences do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that the brains of males and females are of a different *type*. Rather, they differ in *degree* in various specific ways. As one commentator noted, “The brain is no more gendered than the liver or kidneys or heart.”¹⁰¹

Further, evidence of some differences between the brains of males and females does not provide any conclusive evidence about where such differences come from or what they mean.¹⁰² Claims that persons are transgender or have gender dysphoria because their physical sex doesn’t match their “brain sex” often rest on cultural stereotypes of what constitutes “typical” male and female characteristics. Yet these cultural stereotypes have no basis in neuroscientific evidence, let alone in Scripture.¹⁰³

Environmental factors are also posited as a cause of gender dysphoria. For example, some argue that rigid expectations of what it means to be masculine and feminine have created narrow cultural norms that impose restrictions and constraints on those who do not conform. Despite the claims made by various persons and groups, however, none of these theories, whether biological or environmental, has sufficient evidence to lend certainty. As Yarhouse repeatedly emphasizes, “*we do not know what causes gender dysphoria.*”¹⁰⁴

Estimates of prevalence are also fraught with uncertainty, partly because the concepts of gender dysphoria and transgender are so recent and their meaning and categorization are constantly changing. Yarhouse’s review of the literature reveals that using the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition) understanding of gender dysphoria yields estimates of 0.005 to 0.0014 percent of adult men and 0.002 to 0.003 percent of women, but he suggests that such estimates are likely too low. Estimates of those who identify as transgender range from 0.033 and 0.047 percent.¹⁰⁵ By contrast, based on surveys in 19 states and statistical probability estimates for the other states, the Williams Institute estimates that 0.58 percent of Americans identify as transgender.¹⁰⁶

Parents often face substantial internal and external pressure to help their children transition to the opposite gender. These children are at risk. In a recent study, over 60 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth reported

¹⁰¹ Lise Eliot, “Neurosexism: the myth that men and women have different brains,” *Nature* (Feb. 27, 2019); [nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00677-x](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-00677-x).

¹⁰² Cordelia Fine, Daphna Joel, and Gina Rippon, “Eight Things You Need to Know about Sex, Gender, Brains, and Behavior: A Guide for Academics, Journalists, Parents, Gender Diversity Advocates, Social Justice Warriors, Tweeters, Facebookers, and Everyone Else,” *Scholar and Feminist Online*, (15.2, 2019); sfoonline.barnard.edu/neurogenderings/eight-things-you-need-to-know-about-sex-gender-brains-and-behavior-a-guide-for-academics-journalists-parents-gender-diversity-advocates-social-justice-warriors-tweeters-facebookers-and-ever/#.

¹⁰³ Mayer and McHugh, p. 104; Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015), p. 30.

¹⁰⁴ Yarhouse, pp. 61, 79 (emphasis in original).

¹⁰⁵ Yarhouse, pp. 92-93.

¹⁰⁶ A. Flores, J. Herman, G. Gates, and T. Brown, “How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?” (Los Angeles, Calif.: Williams Institute, 2016); williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/How-Many-Adults-Identify-as-Transgender-in-the-United-States.pdf.

engaging in self-harm in the past twelve months. In addition, 40 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth reported being physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their gender identity.¹⁰⁷ The parents of these children are struggling to discern what is best for their loved one.

Health and social service workers, as well as teachers, may tell parents that if their child “is consistent, insistent, and persistent about their transgender identity,” they should affirm and support that identity through social transitioning and later hormonal treatments and surgeries.¹⁰⁸ Respected organizations such as the AMA and Pediatric Endocrine Society have made statements affirming gender transitioning, even though very little research has yet been done on long-term effects of medical practices such as hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgeries.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the evidence on the long-term physical and mental consequences of these treatments is lacking. What is known is that a child who is given hormones to block puberty and who then later takes hormones to change their sex will become sterile.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, research shows that almost all children with gender dysphoria will become comfortable with their anatomical sex after puberty. Many gay adults describe childhood memories of believing they were the opposite sex, or of desiring to be, but attest that they came to accept their sex during adolescence.¹¹¹ At the very least the lack of evidence from long-term studies and the developmental flexibility most children exhibit suggests using caution before entering into any treatment option that is irreversible.

E. Disorders of Sex Development (DSD)

Unlike gender dysphoria, a condition that is characterized by stress and anxiety when one’s gender is perceived as not aligning with one’s biological sex, disorders of sex development (DSDs) are congenital (biologically based) conditions in which the development of a person’s chromosomal, gonadal, internal and/or external anatomical sex is atypical. Most DSDs are relatively mild, but in some cases they are more severe. In these cases a person’s sex might appear ambiguous or even be misidentified.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020

¹⁰⁸ hrc.org/resources/supporting-caring-for-transgender-children

¹⁰⁹ “Those advocating a psychological approach to treatment, as opposed to hormone and/or surgery-based protocols can point to research showing that while SRS [sex reassignment surgery] appears to alleviate mental health problems for some, for a sizable group of others psychological morbidity is unaffected by—or actually increases after—surgical transitioning.” Simonsen, Giraldo, Christensen, Haldi, “Long-term Followup . . .” *Nordic Journal*, as quoted in J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 22.

¹¹⁰ npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278; Norman Spacker, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4955762/; Polly Carmichael GIDS. See Stephen B. Levine, “Ethical Concerns about Emerging Treatment Paradigms for Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 44 (2018), pp. 29-44; Stephen B. Levine, “Informed Consent for Transgendered Patients,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 218-29; DOI: 10.1080/0092623X.2018.1518885.

¹¹¹ T.D. Steensma, J.K. McGuire, B.P. Kreukels, A.J. Beekman, and P.T. Cohen-Kettenis, “Factors Associated with Desistance and Persistence of Childhood Gender Dysphoria: A Quantitative Follow-up Study,” *J Am Acad Child Adolescent Psychiatry*, 52(6) (2013), pp. 582-90; DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016.

¹¹² See Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications; DeFranza, chap. 1; Yarhouse, pp. 17-18.

People with DSDs are sometimes described as intersex, but we have chosen to use the term *disorders of sexual development* for several reasons. First, this is the medically accepted terminology that identifies the range of congenital conditions associated with sexual development.¹¹³ Second, the term DSD makes clear that the various conditions included under this heading result from complications in one's sexual development. While some argue for the inclusion of an additional gender category (or categories) beyond male or female, we follow Preston Sprinkle's contention that persons with a DSD (he uses the term *intersex*) do not constitute a "third sex."¹¹⁴ Similarly, Andrew Walker argues, "Intersex conditions do not disprove the sexual binary."¹¹⁵ In other words, DSDs, like other disorders, are a consequence of the fallenness of creation, departures from God's creational design.¹¹⁶ Like other biological or physiological disorders, DSDs in no way render a person inferior, less human, or less the image of God. Rather, they indicate that some physical aspect of a person is not functioning in a manner suited to its created, biological function.

A lot can go wrong in sexual development, ranging from conditions that pose relatively minor disruptions to those that have substantial and difficult repercussions. In medical terms, it is customary to divide these conditions between those that result from 'chromosomal anomalies' that occur before the zygote even becomes a developing embryo, and 'hormonal anomalies,' which occur in the post-conception stages of development (see Appendix B "Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications" for a more detailed description of these). There are more than twenty-two different variations of DSDs with many different causes. The *Handbook for Parents* from the Accord Alliance offers a good summary of potential causes:

Sometimes a DSD happens because the child has something other than either the XX or the XY chromosome pattern. So some children have XXY, and some children have different combinations in different cells of their body. (That's called a mosaic karyotype.) Another way a DSD can happen is if a child is missing a common gene (part of the DNA), or has an uncommon combination of genes that make his or her body develop differently from most boys or girls. This can happen because of genes passed down through families, or because of a genetic change that happens by chance. Much more rarely, something happens to the mother during pregnancy that leads to a DSD; for example, on rare occasions a pregnant woman may be exposed to chemicals that can affect the sex development of her child. Sometimes [doctors] just don't know why a DSD happened.¹¹⁷

¹¹³ med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/did.htm. Although DSD is the medically accepted term at this writing, there continue to be debates about proper terminology. For example, the Intersex Society of America clearly does not find the term *intersex* offensive, as some have suggested.

¹¹⁴ Preston Sprinkle, "A Biblical Conversation about Transgender Identities," Pastoral Paper #12, Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, p. 17. Also affirmed by Cretella (2016): "The 2006 consensus statement of the Intersex Society of North America does not endorse DSD as a third sex," p. 51.

¹¹⁵ Andrew Walker, *God and the Transgender Debate: What Does the Bible Actually Say About Gender Identity?* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2017), p. 158.

¹¹⁶ Dennis P. Hollinger, *The Meaning of Sex: Christian Ethics and the Moral Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 77.

¹¹⁷ accordalliance.org/dsdguidelines/parents.pdf. For more detailed information on some of the more common DSDs, see Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications. See also med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/dsd.htm.

Whatever the reason for the disorder and regardless of the severity of the disorder, the church should surround parents of children with DSDs and persons with DSDs with love. The church should listen first to the needs of these brothers and sisters and offer them prayer and other support as needed.

F. Implications of worldview

The fact that these are worldview issues—not simply scientific, medical, or empirical matters—is made clear especially in the way some persons or groups are denounced, ridiculed, or attacked when they advise prudence or challenge the conclusions of gender-affirming approaches. A few examples illustrate this point. Michael Bailey’s 2003 book *The Man Who Would Be Queen* described autogynephilia, a theory of male-to-female transgender persons in which men are motivated to transition by being sexually attracted to the thought of themselves as a woman. This theory has been widely attacked and condemned by transgender proponents, and Bailey met a firestorm of controversy that nearly derailed his career, despite an investigation that revealed no basis for accusations leveled against him of malpractice and inappropriate conduct.¹¹⁸

In a more recent example, Dr. Kenneth Zucker was a widely respected psychiatrist and expert in gender dysphoria who worked for more than 35 years at the renowned Child Youth and Family Gender Identity Clinic (GIC) at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto. In 2015, Zucker was fired after an external review of the GIC at CAMH allegedly showed unethical practice. Why? Because Zucker, based on the empirical evidence, continued to advocate a “watchful waiting” rather than a “gender-affirmative approach.” An independent investigation later showed these allegations to be false, and CAMH publicly apologized and settled a wrongful dismissal lawsuit with Zucker.¹¹⁹

Another example (among many more that could be cited) is the reaction and resistance to the American College of Pediatricians (ACP) and its current executive director, Michelle Cretella. The ACP was established in 2002 as an alternative to the more liberal American Academy of Pediatricians and its endorsement of progressive approaches to children and families. A quick google search of the ACP and Cretella reveals numerous links to articles, videos, and blogposts with condemnations and accusations of the ACP with descriptions such as “exposes the lies,” “child abuse alert,” “anti-LGBTQ,” “wingnut,” and “hateful.”

It is clear that there is no neutral stance on questions of gender identity. In the global north and west, we find ourselves in a cultural moment where longstanding beliefs and practices about sex and gender have been challenged and questioned (by Christians and non-Christians alike¹²⁰). At the same time, the liberalization on matters of sexuality has been resisted in the

¹¹⁸ Carey Benedict Carey, “Criticism of a Gender Theory, and a Scientist Under Siege,” *New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2007.

¹¹⁹ Jesse Singal, “How the Fight over Transgender Kids Got a Leading Sex Researcher Fired,” *The Cut* (2016); thecut.com/2016/02/fight-over-trans-kids-got-a-researcher-fired.html. See also “CAMH Reaches Settlement with Former Head of Gender Identity Clinic,” Oct. 7, 2018; cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/camh-settlement-former-head-gender-identity-clinic-1.4854015.

¹²⁰ See, for example, Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

global south,¹²¹ revealing divisions in the global church between the north and south.¹²² In North America, ideas once considered radical and extreme—sex as nonbinary, the separation of gender identity from biological sex, the elevation of individual choice over physical or cultural constraints—have now permeated our societal consciousness whether we like it or not.

In the face of these rapidly changing cultural realities, the church cannot look the other way. Persons experiencing either gender dysphoria or DSD are not “them” but us. Although the prevalence is relatively low, we must be just as prepared and ready to receive our sisters and brothers in Christ struggling with gender identity issues as with any other disorder, no matter what the numbers are. Yet we must also recognize that both gender dysphoria and DSD are a disorder: they are “not the way it’s supposed to be.”¹²³ Our understanding of and response to these disorders ought to be shaped by the two great commandments: to love God above all, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Thus, in the next section we turn to Scripture to glean what God teaches about sex differences and gender identity in light of the reality that God created human beings “male and female” (Gen. 1:27). We will conclude this part of our report on gender identity by identifying pastoral guidelines for how the church should respond to persons who must deal in their own lives with the complexities of gender dysphoria or DSD.

“My son just told me he’s actually a woman,” Ji-ho,* a 51-year-old Asian American, shares with a close friend and colleague during a pastors’ retreat. Baffled and heartbroken, the two men pray for Ji-ho’s adult child and for wisdom and love for Ji-ho in his relationship with his child.

Cheri,* 19 (white), came home from her first year at a Christian college and told her parents that she did not feel comfortable being identified as a girl/woman. Cheri had felt different since puberty and had struggled with depression and anxiety. She had difficulty finding a group who accepted her at college until she got connected with the LGBTQ group on campus. With her friends’ support, she changed her name to Sam and was now dating a woman. The siblings of Sam’s parents were grieved but decided it was best to support Sam by using the name and pronouns (they) she had chosen. Unfortunately, when the church found out about Sam’s chosen identity and that Sam was dating a woman, the pastor told Sam (using her rejected name) that s/he was no longer welcome to sing with the worship team or to play her instrument. The council sent Sam a formal letter to that effect as well as one to Sam’s parents. Sam offered to come and talk to the pastor, but the conversation ended up being hurtful. Sam left the church into which she was born, baptized, and professed her faith. At a recent family gathering, Sam cried as they sang hymns together,

¹²¹ “The Global Divide on Homosexuality,” Pew Research Center, June 4, 2013; pewresearch.org/global/2013/06/04/the-global-divide-on-homosexuality. See also “African United Methodists Won’t Trade Bible for Dollars,” *Juicy Ecumenism: The Institute on Religion and Democracy’s Blog*, Feb. 23, 2019; juicyecumenism.com/2019/02/23/african-united-methodists-wont-trade-bible-for-dollars/#.

¹²² John Anderson, “Conservative Christianity, the Global South and the Battle over Sexual Orientation,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 9 (2011), pp. 1589-1605.

¹²³ Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).

but s/he cannot reconcile the pastor and church's treatment of he/r with the love of God that Sam and he/r family sing about.

IX. Gender identity: Scripture

Central to the discussion of sex and gender identity is the distinction between sex and gender. Yet, as we have seen, this distinction is a relatively recent one, and it is unknown to the Bible. For most of Western history, *male* and *female* would have included the biological realities of those terms as well as all of what is now included in the term *gender*.

Needless to say, there is very little that the Bible explicitly says about these issues. Consequently, when we seek biblical insight on questions pertaining to both gender identity and disorders of sex development, we must rely on the broad scriptural story that includes creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. With respect to humanity, we affirm that God created humanity as male and female in the image of God and declared creation "very good." Due to human disobedience, however, humanity, along with the rest of creation, is now distorted by sin. Thus whatever we observe about humans after the fall into sin is inevitably distorted by the fall in various ways (Gen. 3:14-23). Salvation in Christ entails restoration of all things, including humans, to God's creational intentions. We experience this restoration in part now, while awaiting full restoration at the second coming of Christ and the final judgment.

A. Genesis 1-2

With this in mind, we will find a closer examination of several texts worthwhile. The first is Genesis 1-2. As already noted in section III of this report, focusing on the biblical theology of human sexuality, only humans are described in terms of their biological sex in the creation account. In Genesis 1 they are identified as "male and female," and in Genesis 2 as "man" and "woman." In Genesis 1 this male/female identification sets them apart from other creatures in the story. While a biological male/female distinction is assumed with the blessing of the fish and birds on day five (v. 22), it is not explicit. With the creation of humans, however, the male/female distinction is explicitly stated. In addition, the male/female binary is grammatically connected with the image of God, that is, with what is a central identifying biblical feature of being human (v. 27), something that is reaffirmed in Genesis 5:2. Paul Niskanen writes, "The statement 'male and female he created them,' far from being dissociated from the concept of the image of God, stands at the very crux of its interpretation."¹²⁴

The Christian church has always recognized that Genesis 1-2 are paradigmatic texts. In other words, they describe God's purposes for creation in a way that is not simply descriptive, but normative—that is, the way God intended. Scripture itself teaches us to interpret these texts in this way. For example, it condemns murder and slander by appealing to the fact that human beings have been created in the image of God (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9).

Similarly, the New Testament repeatedly invokes Genesis 1-2 as the authoritative model for sexual relationships between men and women (Matt. 19; 1 Cor. 6; Eph. 5). In response to the Pharisees' question about divorce,

¹²⁴ Paul Niskanen, "The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אדם in the Image of אלהים," in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 128, no. 3 (2009), pp. 417-36 (specifically, p. 424).

Jesus says that “at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’” (Matt. 19:4), a direct reference to Genesis 1:27. He goes on to connect this to Genesis 2, saying that a “man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Matt. 19:5). Jesus offers no indication that this binary is anything less than a creational norm despite the hardness of the human heart.

Some have pointed to other pairs listed in Genesis 1, suggesting that all of the pairs of this chapter, including the male-female pair, represent two ends of a created spectrum of possibilities. For example, light and dark are the extremes of the spectrum of daylight that also includes dawn, dusk, and various degrees in between. But this argument pushes the boundaries of analogy to the breaking point. Genesis 1-2 clearly and explicitly describes pre-fall human beings as created in only two forms: male/man (Adam) and female/woman (Eve). Unlike the degrees between dark and light which are found frequently in Scripture, nowhere does Scripture suggest that there is a spectrum of normative biological manifestations of humanity beyond male and female.

Although people suffering from disorders of sexual development may not unambiguously fit the creational norm outlined in Scripture, this does not alter scriptural teaching. The same is true for those suffering from gender dysphoria. These conditions are not the way things are supposed to be. Like other disorders and diseases, these afflictions are to be interpreted as a result of the fall, which in many ways has distorted God’s good creation. Of course, this does not in any way mean that the people suffering from these conditions are personally responsible for them. Rather they suffer the consequences of the post-fall groaning of creation (Rom. 8:22; John 9:1-12). The church must therefore reach out to them in compassion and love.

B. *Matthew 19:11-12*

A second important text that may shed light on the topic of gender identity and DSD is Matthew 19:11-12. This text has particular significance because of the reference to a eunuch. In Israel the eunuch, along with Gentiles, the lame, the disfigured, and others with various physical conditions, was not afforded full participation in the religious life of the community. Some conditions disallowed one from the priesthood (Lev. 21). Some conditions did not allow a person to enter “the assembly of the LORD.” Eunuchs fell into this latter category (Deut. 23:1). In the context of teaching about marriage and divorce, Jesus makes the following statement concerning eunuchs: “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made that way by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs [note: ‘or have made themselves eunuchs’] for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (Matt. 19:11-12, NIV). So who are these “eunuchs” to whom Jesus is referring?

The first thing to note about the Matthew passage is that it is an obscure saying, the meaning of which is not immediately clear. As Megan DeFranza notes: “Admittedly, it is difficult to know how Jesus’ audience interpreted his words about three types of eunuchs.”¹²⁵ For one thing, Jesus is using the

¹²⁵ Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015), p. 82.

term for “eunuch” in an unusual way. The term normally refers to a man who either occupies a high position in government or a man who has been mutilated by castration—or both.¹²⁶ Although the second meaning here, associated with mutilation or castration, most probably applies to the second kind of eunuch in Jesus’ saying, most exegetes are agreed that the term for “eunuch,” when applied to Jesus’ first and third kinds, is used in an otherwise unattested sense. A reasonable guess is that the first kind of eunuch refers to someone born with some kind of birth defect, and that the third kind refers (given the context) to a person who chooses not to marry, but we can’t be entirely sure. In both cases the term seems to be used by Jesus as a bold metaphor, stretching the normal use of the term for “eunuch” in Greek.

New Testament commentators have made various suggestions as to the meaning of Jesus’ first kind of “eunuch.”¹²⁷ Most seem to think of infertility or impotence, not intersexuality. An exception is Retief and Cilliers, who do think of “hermaphroditism” (that is, intersexuality) in this connection, but they base this on a poor understanding of the science involved and moreover think homosexuality may be involved as well.¹²⁸

Many commentators read the first two kinds of “eunuch” in our text in the light of a distinction made in rabbinic literature.¹²⁹ This is a potentially fruitful source of insight, although rabbinic sources are notoriously difficult to date, and it is impossible to be certain that Jesus and his disciples would have been familiar with the distinction in question.

The rabbinic distinction referred to by commentators is between “eunuchs of the sun” [*sārîsê hammâ*] and “eunuchs of men” [*sārîsê ‘ādām*]. “Eunuchs of men” corresponds to the second sort of eunuch, one who was mutilated, “made that way by man.” The “eunuch of the sun,” the one “born that way,” is sometimes defined as a *saris*, a “sterile male.”¹³⁰ It should be noted, however, that the rabbis unambiguously referred to the “eunuch of the sun” as masculine. Further, there was a female counterpart to the “eunuch of the sun” called an *aylonit*.¹³¹ It is therefore unlikely that the first kind of eunuch

¹²⁶ Francois P. Retief and Louise Cilliers, “Eunuchs in the Bible,” *Acta Theologica* (June 2005), p. 247; journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/at/article/view/2093.

¹²⁷ The Greek church father Gregory of Nazianzus describes such eunuchs as “born without sexual desire” (DeFranza, p. 96). Modern commentators have different guesses. For example, in explaining the first kind of eunuch, Keener speaks of “those who were born without sexual organs” (1999:471); Luz, of “those who are naturally impotent” (2001:501); McKnight, of “males castrated . . . by birth defect” (2008:1617; 2015:1723); and Wilkins, of “those without the capacity for sexual relations” (2008:1861). A bit more delicately, Ellison writes: “For some men and women their physical make-up is such that marriage is at best a social convenience for them” (1986:1141).

¹²⁸ As they put it, “Modern science recognizes a group of syndromes caused by faulty descent or early disease of the testes, or by congenital defects in the sexual organs (particularly the testes). Sterility, impotence, and typical ‘eunuchoid’ body types develop, but without any mental incapacitation. . . . These conditions are very rare, and must have been scarce in antiquity, in comparison with eunuchism due to castration. Hermaphroditism (genuine bisexuality) is also extremely rare. . . .”; Retief and Cilliers, pp. 255-56.

¹²⁹ See for example, Ulrich Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 2001), p. 501; Retief and Cilliers, p. 255; and DeFranza, p. 71.

¹³⁰ Hagith Sivan, *Jewish Childhood in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 190.

¹³¹ She is described as “a female eunuch/congenitally infertile female (*aylonit*), who was presented, for the most part, as the mirror image of a *saris* (*hamma*)”; Sivan, p. 192.

that Jesus had in mind was someone who was sexually ambiguous—that is, someone of whom it was unclear whether they were male or female.¹³² This is confirmed by the fact that the rabbis did have other terms to describe such a person—namely, *androgynos* and *tumtum*—the former term refers to “a baby born with sexual attributes of both males and females (i.e., a hermaphrodite), the latter [to] a child born without clear sexual demarcation (i.e., with sexual organs covered: a cryptorchid).”¹³³

It may be that Jesus was alluding to the rabbinic distinction between “eunuchs of the sun” and “eunuchs of man.” If so, then “eunuchs [who are] born that way” and “eunuchs made that way by man” probably correlate with the first two kinds of eunuchs mentioned by Jesus, setting the stage for the climactic third kind, which by common consent does not refer to physical disfigurement or mutilation but to persons who choose a life of celibacy in order to devote themselves to the kingdom of God.¹³⁴

Although we cannot be sure what exactly is meant by “eunuchs who were born that way,” a significant clue is found in the adjectival use of the word *eunouchos* in extra-biblical Greek. According to the standard dictionary of classical Greek, the *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell-Scott-Jones, this word, when used as an adjective describing plants, means “without seeds.” That would suggest that Jesus’ first kind of “eunuch” is someone who from birth is “without seeds”—that is, infertile or impotent.

This description comports well with Isaiah 56:3-5, where the eunuch is exhorted not to complain, “I am only a dry tree.” This text is part of a beautiful promise to people who were formerly excluded from worship; “the LORD says: ‘To the eunuchs who . . . choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—to them I will give . . . a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters’”—a sign of covenant blessing. This is surely a prophecy of hope for all who live with DSDs.

Despite the interpretive difficulties involved with the text in Matthew 19:11-12, Jesus’ overall argument is reasonably clear. The disciples were right to conclude that for many Christians it is better not to marry. Some Christians are unable to flourish within marriage because they are born with a sexual defect. Other Christians are unable to flourish within marriage because of a sexual injury. Still others decide to voluntarily abstain from marriage. Regardless, each of these types of Christians follows a path that is worthy of praise and that will lead, in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah, to great reward.

As Jesus himself declares shortly afterward, “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” (Matt. 19:29). In Mark 10:30, Jesus even declares that those who give up such familial rewards will receive a new family even in this life, receiving “a hundred times as much *in this present age*: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

¹³² This conclusion is also that of Susannah Cornwall, author of *Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology* (London: Equinox, 2010), as cited in DeFranza, p. 102.

¹³³ Sivan, p. 185.

¹³⁴ DeFranza, p. 71.

C. Testimony of Paul

Jesus' teaching in Matthew 19 is affirmed by the apostle Paul, who declares in 1 Corinthians 7 that it may be better for Christians not to marry. It is also affirmed in a powerful story in Acts 8, in which Philip evangelizes and baptizes a prominent eunuch from Ethiopia. Acts 8 tells us that after his baptism the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing" (8:39). All of these passages confirm the general truth that in the kingdom of God the powerful legal and social barriers that divide men and women and that exclude persons who suffer from various disorders collapse.

Paul celebrates this reality of equity in the kingdom of God in Galatians 3:26-29 as he declares, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Is the text suggesting that the male/female distinction is not normative and should be done away with? Most scholars do not claim that this is what Paul had in mind. Rather the emphasis falls on being in Christ. Paul is reminding his readers that our primary identity is grounded not in our place in society or our sex or our ethnic background, but in the fact that we are in Christ. St. Jerome (A.D. 345-420), in his commentary on Galatians, identifies these categories as social hierarchies that are negated in Christ.¹³⁵ Calvin's comments on verse 28 are similar. He writes, "The meaning is, that there is no distinction of persons here, and therefore it is of no consequence to what nation or condition any one may belong: nor is circumcision any more regarded than sex or social rank."¹³⁶ More recently, Nigerian scholar Adewale J. Adelakun¹³⁷ notes what he claims most understand about this text. The text is not about erasing distinctions but rather about emphasizing that all are equal—there is no hierarchy in Christ.

Paul's argument is that in Christ all legal, ethnic, economic, and gender barriers to membership in the body of Christ have collapsed. One no longer needs to be a circumcised Jew to enter the presence of God, any more than one needs to be a man or a free person, as was the case in Old Testament Israel. Now all persons have access to God by grace through faith in Christ alone. Paul's point is not that a woman is no longer a woman, that a slave is no longer a slave, or that a Jew is no longer a Jew. The instructions Paul gives in Ephesians 5-6 and other places make this quite clear. Diversity is not erased in the body of Christ. His point, rather, is that all believers are equal and all are one, because all are "children of God through faith" in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26).

In contrast to the Old Testament era, in which circumcision was a sign only for males, all are now equal recipients of the sign of the new covenant,

¹³⁵ St. Jerome, tr. Andrew Cain, "Book Two, Galatians 3.10–5.60," p. 152, in *Commentary on Galatians*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), pp. 129-202. Accessed April 10, 2020; DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt284xqj.7.

¹³⁶ John Calvin, tr. William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), p. 112.

¹³⁷ Adewale J. Adelakun, "Complementarian versus Egalitarian: An Exegesis of Galatians 3:28 from a Nigerian Cultural Perspective" in *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology*, Vol. XVII, 3 (2012), p. 77-95.

baptism. Through baptism, all are one in Christ. According to Adalakun, Paul “holds the view that this division into male and female established in creation is not relevant in references to baptism into Christ, since no one is baptized to be either a man or a woman”; rather, in Christ all “have equal access to God.”¹³⁸

Working from a very different perspective and hermeneutic, Swedish scholar Marianne Bjelland Kartzow nevertheless comes to a very similar conclusion about Paul’s message in this text. While recognizing interpretive disputes about Galatians 3:28, she writes, “One possible interpretation is that the existing social hierarchy is of less importance in baptism, since all are one in Christ Jesus.”¹³⁹ This is, in fact, the interpretation she chooses to work with. Building on work by Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, Kartzow is trying to show that social categories inevitably intersect with one another such that one never occupies just one category. She recognizes that the author of Galatians (whom she posits may not be Paul) is working with three prominent social hierarchies in his day. But she goes on to assert the author’s point that these categories are overcome by one’s status in Christ.

In summary, Paul’s point is clear: “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Diversity is not erased in Christ. But inequality is. The verse in its context is not about a meltdown of physical differences. It is not even about a meltdown of social differences. Rather, it points to the fact that in Christ, all are one, all are “children of God through faith” in Christ Jesus (3:26).

None of this takes away from the fact that believers and, in fact, all people will continue to experience the fallenness of creation in their own lives. Like a myriad of other disorders and disabilities, gender disorders are “not the way it’s supposed to be.”¹⁴⁰

Similarly, the fall has corrupted the relations between men and women and the social expectations of each. This includes everything from social and societal structures that prevent or discourage women from developing and using their God-given gifts, to portrayals of women and men that not-so-subtly suggest that only certain clothes, mannerisms, and behaviors are truly masculine or feminine. The gospel promises an end to the oppression and hierarchy that has long divided men and women, uniting us as one body in Christ, but we remain male and female, created in the image of God.

Some people argue that there is no reason why a person’s gender identity should not be accepted as just as clear an indication of God’s will for them as their body. Why should we assume that the problem is with the mind, they ask? Why not consider whether the body is the problem?

The problem with this argument is that it is dualistic. At the heart of the biblical understanding of humanity is the teaching that our bodies matter. The Bible does not pit the soul against the body. It does not locate the true identity of a person in their soul or conceive of the body as the soul’s prison. Rather, Scripture presents the human being as a holistic, interdependent unity of body and soul. The biblical words often translated as “soul”

¹³⁸ Adalakun, p. 84.

¹³⁹ Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, “Asking the Other Question: An Intersectional Approach to Galatians 3:28 and the Colossian Household Codes,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 18 (2010), pp. 364-89.

¹⁴⁰ Neil Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*.

(Hebrew *nephesh* and Greek *psuche*) or “body” (for which biblical Hebrew does not even have an equivalent, and Greek uses *soma*) usually refer to the whole person, including both their physical and biological aspects and also their emotional, mental, and spiritual aspects. Biblically speaking, a person does not *have* a soul but, rather, *is* a soul. Likewise, a person does not *have* a body, but *is* a body.¹⁴¹

This means that we cannot treat a person’s subjectively experienced gender as a fact of their existence independent of their biological sex. We cannot claim that a person’s true identity resides in their subjective sense of self, as distinct from the body with which they were born. As Kevin Vanhoozer writes, “One’s true self is not, therefore, hovering above or within one’s body. At the limit, the idea that we are men trapped in women’s bodies or women trapped in men’s bodies collapses the distinction between sex and gender and flirts with a gnostic, even docetic, disregard for bodily reality (he only *seems* [*dokeo*] to be male).”¹⁴² Margaret McCarthy points out that extreme views of gender reject the body as “a problematic limit to freedom—freedom conceived as pure self-initiating self-determination.”¹⁴³

As Christians, we believe that the body is a gift from God. Tragically, due to the fall, through no fault of their own, some people experience a disconnect between their gender identity and their sex. Nevertheless, there is no redemption in embracing this disconnect as a sign of God’s good intent. There is no redemption in trying to live as a male when God has given one the body of a female, or in trying to live as a female when God has given one the body of a male. We do not help people to flourish when we encourage them to transition from one sex to another. To transition is merely to intensify the problem. No matter how hard a person tries, or regardless of what invasive procedures they undergo, they cannot change the fact that God has made them male or female.

As Vanhoozer puts it, “The body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore not our own (1 Cor. 6:19).” For that reason, “in refusing one’s biology, the creature refuses what is ultimately not merely a natural given but a gift of God.” Our true vocation is not to reject our physical bodies. It is “to discern, deliberate on, and do those possibilities that are given to us with our biological sex.”¹⁴⁴

All of that said, to emphasize that Scripture calls us to live in accord with our male or female sex is not to say that Scripture prescribes the precise roles that human beings often associate with each sex. All too often Christians have confused sex roles as they are *described* in Scripture with what God has *proscribed* as his normative will for men and women rooted in creation. Yet, as with issues like divorce and polygamy, we need to recognize that God tolerated all manner of sinful behavior that did not reflect his moral will.

¹⁴¹ Christian materialists might deny the existence of an immaterial soul or have differing conceptions of that soul, but there is seemingly no one who would argue that the body is somehow unimportant.

¹⁴² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Drama-of-Redemption Model,” in *Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 151-99 (specifically pp. 195-96).

¹⁴³ McCarthy, p. 284.

¹⁴⁴ Vanhoozer, pp. 195-96.

Even worse, Christians have often assumed that traditional gender roles, whether described in Scripture or not, are ordained in nature. Yet in so doing we commit the fallacy of assuming that what we observe in nature or in human society is creational. Human society is fallen, and ever since the fall into sin we have practiced gender in ways that have been oppressive, self-serving, and sinful.

The problem is not necessarily with gender roles per se. The problem arises, at least in part, when we hold to these gender associations too rigidly, stifling the freedom to which God has called us in Christ. The problem perpetuates when we dogmatically impose our gender expectations, or the gender expectations of our culture, on other people. To do this is to turn our understanding of gender into an idol. And the problem is made all the worse by the fact that it imposes severe distress and pain on others. Throughout history women in particular have been prevented from doing many good things due to sinful impositions of gender—such as working for pay, owning property, voting, speaking in public, or wearing pants. Because of the influence of fallen cultural conceptions of gender, men too have been discouraged from certain behaviors, such as showing emotion—and not discouraged from aggressive behavior.

As Christians, we are not called to imitate cultural ideas of masculinity or femininity—not even those that were present during the time of the Old and New Testaments—but to imitate Christ. Jesus himself was both gentle and strong, humble and bold, submissive and a leader. The virtues of Christ are appropriate for both men and women, since both men and women have been made in the image of God and Jesus is the expressed image of God (Col. 1:15).

Properly understood, the gospel brings peace and freedom to us as sexual beings. God has created us in his image to express our maleness and femaleness with freedom and creativity. Although he made us with important, sexual differences, God does not dictate masculine or feminine traits that ought to accompany these differences. This is not to say that Scripture says nothing about what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman. It is simply to say that this biblical teaching is not nearly as specific or dogmatic as Christians have typically made it out to be. In many cases, we owe one another greater freedom than we have given in the past. Here we need wisdom and discernment that is rooted not primarily in the cultures of traditionalism or secularism but in the culture of the gospel.

As a committee, we understand that in the Christian Reformed Church there are differences of opinion on whether women should be ordained to the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon. As a denomination, we recognize that these differences arise from credible and sincerely held interpretations of Scripture. Nevertheless, we urge our churches to consider whether we have often imposed our own cultural prejudices on others as if they were the will of God, consequently exacerbating the difficulties of people who experience either gender dysphoria or disorders of sexual development.

X. Gender identity: Pastoral care

The readers of this report have various experiences and perspectives. Some of us have transitioned or have a DSD; others of us are family members of persons with gender dysphoria; many of us are pastors, health-care

providers, and congregational members who desire to serve well. How should we respond to each other's hurts, questions, bitterness, strong opinions, and great needs?

As noted at the beginning of this gender identity section of this report, in preparation for writing this report committee members listened to stories from trans and queer persons as well as their families, and we read literature from theology and the biological and social sciences, including queer theology and queer studies. The numbers of those identifying as transgender, especially youth and small children, has risen dramatically in recent times. Consequently, some medical treatments are new or being used on much younger people; and the body of scientific research is significantly smaller than in many other areas of sexuality. At the same time, relatively few theologians have studied and written about persons who experience gender dysphoria or are gender nonconforming. Thus, what we offer here with regard to pastoral care, we offer cautiously.

We also note that in its mission and pastoral care, the church should demonstrate great openness to people who experience gender dysphoria or who are gender nonconforming, and should be cautious in any pronouncements and policy making. "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:12-13).

A. What is pastoral care, and who is responsible for it?

Pastoral care should be modeled after the example of Jesus, the good shepherd, who feeds his flock, cares for the wounded, protects the vulnerable, carries the young close to his heart, strengthens the weak, brings back the straying, and seeks out lost sheep.¹⁴⁵ Thus, pastoral care involves nurture, healing, guidance, admonition, discipline, reconciliation, comfort, diaconal care, and support. It involves reaching out, visiting, listening, showing empathy, and working to restore relationships. It often includes reading Scripture, prayer, or simply being a compassionate, empathic presence.

The New Testament calls elders and pastors to love, feed, protect, admonish, comfort, and guide the sheep of God's flock (John 21:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). And the Bible describes shepherding or pastoring as a gift God has given to some for the sake of the church. Yet God also urges all believers to encourage the weak, show compassion, seek the lost, teach and admonish one another, pray for each other's spiritual and bodily healing, bring reconciliation, and mourn with those who mourn (Matt. 18:10-14; Rom. 12:16; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Gal. 6:1; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:14; James 5:16). So while gifted leaders and staff may give direction to the pastoral work of a congregation, every member has some responsibility to care for other sheep, whether in the flock or outside it, who are in need.

B. Goals of pastoral care

Pastoral care for people in the church with a sexual development disorder or gender dysphoria must include concern for the welfare of their bodies, minds, and spirits. As already noted, unlike much Greek philosophy, biblical writers view humans as a unity of body and soul, not as a soul located in a

¹⁴⁵ Ps. 23; 80:1; 95:7; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:11-16; Luke 15:10; John 10:1-18.

body. Yet for people struggling with their sense of identity, or whose bodies are sexually ambivalent because of an intersex condition, relationship with their bodies is potentially incredibly difficult.

Jesus' ministry included restoring people's physical health, their status in the wider society, and their spiritual health. In these ways, Jesus brought reconciliation where there had been brokenness or alienation from God, from others, or in their own bodies. In the same way, the main goals of pastoral care for those affected by gender dysphoria and disorders of sexual development must be to help people enter or regain healthy relationships with God and others, and to be at peace within themselves as whole persons: heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Because the Bible does not give explicit teaching on the issues raised by gender dysphoria and DSD, we believe that we must be tentative in formulating general guidelines. Nevertheless, on the basis of Scripture's clear teaching that humanity has been created as male and female, we believe the following constitutes wise counsel.

C. Care for those with gender dysphoria or who identify as transgender and their families—adults and children

1. Adults

Formerly transgendered people report isolating at home because they didn't want to be seen in their bodies. They were ashamed of or even hated their bodies. While there can be a variety of healthy ways to dress and act as a man or woman, to live comfortably in their bodies in the outside world, people who experience gender dysphoria, or who don't identify with their sex, need to see themselves as God sees them—as “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God (Ps. 139:14), as part of the restored “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). To receive God's love for their bodies and to be able to love their own bodies, transgendered believers need protection from the evil one's deception that God made a mistake when creating them. Therefore, those who are transgendered or are experiencing gender dysphoria should be encouraged to be reconciled to their created self. In all of this, be sure to recognize your limits and be willing to suggest that the person consult a professional psychologist.

a. Spiritual care

- With care and compassion, recognize the deep hurt, confusion, and estrangement from God and community that many parents, youth, and adults feel—and lament with them. This might include the baffled parent of a three-year-old who seems to reject his or her biological sex; a black trans person whose family and church rejected her; a middle-aged transperson who finally feels validation of their sense of self after beginning to identify as the opposite sex. If such feelings mystify you or make you uncomfortable, model yourself after the compassionate Lord Jesus.
- Consistently discuss, celebrate, and preach about the value of the created world and the dignity of the human body explained in the Christian teachings of creation, Christ's incarnation and ascension, and the resurrection.

- Help people enter into the presence of a loving God who comes to us by many names and images, such as the good shepherd, who provides guidance and protection, seeks the lost, and brings us to a peaceful place (Ps. 23; Luke 15; John 10); the light of the world, who comes into our darkness and confusion and drives away oppression and sadness (John 8:12); our refuge, the one in whom we can hide (Ps. 46); our powerful rescuer, who comes down from heaven when he sees we are in trouble (Ps. 18). This can happen one on one, with a prayer team, or in public worship.
- Confront any unbiblical gender expectations in your church community that could contribute to gender dysphoria. We noted earlier that transgendered people who believe their physical sex doesn't match their "brain sex" often rely on cultural stereotypes of typical male and female characteristics, which have no basis in neuroscientific evidence of sex differences in the brain. Our *culture* consistently values men specifically for their distinction from women and mocks them with female or gay epithets if they fail.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, the church often subtly or overtly exerts the same pressure on young men by promoting unbiblical stereotypes, relying on teaching from popular websites and books that promote a notion of manhood as displaying strength in comparison to women and of womanhood as utility and attractiveness to men.

In contrast, the gospel brings peace and freedom to us as sexual beings within gendered cultures. Instead of putting us in boxes, God has created us male and female in God's own image with freedom and creativity. Although God created men and women with physical differences, in the Scriptures God does not prescribe masculine or feminine traits.

Whether by identifying as gender nonconforming, transgender or genderqueer, an increasing number of our brothers and sisters find themselves desperately uncomfortable with gender expectations of them. We can care well for them by *acknowledging* that there is no one biblically prescribed way to live as male and female and by *repenting* of putting unnecessary gender expectations on boys and girls that can contribute to body-shaming, sexual violence, and gender identity confusion.

- Give long-term personal support for gender dysphoric or transgender people or their family members through a person or persons willing to accompany them on a journey of restoration, whether that journey is continuous or fragmented. Not only will support persons encourage them with a listening ear, prayer, and encouraging Scriptures; they will also be available for wise counsel about harms and outcomes of medical intervention, as well as for a kind, nonjudgmental perspective on the pressures the person may experience from the transgender community and others. Support people can also help to provide resources. (See Internet Resources below for a few good examples from the numerous websites of parents advocating for

¹⁴⁶ Nate Pyle, *Man Enough: How Jesus Redefines Manhood* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015), p. 30.

children's physical well-being, of detransitioners telling their stories to encourage others, and of feminists concerned about pressure on young women to transition.)

- Also note that a review of studies of persisters and desisters shows that about half of those who detransition are same-sex attracted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many young people in the church and wider society, transitioning is seen as more acceptable than being gay.¹⁴⁷

b. Hospitality

Individuals who identify as transgender or have gender dysphoria need to be received without judgment as persons made in God's image, valuable to God as they are. In other words, they need to be welcomed with unconditional love.

- Treat every person as an individual. Like all of us, every trans person is unique and wants to be seen for who they are. Work against your ideas and biases of who transgender people are, and strive to know and love the person in front of you. To quote a common expression, "If you've met one transgender person, you've met one transgender person."
- Acknowledge that having gender dysphoria is not a choice. Also understand that they may view surgery as a means of God's healing to alleviate the anguish of gender dysphoria. The existence and persistence of such intense discomfort in some persons within the church is not a form of rebellion against God's creation of us as male and female. No one chooses to experience such distress with their body that they would undergo physical treatments to radically and permanently alter it.
- Celebrate spiritual community with time spent together physically in meals, hugs, games, movie nights, etc. Human community in real time often serves as an antidote to confusion, pain, and loneliness!
- Decide what welcome and hospitality look like in regard to people's names and pronouns. A recent study showed that "transgender and nonbinary youth [ages 13-24] who report having their pronouns respected by all or most of the people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected."¹⁴⁸ Reflect on Paul's decision in 1 Corinthians 9:22 in reference to people's identity and pronouns: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." Some congregations will decide that to be inclusive means that their community will refer to transgendered people with the names and pronouns they prefer. Other congregations may choose not to do that but should strive to avoid giving offense as much as possible.
- Be open to variety in people's clothing. Just as a man in contemporary Scotland might wear a kilt, and just as men in many countries wear robes, so cultural expectations for male and female dress vary greatly by region or time period.

¹⁴⁷ womanmeanssomething.com/half-of-all-desisters-are-same-sex-attracted

¹⁴⁸ thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020

- Accept those who have already fully transitioned (i.e., have had hormones and surgery) as they are. If they later show interest and openness in exploring detransitioning or other ways of making peace with their biological sex, be ready to support them in that journey. Be willing to open yourself up as much as you hope they will.

We offer this case study (again, the names have been changed) as one example of a situation a church recently faced, along with possible pastoral steps:

Surita, who presents as female but was born male, and Surita’s partner, Lindsay, have been attending your church. They are both professing Christians and recently have asked your pastor to officiate at their wedding in your church building.

Desired outcomes:

- Deep intimacy with God and close relationship with God’s people for each of them.
- For Surita to be at peace with her created male body.

Obstacles:

- Their sense of themselves as a lesbian couple.
- Possible great pride in transition for Surita.
- If Surita has already fully transitioned, it may feel unlikely to the pastor that Surita would consider detransition. This will be a long, difficult journey with potential for lots of hurt.

Possible steps:

- Pray with them for the Spirit’s presence.
- Listen to their faith story and the history of their relationship, as well as Surita’s journey toward transitioning.
- Explain the biblical understanding of male-female union as God’s design for marriage, which reflects Jesus and the church. Explain why the marriage of two people who both live as females does not reflect that purpose of marriage.
- Ask if Surita would be willing to explore the possibility of making peace with the body they were born in?
- Offer support from an individual, and a small group, to accompany them spiritually on such a journey of exploration.
- Invite them to pray together for wisdom and next steps together.

2. Parents

Parents of children who say they are transgender, want to transition, or suffer harassment need practical support. Parents whose child identifies as trans not only feel great concern for their child’s physical and emotional well-being because of bullying but often also greatly fear the suicide of their child. At the same time, parents may be told by health and social-service workers as well as teachers that if their child “is consistent, insistent, and persistent about their transgender identity,”¹⁴⁹ the parents should affirm and support that identity through social transition and later

¹⁴⁹ hrc.org/resources/transgender-children-and-youth-understanding-the-basics; apadivisions.org/division-44/resources/advocacy/transgender-children.pdf

hormonal treatments and surgeries. For this reason, many wonder if they should help their child transition.

a. Spiritual care

Many of the spiritual care and hospitality suggestions offered above for transgendered and gender dysphoric adults will apply to parents of transgendered and gender dysphoric children. In addition, we offer the following:

- Offer prayer for and with parents in various settings such as intercessory prayer groups, small groups, and one-on-one meetings. Offer support and encourage parents to share their journey with their small group, if they feel safe doing so. Help them to know and feel they are not alone in this.
- Cultivate hope in a God who loves their child unconditionally and in a community that will respect, accept, and support their child no matter what.
- Whether one's child is age 5 or 25, parents will likely be grieving over their child's confusion about their gender. Offer space and time for parents to express their unique emotional experience over what is happening with their child. Offer psalms of lament to them as one outlet for expressing their anger to God.

b. Hospitality

- Work to educate your congregation to the realities of gender dysphoria, including the dismal statistics regarding self-harm in young people who identify as nonbinary.¹⁵⁰
- Work to ensure that church is a safe place for children and young people in contrast to many areas of society in which these persons are at risk of physical harm and bullying. The Trevor Project notes that 40 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth (ages 13-24) report being physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their gender identity.¹⁵¹ Think about how your congregation speaks about nonbinary persons.
- See internet resources below for a few good examples from the numerous websites of parents advocating for children's physical well-being, of detransitioners telling their stories to encourage others, and of feminists concerned about pressure on young women to transition.

c. Support with decision making

- Be willing to share wisdom about medical treatment and support to resist cultural pressure.

Since the Bible teaches that being created male or female is part of how humans reflect the image of God, parents may well need help to protect their children from harms by medical interventions. For example, although respected organizations such as the AMA and the

¹⁵⁰ thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020

¹⁵¹ thetrevorproject.org/survey-2020

Pediatric Endocrine Society have made gender-affirming statements, very little longitudinal research has been done on the effects of medical practices such as hormone treatments and sex reassignment surgeries.¹⁵²

Research does show that almost all children with gender dysphoria will become comfortable with their anatomical sex after puberty. In addition, many adults, particularly gay and lesbian adults, have childhood memories of strongly believing they were the opposite sex but came to accept their sex during adolescence.¹⁵³

At the same time, a child given hormones to block puberty who then later takes hormones to change their sex will become sterile. To enable them to resist pressure to move down a path leading to such potentially damaging and irrevocable changes, the church should give the family and the child strong support as the child goes through puberty.¹⁵⁴ Knowledgeable church members can serve as resources or support as families debate the wisdom or timing of surgeries, puberty blockers, or other medications.¹⁵⁵

- As with adults, we suggest the internet resources below for a few good examples of the numerous websites of parents advocating for children’s physical well-being.

3. Mission

Outside your church community are many homeless transgendered people who are being prostituted. There is also a large and growing group of young people who share the transgender umbrella because they identify as gender queer, gender nonconforming, or gender fluid. They long for love, acceptance, and genuine mutual community.

- Rest in God and give God your fears and anxieties. Be with God in prayer. Receive God’s love. “Perfect love drives out fear” (1 John 4:18). Ask the Spirit to help you fear God rather than people’s ideas, political agendas, or fears.
- Listen to a real person tell their story. Hear the hurts, fears, joys, concerns of a transgendered person, a gender dysphoric youth, a desperate parent whose adolescent child is suicidal, or a detransitioner.
- Consider how your church might reach out to the local trans community. Encourage members of your congregation who see themselves as gender nonconforming, who experience gender dysphoria, or who are

¹⁵² “Those advocating a psychological approach to treatment, as opposed to hormone and/or surgery-based protocols can point to research showing that while SRS [sex reassignment surgery] appears to alleviate mental health problems for some, for a sizable group of others psychological morbidity is unaffected by—or actually increases after—surgical transitioning”; Simonsen, Giraldi, Christensen, Haldi, “Long-term Followup . . .” *Nordic Journal* as quoted in J.K. Beilby and P.R. Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 22.

¹⁵³ Steensma, et al.; DOI:10.1016/j.jaac.2013.03.016.

¹⁵⁴ npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90273278; Norman Spacker, ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4955762; Polly Carmichael GIDS.

¹⁵⁵ See Stephen B. Levine, “Ethical Concerns about Emerging Treatment Paradigms for Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 44 (2018), pp. 29-44; Stephen B. Levine, “Informed Consent for Transgendered Patients,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 218-29; DOI: 10.1080/0092623X.2018.1518885.

attracted to the same sex to advise or help give leadership to any outreach. Not only will this further their own discipleship, but the church will also benefit from the personal advocacy and compassion they will bring.

- Give thought to how your church might address the injustice of ethnic minorities and other marginalized people being prostituted.

D. Care for those with Disorder of Sex Development (DSD)

Some of the above-mentioned ministry the church offers to people who are transgender and gender dysphoric will also give great comfort to individuals with disorders of sexual development and their families. In addition, some of the societal issues noted above overlap for both groups. Nonetheless, the biological realities of persons with DSDs suggest that these people and their families also have unique needs that the church must address. Be sure to recognize your limits and be willing to suggest that they consult a professional psychologist.

1. Spiritual care

- Since some of these conditions are identified at birth, the church should be prepared to support parents as soon as possible through prayer and a consistent empathic presence, especially in the first weeks but continuing for as long as is needed as parents adjust to the realities of this unexpected condition.
- Parents may feel some shame, fear, confusion, grief, or anger. Offer non-judgmental support for them. Encourage them to express their unique emotional experience. Offer psalms of lament as an outlet for letting them express their feelings to God. Suggest practical outlets such as keeping a journal of the medical and emotional journey or writing their own psalm of lament.
- For the person who has a DSD, be ready to be an empathic presence, to walk with them in their suffering. Acknowledge their feelings of shame, anger, or bitterness if they were bullied or mocked during childhood or adolescence. Encourage them to express their unique emotional experience. Offer psalms of lament and other Christian resources such as music as an outlet for letting them express their feelings to God.

2. Hospitality

- Acknowledge that disorders of sexual development vary widely. They manifest at different ages, and some are visible while others are not. If and when someone shares their story with you, assure them of your support. Offer to connect them with a small group.
- Consider selecting a small group of interested people in your church who are willing to learn about Disorders of Sexual Development and who would be able to come alongside parents or persons with a DSD.
- Be aware that some persons with a DSD may position themselves under the transgender umbrella. Intersex conditions arise from biological disorders rather than as a matter of internal sense of identity. However, as public acceptance of trans identities and genderqueer culture has grown, some people with such congenital differences find a sense of

community. Of course, it is also the case that some persons with a DSD will not want to identify themselves in this way.

3. Support in decision making

Studies¹⁵⁶ suggest that those who discover early that they have a disorder of sexual development and who choose which sex they most identify with do relatively well. For this reason, the church can support such members and their parents as they decide how to live into the sex that seems most comfortable or natural to them. They should be helped as they make whatever surgical or hormonal alterations that will facilitate this.

To conclude, we offer a few stories that are pertinent to this report. As with other stories throughout the report, names have been changed to protect the persons involved.

Chelsey,* 34, had served six years in a Canadian women's prison when a biological male (Terri*) who identified as a transwoman was placed in her cellblock. Convicted of sexual assault against a woman, Terri* wore a beard and had not begun any kind of physical transition. When Terri sexually assaulted Chelsey, she made a formal complaint. Although the prison authorities believed her, they told her they were unable to remove Terri because it would be a violation of Terri's human rights. Chelsey says, "I felt like I was going crazy because I knew he was a man."¹⁵⁷

Max* never took to "girly" things like dresses and makeup or playing with dolls. But she loved being outdoors and anything to do with exercise and sports. When men began to look at her developing body in puberty, Max dressed in loose shirts and baggy pants. At the same time, she realized she was romantically attracted to girls, not boys, and gradually came out to her friends and family. She began to feel she had "a Barbie body" but was not and could not be a Barbie, so she presented as very "butch." By her late teens, she started getting strong encouragement from transgender people to transition. She found complete acceptance in this new community, as long as she didn't question the values, and she began taking hormones and preparing to get "top surgery." For eight years she lived as a man and was engaged to a woman. Now a detransitioner, Max has withdrawn completely from the transactivist community because she regularly gets hostile social media posts and threats of violence for choosing to return to living as a lesbian. A Christian friend of Max's mother, a justice activist, offered Max support over coffee and meals. Since Max relocated, the new friend reached out, and they now correspond online about Jesus and the Bible and have even begun to pray together over the internet.

¹⁵⁶ See Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications.

¹⁵⁷ [sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/Committee/421/RIDR/54206-e; womenarehuman.com/the-alarm-has-been-sounded-whos-going-to-respond](http://sencanada.ca/en/Content/Sen/Committee/421/RIDR/54206-e;womenarehuman.com/the-alarm-has-been-sounded-whos-going-to-respond)

E. Selected resources

1. Books

- Beilby, James K., and Paul Rhodes Eddy, eds., *Understanding Transgender Identities: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2019).
- Fine, Cordelia. *Testosterone Rex: Myths of Sex, Science, and Society* (New York: Norton, 2017).
- Jeffreys, Sheila. *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (Melbourne: Routledge, 2014).
- Kivel, Paul. *Men's Work: How to Stop the Violence That Tears Our Lives Apart* (New York: Ballantine, 1992).
- Pearcey, Nancy. *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions of Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2018).
- Rippon, Gina. *Gender and Our Brains: How New Neuroscience Explodes the Myths of the Male and Female Mind* (New York: Pantheon, 2019).
- Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart. *Gender & Grace* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990).
- Van Leeuwen, Mary Stewart. *Am I My Brother's Keeper? What the Social Sciences Do and Do Not Tell Us about Masculinity* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002).
- Yarhouse, Mark A. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

2. Websites and video

kelseycoalition.org; Working to Change the Systems That Failed Our Kids
genderresourceguide.com; Educating and Equipping Parents
4thwavenow.com; a community of people who question the medicalization of gender atypical youth
piqueresproject.com; stories and info from four detransitioners
med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/dsd.htm
ted.com/talks/tony_porter_a_call_to_men

XI. Homosexuality: Cultural context

A. A word about language

Currently many people in North America, including Christians, assume that the words *lesbian*, *gay*, and *bisexual* refer to unchosen aspects of one's personhood. Others, however, use these words to refer to a person's identity or behavior. Some Christians who are attracted to the same sex are comfortable describing themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Others do not use these labels to identify themselves because the Bible talks about behavior, not identity; or because they have chosen to live in obedience to the historically orthodox understanding of sexuality and thus do not want to be labeled with a word in any way connected with sinful behavior. Still others simply reject the notion of heterosexuality and homosexuality, believing that all of us are on a spectrum of sexual attraction. Out of respect for all of these perspectives, in this report we use the terms *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* only to refer to persons who identify as such. Otherwise we simply speak of an attraction to the same sex or to same-sex activity or practice.

B. Context

The Christian Reformed Church's 1973 synodical report on homosexuality broke ground by making a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual activity. As the report put it, "We must distinguish between the person who is homosexual in [their] sexual orientation and the person who engages in explicit sexual acts with persons of the same sex." It also noted that "homosexuality is not the result of any conscious choice or decision on the part of the person." In other words, there is no sin in being attracted to the same sex. We only sin if we act on our sexual attractions.¹⁵⁸

In the past few decades genetic research and brain chemistry studies have attempted to demonstrate definitive correlations between our biology and our sexual attractions.¹⁵⁹ Scientific studies have tried to establish empirically what many people feel: in childhood, puberty, or adulthood, they found themselves attracted to their own sex. They did not choose this same-sex attraction, nor could they suppress it.

However, no "gay gene" has yet been identified. Quite the opposite, the claim that attraction to the same sex has a biological cause has been seriously challenged by recent research. For example, a team of scientists from MIT and Harvard recently studied the genetic material of an extremely large sample group—almost half a million individuals.¹⁶⁰ Their findings affirm the results of previous research that strongly call into question the commonly held assumption that being gay is an innate condition which is controlled or compelled by one's genetic makeup. To put it in colloquial terms, this study weakens the contemporary cultural idea that people are born this way.

Charles,* 55 (white), has loved Jesus since he was a small boy. Music and liturgy in worship have always been deeply meaningful to him. He is usually the most dependable member of church choirs and ensembles and liturgist and drama teams. Other than the obligatory talks in youth group about how to avoid intercourse before marriage, Charles heard little teaching about sexuality in church. Yet he always knew the church believed "homosexuality is wrong" and definitely understood that being gay was considered by church members to be one of the most shameful situations one could be in. As a faithful church member and believer, Charles regularly reads the Bible and prays, and he has agonized over his sexuality since he was very young. Since puberty, Charles has felt shame and hurt, and often anger too, toward God, himself, and the church. In the church, he has been desperately lonely both because congregational life is organized around families and because he's never experienced a safe place to talk about his deep longings for sexual intimacy with a man.

While others in their youth groups and university fellowships dated and explored sexuality, Derek,* 30 (white), and Asta,* 28 (East Indian), hid their sexual feelings. Each eventually met a potential same-sex partner and finally decided to live openly as a gay person. They left churches

¹⁵⁸ *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 612-613.

¹⁵⁹ See Appendix A: What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

¹⁶⁰ See "How Do Genes Affect Same-Sex Behavior?" *Science*, Vol. 365, Issue 6456 (Aug. 30, 2019).

that prioritized the biological family over the spiritual family and offered them no viable alternative to the intimacy they craved. After each making the transition from living alone, hiding part of what feels like their core self, and feeling ashamed, to living honestly, being accepted, and sharing a household with another person in a supportive, intimate relationship, Derek and Asta each feel freer and happier.

In contemporary North American culture, sexual expression is assumed to be a physical need like food or sleep. And the word *intimacy*, once defined as close familiarity or friendship, is often used to refer only to sexual and romantic closeness. For many people, increasingly, intimacy requires sex. Thus it has become difficult for many church members to imagine asking anyone to deny themselves a sexual relationship, thus depriving them of intimacy. They question whether a life without sexual intimacy is even worth living.

Indeed, humans need intimacy. Babies cannot thrive without physical affection, and elderly people who experience it live longer and are happier. Biological and social scientists tell us that regular human touch makes people healthier in every way and that people with strong social networks show greater physical and emotional resilience after suffering illness or trauma. Young and old, women and men—all of us long to be known, welcomed, and accepted as we are.

God designed the church community to meet the deep human need for intimacy (Heb. 13:1: “Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters”). While the nation of Israel was organized by families, with marriage expected for all, and children a sign of God’s favor, Jesus preached an astonishing new message. Women would be blessed not for child-bearing but for discipleship, and men could choose not to marry.¹⁶¹ Jesus proclaimed that seeking the kingdom takes precedence over marriages and the natural obligations of biological families.¹⁶² Traveling with both men and women,¹⁶³ some of whom had left spouses or families behind, Jesus modeled a radically new kind of community, in which those who do God’s will are sisters and brothers of Jesus and of each other.¹⁶⁴

In this new tradition, New Testament writers described the reality that individual members are drawn into one interdependent community with other metaphors such as a household built of individual spiritual stones, branches tied in to Jesus as the living vine, and the body of Christ.¹⁶⁵ And every epistle includes wisdom for how these sisters and brothers can show each other love in practical ways.

Imagine the distress, then, if the family of God begins to shun or despise people who reveal that they are attracted to the same sex. Robbed of the intimacy to which God has called them in Christ, such persons will either die spiritually or turn elsewhere for support. Unfortunately, many people are in exile from the North American church because the church has ignored them and their needs for intimacy, or judged them as sexually immoral simply because of their attraction to the same sex. Others have left one congregation or

¹⁶¹ Luke 11:27-28; Matt. 19:12, 28.

¹⁶² Matt. 8:18-22; 19:29; 22:1-14; Mark 10:29; Luke 9:59; 14:15-27.

¹⁶³ Luke 8:1-3.

¹⁶⁴ Mark 3:31-35.

¹⁶⁵ Rom. 8; 1 Pet. 2; John 15; Eph. 2; 1 Cor. 12.

denomination for another that was more accepting. And many of us who remain in the church feel like outcasts because the church talks about us rather than with us, and portrays us as sexual sinners, agitators, or objects of pity. In addition, because church culture has been built around married couples and families, people who are single are denied deep Christian community, whether or not they have chosen the celibate life.

The church has also harmed people who are attracted to the same sex by promoting the false expectation of orientation change, as if believers who are attracted to the same sex can expect to become attracted to the opposite sex as they are sanctified. The church has pressured some into programs of orientation change that inflicted tremendous psychological, emotional, and social harm upon them.

All of this is in stark contrast to the recommendations of the 1973 synodical report, which declared that those who are attracted to the same sex “must be accepted in [their] homosexuality, so that in the congregation [they do] not need to wear a mask and conduct [themselves like hypocrites], living in constant fear of discovery and exposure. . . . [They deserve] the same acceptance, recognition, compassion, and help that is given to any person.”¹⁶⁶

It is a sad truth that the Christian community, including our Christian Reformed denomination, has failed in its calling to empathize with, love, and bear the burdens of persons who are attracted to the same sex, making it very difficult for them to live a life of holiness.

The sin of homosexual practice is often singled out for condemnation while other sexual sins are ignored or minimized. For example, many people in our churches engage in premarital sex, use pornography, commit adultery, or divorce their spouses without a legitimate cause, but they are not disciplined in any way. In such a context any church teaching that condemns homosexual activity is naturally perceived as hypocrisy. For many people in the church, especially those who are attracted to the same sex, no repetition of biblical teaching on homosexuality will be persuasive unless the church repents of this hypocrisy and becomes the loving community that Christ has called it to be.

Indeed, the church has not been the supportive, grace-saturated community it is supposed to be. And if those who are not attracted to the same sex attempt to maintain traditional church teaching while refusing to repent of their own idolatry and self-righteousness, the church will be worse off than it was before.

Yet while the church has already failed persons who are attracted to the same sex for many, many years, there is hope. Followers of Jesus are appropriately moved and chastened by the stories of pain, isolation, ridicule, and even outright hostility experienced by many people who are attracted to the same sex. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the church’s current controversy over homosexuality can become the moment we choose together to live anew as the nurturing family of God; to give and receive grace as we learn together how to walk in sexual holiness; to support each other in celibate singleness or faithful marriage; to help each other walk the narrow way—the way of suffering that is the only way to glory. Through a power not our own,

¹⁶⁶ *Acts of Synod 1973*, p. 626.

we can become willing to let the church be the body of Christ where women and men, girls and boys are being reconciled to God and to one another.

Kimberly,* 45, and Jeffrey,* 40, both single, along with Rob,* Jen,* and their three children share an old house in the downtown neighborhood of a medium-sized city. The church to which they all belong is committed to seeking the welfare of their city. In fact, several other households of church members are similarly sprinkled around the same neighborhood. These households began as a way to offer hospitality and show God's love to nearby city residents. The church members in these households quickly discovered that their unique living arrangements also provide the much needed support to live faithfully as celibate singles and monogamous married couples with children. Sharing meals and tasks, they experience the truth of the proverb "Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another" (Prov. 27:17, NRSV) as well the encouraging wisdom "A friend loves at all times" (Prov. 17:17).

XII. Homosexuality: Scripture

A. Introduction

The first-century church was notable because it taught and practiced a sexual ethic that encouraged people not to marry, praised celibacy, and limited sexual activity to marriage. Whereas the ancient pagan culture gave husbands tremendous power over their wives, held free women to a stricter sexual code than men and slaves, and permitted men to indulge in sex with female prostitutes, boys, and other men, the church called husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church, held men to the same sexual code as women, and called them to abstain from sex with anyone other than their wife.

Jesus praised those who were celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:1-12). Jesus himself lived a celibate life in close intimacy with his disciples, male and female. Paul was also single, and he went so far as to suggest that the way of celibacy is preferable for women and men because it allows them to seek the kingdom of God unhindered (1 Cor. 7:7-9, 25-40). The result was that early Christians were free to marry, as their culture expected them to do, but they were also free to reject marriage, in sharp violation of cultural norms. Communities of celibate Christian women and men sprang up, ultimately giving rise to the phenomena of monasticism.

Following Jesus in celibate singleness or faithful marriage was just as shocking and baffling to the first-century world as it is to our secular neighbors today. Historians demonstrate that the early church's practice of sexuality was so different from that of the pagan Roman culture that it made no sense to nonbelievers. Today too, traditional Christian sexual practices are increasingly regarded as prudish, anachronistic, repressive, and even bizarre. Even many Christians have begun to share this perspective.¹⁶⁷

The idea of suffering to follow Jesus has never been popular. The apostle Peter devoted his entire first epistle to teaching Christians how to suffer for

¹⁶⁷ Steven D. Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City: Culture Wars from the Tiber to the Potomac* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018). See also Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), pp. 121ff.

Christ's sake, but he himself had once rejected the prospect out of hand. When Jesus had predicted his suffering and death on the cross, Peter rebuked him. Jesus dismissed Peter's aversion to suffering as a temptation of the devil. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Then he turned to the crowds and announced, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:31-34, NIV).

Peter and the other New Testament writers came to embrace this calling, in part because Jesus' death and resurrection taught them that suffering is the necessary path to glory.¹⁶⁸ Paul reminded Christians in Rome 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" (Rom. 5:3-4). The writer to the Hebrews wrote that just as the author of our faith had to be "perfect through what he suffered" (Heb. 2:10), so we too must expect to suffer as we become like Jesus. In doing so, we can rely on him to help us, because he has been tempted in every way, just like us, yet was without sin (2:17-18).

Regardless of whether they chose celibacy in community or pursued marriage and family, all early Christians sought to live into the intimacy of the body of Christ. Jesus described the life of his followers as a life of sustaining relationships (John 15). God has chosen to heal and redeem us as members of one body. In an age of radical individualism, we must "keep the unity of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3) by sharing our lives together in practical and physical ways. If we do, we are promised, the light of this love will draw others to Christ as well.

It is within this countercultural context that we must grapple with the way Scripture addresses homosexuality.

B. *The testimony of the Old Testament*

1. Genesis 19:1-29 and Judges 19

The first of the seven biblical texts that are typically cited in any discussion of Scripture's view of homosexual activity is the story of Lot and the men of Sodom (Gen. 19:1-29). Many of the observations about this passage also apply to the story of the Levite and his concubine (Judg. 19), since both texts closely parallel each other.

Some scholars, often called revisionists since they argue for changing the traditional position that the Bible condemns homosexual activity, claim that this passage does not, in fact, deal with homosexual conduct. In the text the men of Sodom learn that Lot has invited some men into his home as guests. They demand, "Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with [literally "know"] them" (Gen. 19:5). Some revisionist scholars assert that the verb for "know" here simply means "get acquainted" and has nothing to do with homosexual activity.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ See Rom. 8; 2 Cor. 4-5.

¹⁶⁹ See, for example, Derrick Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1955), pp. 3-4; John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 93-94; John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual* (Kansas City, Kan.: Sheed, Andrews, and McMeel, 1976), pp. 54-55; K. Renato Lings, *Love Lost in Translation: Homosexuality and the Bible* (Bloomington, Ind.: Trafford Publishing, 2013), pp. 372-99.

This assertion, however, is clearly wrong, since the Hebrew verb for “know” (*yada*) commonly has the meaning “have sex with.” This meaning is recognized in all standard dictionaries of biblical Hebrew and is confirmed a few verses later in Lot’s statement: “Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man” (Gen. 19:8). Here the Hebrew is literally “who have not known a man.” Therefore, virtually all biblical interpreters—both traditionalists and the majority of revisionists—recognize that the story of Lot and the men of Sodom does involve homosexual activity.

Almost all of these interpreters also agree that the focus of the Sodom episode is not the sinfulness of gay sex but the violation of hospitality or the display of human depravity. Richard Hays, for example, who affirms the traditional Christian position on homosexual activity, states in his influential book on ethics: “The notorious story of Sodom and Gomorrah—often cited in connection with homosexuality—is actually irrelevant to the topic. . . . The gang-rape scenario exemplifies the wickedness of the city, but there is nothing in the passage pertinent to a judgment about the morality of consensual homosexual intercourse.”¹⁷⁰

Robert Gagnon, a prominent defender of the traditional view on homosexuality, similarly concedes: “Traditionally, Gen. 19:4-11 has been regarded as the classic Bible story about homosexuality. However, to the extent that the story does not deal directly with consensual homosexual relationships, it is not an ‘ideal’ text to guide contemporary sexual ethics.”¹⁷¹

But although Genesis 19:1-29 is not first-and-foremost a statement against homosexual activity, it is legitimately read as illustrating the overall biblical association of homosexual conduct with human perversity. Kevin De Young recognizes that these two important points are both part of a right reading of this story:

To be sure, the scene in Genesis 19 looks very different from two men or two women entering into a consensual and committed sexual relationship. The case against same-sex sexual intimacy is less obvious from the Sodom and Gomorrah account than from the other passages we will consider. And yet, the destruction of these infamous cities is not irrelevant to the matter at hand. From the allusion in Ezekiel, to the perception of Sodom in other Jewish literature, to the mention of unnamed desire in Jude, we see that Sodom had a reputation for sexual sin in general and homosexual sin in particular. While the violence associated with homosexual behavior in Sodom certainly made the offense worse, the nature of the act itself contributed to the overwhelmingly negative assessment of the city. Sodom and Gomorrah were guilty of a great many sins; we don’t have to prove that homosexual practice was the only sin to show that it was one of them.¹⁷²

2. Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13

The two remaining Old Testament texts that address the subject of homosexual activity are both from the book of Leviticus:

¹⁷⁰ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), p. 381.

¹⁷¹ Robert A.J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001), p. 71.

¹⁷² Kevin DeYoung, *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015), p. 38.

- “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable” (Lev. 18:22).
- “If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads” (Lev. 20:13).

Both revisionists and traditionalists agree on two things about these texts. First, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 are, in fact, referring to same-sex intercourse between men. Second, these texts are not referring to abusive forms of same-sex intercourse but consensual sex, since the same penalty for breaking these commands is applied to both men (20:13), something that does not happen in the case of rape (see Deut. 22:23-27). The two camps disagree, however, on whether and how these prohibitions apply today. Several types of arguments have been advocated either to reject (revisionists) or affirm (traditionalists) the abiding significance of these two Old Testament texts for contemporary believers.

Revisionists often argue that both Levitical commands are given in a very specific cultic context: they are part of a polemic against a non-Israelite cult in which God’s people were tempted to engage in idolatrous practices such as cultic prostitution. This means, they conclude, that the two commands do not address the ethics of modern same-sex relationships. James Brownson, for example, claims:

The first thing to note is that the immediate contexts of both of these prohibitions against ‘lying with a male as with a woman’ are closely linked to two other problems: injunctions against the practices of idolatry and the urgency of avoiding the practices of surrounding nations. . . . There is evidence linking same-sex eroticism, particularly among males, to cultic prostitution and other idolatrous practices in the ancient world generally. . . . So we can say with reasonable confidence that the activity envisioned in the Levitical prohibitions is assumed to be consensual, and that it is probably envisioned to take place in cultic contexts, with clear linkages to idolatry and other religious practices foreign to the nation of Israel.¹⁷³

Traditionalists argue instead that the two key texts from Leviticus are still applicable for the church today, and they typically do so by appealing to creation order: the Levitical commands prohibit same-sex sexual acts because such behavior goes against the pattern for sexual relations given in the creation narratives. Robert Gagnon illustrates this common claim when he writes:

Thus there are good grounds for asserting that the primary problem with male-male intercourse is the more general concern that it “mixes” two things that were never intended to be mixed. . . . The refrain in 18:22 and 20:13, “as though lying with a woman,” is the best indication we have of what the primary concern was; namely, behaving toward another man as if he were a woman by making him the object of male sexual desires. That is an “abomination,” an abhorrent violation of divine sanctioned boundaries—in this case, gender boundaries established at creation. . . . All the laws in Lev. 18:6-23; 20:2-21 legislate against forms of sexual behavior that disrupt the created order set into motion by the God of Israel.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Brownson, pp. 270-71.

¹⁷⁴ Gagnon, pp. 135-36.

Revisionists additionally question why these two prohibitions against homosexual intercourse ought to be followed today when other surrounding prohibitions are freely ignored. For example, Christians do not typically feel the need to obey the commands against planting one's field with two kinds of seed or against wearing clothing made with two kinds of material (Lev. 19:19). Even a traditionalist like Richard Hays recognizes the force of this argument: "Quoting a law from Leviticus, of course, does not settle the question for Christian ethics. The Old Testament contains many prohibitions and commandments that have, ever since the first century, generally been deemed obsolete by the church. . . . In each case, the church is faced with the task of discerning whether Israel's traditional norms remain in force for the new community of Jesus' followers. In order to see what decisions the early church made about this matter, we must turn to the New Testament."¹⁷⁵

When one does turn to the New Testament, we see that many of the laws regarding sexual activity in Leviticus 18 and 20 are affirmed as still obligatory for the people of God. As Kevin DeYoung observes: "Apart from the question of sex during menstruation, the sexual ethic in Leviticus 18 and 20 is squarely reaffirmed in the New Testament. Adultery is still a sin (Matt. 5:27-30). Incest is still a sin (1 Cor. 5:1-13). Even polygamy is more clearly rejected (1 Cor. 7:2; 1 Tim. 3:2). It would be strange for the prohibition against homosexual practice to be set aside when the rest of the sexual ethic is not, especially considering how the rejection of same-sex behavior is rooted in the created order."¹⁷⁶

In fact, as we will see, in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 the apostle Paul condemns homosexual activity in a way that draws directly on the prohibitions of Leviticus 18 and 20. He does so by using the Greek word *arsenokoitai*, which is a compound of the words used to condemn homosexual activity in the Septuagint version of the Levitical prohibitions. This confirms that Paul viewed the teaching of these Old Testament texts as still binding on Christians (for a more detailed discussion of this special Greek word and its link with the Levitical prohibitions, see below).

It is true that a few revisionists question this link between Paul's use of *arsenokoitai* and the Levitical texts, asserting that such a connection is "speculative and lacks external confirming evidence."¹⁷⁷ It is also true, however, that the vast majority of biblical scholars, including leading revisionists, find this connection to be obvious and beyond doubt.¹⁷⁸

C. *The testimony of Jesus*

When one turns to what the New Testament says about homosexual activity, revisionists typically separate the testimony of Jesus from the testimony of Paul. The result of such a distinction almost always is the same: there exists a conflict or contradiction between Jesus and Paul whereby Jesus reflects an attitude of love and tolerance, while Paul reflects an attitude of judgment and narrow-mindedness. The church has always rejected

¹⁷⁵ Hays, p. 382.

¹⁷⁶ DeYoung, p. 46.

¹⁷⁷ Brownson, p. 271.

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 331 (for 1 Cor. 6:9), p. 334 (for 1 Tim. 1:10).

separating the words of Jesus from those of other biblical authors, as if the rest of the Bible were not also inspired by the Holy Spirit as a word from the Lord. What Paul has to say about homosexuality is just as much the “word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13) and thus authoritative as what Jesus says, or in this case, does not say.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented revisionists from appealing to the silence of Jesus on homosexual conduct, arguing: “If homosexual activity is so bad, why didn’t Jesus say anything about it?”

Careful reflection reveals how weak that argument actually is. First, Jesus was a Jew, and the Judaism of his day was unanimous in denouncing homosexual activity. All Jewish writings from the ancient world—those in the Bible as well as the many writings from that time period that were not included in the Bible—uniformly rejected homosexual and lesbian behavior.¹⁷⁹ Such widespread agreement in Judaism is quite remarkable, given the diversity of Jewish views on all kinds of topics. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Jesus would differ from that view, unless he explicitly stated that he did. Yet Jesus never even hints at an affirmation of homosexual activity.

Second, Jesus never says anything against several sexual sins. One looks in vain for Jesus to condemn prostitution, incest, pederasty, or bestiality. Yet no one concludes from Jesus’ silence that he was tolerant of such behaviors. This illustrates the danger of what is often called an “argument from silence”—the fallacy of drawing a conclusion not on the basis of what someone does say but rather on the basis of what that person does *not* say. Jesus is almost certainly silent about homosexuality because he lived at a time and in a culture where everyone agreed that homosexual activity, like prostitution, incest, pederasty, and bestiality, was immoral. He had no need to comment on the matter. As Preston Sprinkle has observed: “Why preach to the choir about something everyone agrees on? No mathematician spends time arguing that $2 + 2 = 4$, and no Jew came to Rabbi Jesus asking whether same-sex sexual relations were sin. The answer was self-evident within first-century Judaism.”¹⁸⁰

Third, in Mark 7:21-23 Jesus lists several things that defile a person, and at the head of the list is “sexual immorality” (NIV 2011). This translation in English is a bit misleading because the Greek term used here, *porneiai*, is actually plural: “sexual immoralities.” This reminds us that Jesus, as a rabbi who knew the Torah (or Old Testament law) well, was referring to many different sexual sins forbidden in texts like Leviticus 18 and 20—texts that condemn all kinds of unlawful sexual relations, including homosexual relations (Lev. 18:22; 20:13).

Fourth, in answering a question from the Pharisees on divorce, Jesus cites both Genesis 1:27 and 2:24: “‘Haven’t you read,’ he replied, ‘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. 19:4-5;

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, Philo, *Special Laws*, 3:37-42; *Contemplative Life*, 59-60; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 1.11.3; *Against Apion*, 2.273-275; *Pseudo-Phocylides*, 190-192, 213-214; *Sibylline Oracles*, 3.184-187; 5.166; *Letter of Aristeas*, 152; 2 *Enoch*, 34:1-2; *m. San.*, 7:4; *t. Abodah Zarah*, 2:1; 3:2.

¹⁸⁰ Preston Sprinkle, “Why Didn’t Jesus Mention Homosexuality?”; centerforfaith.com/resources

also Mark 10:6-8). What is significant for our understanding of Jesus' position on homosexuality is the fact that he includes the quote from Genesis 1:27 ("made them male and female"), whereas only the quote from Genesis 2:24 was directly relevant to the Pharisees' question about divorce. Jesus could have easily omitted the quote from Genesis 1:27 from his answer. The fact that he included it reveals that Jesus considered sex difference ("made them male and female") to be important and that he did, in fact, expect marriage to be between a man and a woman.

The appeal to Jesus' silence on the issue of homosexual conduct and the portrayal of Jesus as someone who would be open to certain kinds of homosexual relationships, therefore, lacks any persuasive evidence, and is in fact contradicted by the available evidence. As Robert Gagnon puts it: "The portrayal of Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew who was open to homosexual practice is simply ahistorical. All the evidence leads in the opposite direction."¹⁸¹

D. *The testimony of Paul*

Paul, like Jesus, was a first-century Jew and thus would have been similarly influenced by the unanimous condemnation of same-sex acts found in the Jewish writings of his day. As David Garland observes, "Though homosexual acts were generally accepted in the ancient world, Hellenistic Jewish texts are unanimous in condemning them and treat them and idolatry as obvious examples of Gentile moral depravity. Not surprisingly, Paul shares this Jewish aversion to idolatry and homosexual acts."¹⁸²

The apostle's position on sexual matters was generally strict. For example, he writes to the Thessalonians, "It is God's will . . . 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" (1 Thess. 4:3-5). He strongly rebukes the Corinthian church for tolerating a sexual relationship between a man and his step-mother (1 Cor. 5:1-11). He further admonishes the believers in Corinth for tolerating certain members who were paying prostitutes for sex (1 Cor. 6:12-20), leading him to issue the strong command that they "flee from sexual immorality" (6:18). The first item in the apostle's list of vices for both the Galatians and the Colossians to put to death is "sexual immorality" (Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5). He exhorts the Ephesians, "Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people" (Eph. 5:3).

In light of the apostle's Jewish background and his general statements on sexual conduct, therefore, it would be surprising if Paul were shown to be approving of homosexual activity. However, Paul does not leave us guessing. He deals explicitly with homosexual practice in three places: Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; and 1 Timothy 1:10.

1. 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:10

We begin by looking at the two shorter texts first: 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. These two texts address homosexual activity by using two Greek words: *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*.

¹⁸¹ Gagnon, p. 228.

¹⁸² David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 213.

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 adulterers nor men who have sex with men [*malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*] nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

(1 Cor. 6:9-10)

We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality [*arsenokoitai*], for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

(1 Tim. 1:8-11)

Revisionists typically claim one of the following two things with respect to these texts. Some assert that it is impossible to determine the precise meaning of these two Greek words with certainty, and therefore we should not draw any conclusions about homosexuality from them. David Gushee, for example, asserts: “Very high-level scholarly uncertainty about the meaning and translation of these two Greek words . . . undermines claims to the conclusiveness of *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* for resolving the LGBT issue.”¹⁸³ But although some revisionist academics have raised doubts about the origin and sense of these two key terms, it is nevertheless also the case—as demonstrated in the discussion below—that there exists a widespread scholarly consensus as to their meaning.¹⁸⁴

Revisionists more often claim that these two Greek words refer narrowly to *abusive* forms of homosexual activity—namely, man-boy relationships (pederasty) and prostitution. According to this view, Paul is rejecting the exploitative nature of these specific kinds of homosexual acts that were common in his day. Thus, it is claimed, 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 cannot be used to condemn the consensual, monogamous same-sex relationships characteristic of our contemporary age. Richard Horsley, for example, states: “The terms in question probably referred to ‘masturbators’ and ‘male prostitutes.’ Certainly the terms Paul uses here were not references to an ancient equivalent of modern homosexual relations. The list in 6:9 thus provides no indication that Paul considered such a relationship to be sinful.”¹⁸⁵

Similarly, Martti Nissinen asserts:

The modern concept of “homosexuality” should by no means be read into Paul’s text, nor can we assume that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6:9 “condemn all homosexual relations” in all times and places and ways. . . . Regardless of the kind of sexuality meant in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10, in their current contexts they are examples of the exploitation of persons. What Paul primarily opposes is the wrong that people do to others.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ David P. Gushee, *Changing Our Mind* (Canton, Mich.: David Crumm Media, 2015), p. 79.

¹⁸⁴ See especially the recent publication of John Granger Cook in *New Testament Studies* 65 (2019), pp. 332-52, arguably the most prestigious academic journal for issues related to the New Testament.

¹⁸⁵ Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1988), p. 89.

¹⁸⁶ Martti Nissinen, *Homoeroticism in the Biblical World: A Historical Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), p. 118.

One more example of this revisionist view of 1 Corinthians 6:9 is found in the recent book by Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh, who claim that “Paul is talking about some form of pederasty here, some form of sexual predation on prepubescent boys.” They conclude that this text does “not at all” apply to monogamous same-sex relationships today.¹⁸⁷

This interpretation suffers from at least four major problems. First, if Paul had in view only exploitative same-sex relationships like pederasty, he could have easily made this clear by using any one of several Greek words that refer specifically to pederasty. For example, there is the word *paidērastês*, from which we get the English word “pederast.” Another good word choice to make this point would be the word-pair *erastês* (older man) and *erômenos* (younger man). The fact that Paul did not use any of these terms, all of which were commonly known and used in the writings of his day, suggests that he was not thinking only of abusive forms of homosexual activity but of any type of homosexual activity.

Second, it is helpful to let the longer and clearer text of Romans 1:24-27 clarify the meaning of the brief and less clear texts of 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. Paul refers in Romans 1:26 to women who have sexual relations with women (i.e., lesbianism). Since pederasty in the ancient world only involved sexual relations between an older man and a younger man or teen and never involved sexual relations between an older woman with a younger woman, it is highly unlikely that the apostle in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 has in view only the narrow and abusive form of same-sex sex involved in pederasty.

This is confirmed by Paul’s reference in Romans 1:27 to men who have sex with other men who “were consumed with passion *for one another*.” The phrase “for one another” indicates that the apostle is referring to consensual sex and that he finds fault with both persons involved in the same-sex act (note also the use of the plurals in the rest of the verse: “receiving in *themselves* the due penalty for *their* error”). This makes it impossible to believe, as revisionists claim, that Paul is referring narrowly in 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 to the abusive aspect of pederasty in which an older man sexually exploits a younger man. As William Loader observes: “The reference to lesbian relations which does not fit pederasty, and Paul’s depiction in [Rom.] 1:27 of mutual desire (*eis allêlous* ‘for one another’) suggest that what he [Paul] has in mind is not primarily exploitative pederasty and certainly not limited to it.”¹⁸⁸

Third, there is the Old Testament allusion to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 in Paul’s use of the special word *arsenokoitai* in both 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10. This word is unique because the apostle is the first person known to have used it. In other words, there are no known occurrences of the word *arsenokoitai* before Paul’s use of it in two of his letters. This means that either it was a recently coined word or, as most scholars assume, Paul himself created it on the basis of the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

¹⁸⁷ Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh, *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2019), p. 331.

¹⁸⁸ William Loader, *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 325.

Another instance of the apostle similarly creating a new word and doing so on the basis of an Old Testament text can be seen in 1 Thessalonians 4:9, where he coins the term “God-taught” (*theodidaktoi*) in a clear allusion to Isaiah 54:13 in the Septuagint: “And I will cause all your sons to be taught of God” (*didaktous theou*). The fact that Paul does not explain the meaning of the special word *arsenokoitai* and includes it in a vice list shows that he assumes his original readers would have no difficulty in understanding what he meant. The rhetorical force of such a list required that the vices listed were well known.

This special word, *arsenokoitai*, is a compound term made up of two parts: *arsên*, which means “male,” and *koitê*, which literally means “bed” but euphemistically refers to sexual acts that take place on a bed. On the basis of these two parts, the standard academic Greek lexicon defines the singular form *arsenokoitês* as “a male who engages in sexual activity with a person of his own sex.”¹⁸⁹ Even the person who does not know Greek can easily see how the two parts of the compound word *arsenokoitês* comes from the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13:

Leviticus 18:22 *kai meta arsenos ou koimêthêsê koitên gynaikos*
“And with a male you shall not sleep as with a woman”

Leviticus 20:13 *kai hos an koimêthê meta arsenos koitên gynaikos*
“And whoever will sleep with a male as with a woman”

David Wright, who has written the definitive study on the origin and meaning of *arsenokoitai*, has described the link between this special Greek word and the two Levitical texts as “inescapable.”¹⁹⁰

Why is it significant that the special word Paul uses in two key texts dealing with homosexual activity comes from Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13? Since these Old Testament texts deal with *all* types of same-sex acts, not just exploitative ones like pederasty and prostitution (note Lev. 20:13 which explicitly states, “both of them have done what is detestable”), Paul’s use of this word indicates that he is thinking of the Mosaic law in which any kind of sexual relationship between two males is forbidden. In fact, in 1 Timothy 1:8-9, just before he mentions *arsenokoitai*, Paul refers twice to the “law,” suggesting yet again that he has the Old Testament comprehensive prohibition of homosexual intercourse in view.

Fourth, the pairing of the two words *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 is significant. There is wide-spread agreement among grammarians and New Testament scholars that the first term, which literally means “soft” or “effeminate,” refers metaphorically to males who played the female role in sex and allowed themselves to be penetrated by other males, while the second term refers to males who penetrate other males.

This consensus is reflected in the New International Version (2011) and the English Standard Version (2016) translations, which both have exactly the same textual note on this verse: “The words *men who have sex with men* translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants

¹⁸⁹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 135.

¹⁹⁰ David F. Wright, “Homosexuals or Prostitutes: The Meaning of *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10),” *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (1984), pp. 125-53.

in homosexual acts.” Paul, by pairing these two words, is referring not narrowly to pederasty or prostitution but comprehensively to both the passive and active partner in any same-sex relationship.

Paul’s pairing of the two words *malakos* and *arsenokoitai* reveals his opposition to the contemporary Roman attitude towards same-sex sex. The key issue in the broader honor-shame culture of that day centered on whether a man played the active, penetrating “male” role in sex (with either a woman or a man), or if he played the passive “female” role of allowing himself to be penetrated. There was no shame connected with the active role, regardless of whether the partner in the sex act was female or male, but there was shame associated with the passive role. As Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner explain:

Romans did not think in terms of sexual orientation or identities, but that proper masculinity was to be expressed in taking the active, dominant role in any sexual act. To desire or willingly play a passive homosexual role was considered shameful, but it was expected that men of stature would penetrate people of lesser status (whether women or men) but not be penetrated themselves.¹⁹¹

Paul’s pairing of *malakos* with *arsenokoitai*, therefore, signals his rejection of the common Roman attitude of his day. The apostle makes clear to his first-century readers that it is not simply the hierarchy of a homosexual relationship that he condemns. Regardless of whether a person’s role is active or passive, their participation in homosexual intercourse is contrary to God’s will and to membership in his kingdom.

It is important to emphasize, however, that people who engage in homosexual activity are no worse than other people. The biblical texts list homosexual sex alongside of many other things that are equally forbidden for followers of Jesus. For example, 1 Corinthians 6:9 lists the “greedy” shortly after “men who have sex with other men” as those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. This suggests that the church should be just as concerned about people who pile up wealth yet fail to share with others in need as it is about people who engage in homosexual sex.

2. Romans 1:24-27

The third Pauline text that deals with homosexual activity is Romans 1:24-27. This passage is the most important because of its length, its explicit reference to both gay and lesbian conduct, and its argumentation. Whereas 1 Corinthians 6:9 and 1 Timothy 1:10 demonstrate Paul’s strong opposition to homosexual intercourse, Romans 1:24-27 spells out the reason *why* the apostle rejects such behavior:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

¹⁹¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 241-42.

The larger context (Rom. 1:18-32) shows that Paul's primary goal in these verses is not to condemn homosexual sex but to show how homosexual sex is another example—in addition to idolatry (1:21-23, 25)—of the degree of human sin and of why God's wrath for such sin is justified. Nevertheless, the apostle's words here are pointed and clear: women having sexual relations with other women and men having sexual relations with other men are sinful acts deserving of God's wrath.

Revisionists typically argue that Paul's words ought to be understood according to what can be labeled the "excessive-desire interpretation." They claim that the apostle is not addressing all forms of homosexual activity but only a specific type of homosexual conduct characterized by excessive desire and a lack of self-control. Straight women were so filled with sexual desire—that is, lust, the argument runs—that they had sexual relations with other women. Similarly, straight men were so filled with lust that they had sexual relations with other men.

This argument appeals to such references in Romans 1:24-27 as "desires" (1:24), "shameful lusts" (1:26), and people being "inflamed with lust" (1:27) to support the claim that the apostle is not rejecting normal desire, whether homosexual or heterosexual, but excessive desire, or lust. James Brownson, for example, states: "It is not desire itself that Paul opposes, but excessive desire, which directs itself toward what is not rightly ours, overcoming self-control and obedience to God."¹⁹² The corollary of this interpretation is that the apostle would not object to homosexual sex as long as it stems from normal desire and self-control, which is also required in heterosexual activity.

If the problem that Paul is addressing were, in fact, excessive sexual desire or lust in 1:24, Paul could have made this clear by adding the adjective "much" before the word "desire" (*epithumia*) as he did in 1 Thessalonians 2:17 ("in much desire," *en pollê epithumia*).

Further, the problem that the apostle identifies involves not one of wrong *degree* (excessive behavior) but of wrong *object*. The preceding verses of Roman 1:19-23 deal with the sin of idolatry, and Paul's argument here does not involve degree (as if normal idolatry is acceptable but excessive idolatry is wrong) but object: people worship created things rather than the Creator. Similarly, the sin of lesbian and gay sex discussed in 1:24-27 does not involve degree (the idea that normal desire for same-sex sex is acceptable but excessive desire or lust is wrong) but object: women are having sex not with men but with women, and, conversely, men are having sex not with women but with men.

Yet another key weakness of the "excessive desire" interpretation lies in the short but important phrase "against nature" (Greek: *para physin*) in Romans 1:26 (many translations render the phrase "unnatural"). Revisionists argue that this phrase refers to one's *sexual* nature—that is, one's sexual orientation: women, who have a natural heterosexual attraction for men, nevertheless were so full of passion that they acted in an unnatural ("against nature") way by having sex with other women; similarly, men, who have a natural heterosexual attraction for women, nevertheless also ("in the same way") acted in an unnatural manner by having sex with

¹⁹² Brownson, p. 164.

other men. According to this construal, Paul is narrowly condemning “unnatural sex”—heterosexuals who ignore their natural desire for the opposite sex and are “inflamed with lust” for members of the same sex. Such a reading leaves the door open for the apostle approving of other, more noble forms of homosexual relationships in which lesbians and gays follow their “natural” same-sex orientation.

This nuanced and novel interpretation, however, assigns to the word for “nature” (Greek: *physis*) a meaning which it has nowhere else in Greek. It is doubtful whether people in the first century were familiar with the concept of sexual orientation as we understand it today (that is, as an involuntary disposition to be attracted to people of one’s own gender), and, in any case, the Greek word *physis* is never used to refer to it.

Further, this interpretation is contradicted by Paul’s key argument in these verses: homosexual activity is wrong because it violates God’s created order for male-female relationships. The word for “unnatural” refers not to heterosexuals acting against their natural desire for the opposite sex but to homosexual conduct that violates one’s *created* nature—God’s design for men and women established in creation. That Paul does, in fact, have the Genesis creation account in mind is obvious from his multiple allusions to it in Romans 1:24-27:

- 1:20 refers to “the creation of the world”
- 1:23 has the three-fold combination of “birds and animals and reptiles,” thereby echoing Genesis 1:30 (Septuagint)
- 1:25 refers to God not as a “God” or “Father” but as “the Creator”
- 1:26 and 1:27 refer to “women” and “men,” which in the Greek text literally are “females” (*thēleiai*) and “males” (*arsenes*), thereby alluding to Genesis 1:27, where we read “male and female he created them”

Paul’s argument, therefore, is clear: sexual acts between a female and another female or between a male and another male are “unnatural” and wrong, because such conduct goes against one’s *created* nature. It is contrary to the way in which God made each sex physically so that male and female fit the other in a “natural” way and can fulfill the Genesis command to be fruitful and multiply.

One additional point about Paul’s words to the Romans should not be overlooked. The apostle ends his discussion with the sober warning that it is not only those engaged in homosexual activity and other sins (such as greed, envy, gossip, slander, strife, disobedience to parents, and murder) who face divine judgment. It is also those who approve of these sins: “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also *approve of those who practice them*” (Rom. 1:32). Homosexual activity is not something that Christians can simply ignore or tolerate.

E. *Additional revisionist claims*

Revisionists often make a number of additional claims as to why Paul’s statements on homosexuality ought to be interpreted differently or are no longer applicable for the church today.

1. Claim 1: Paul didn't know of any nonexploitative homosexual relationships.
It is frequently claimed that Paul had no examples of a more "noble" form of homosexuality involving consensual, monogamous, long-term relationships. He only knew of exploitative relationships like pederasty and prostitution. This common assertion, however, is false. The existence of many different types of homosexual relations, including consensual and even monogamous, is well documented in the literature of the period.¹⁹³ Paul, as a well-educated and widely traveled man, would have had ample opportunities to know about these types of same-sex relationships.
2. Claim 2: Paul didn't know about same-sex orientation.

It is also often asserted that Paul did not have any understanding of same-sex orientation and that such ignorance relativizes his condemnation of homosexual activity. James Brownson, for example, states: "Writers in the first century, including Paul, did not look at same-sex eroticism with the understanding of sexual orientation that is commonplace today."¹⁹⁴ Keesmaat and Walsh similarly assert: "Paul would have had no idea of anything like a homosexual orientation."¹⁹⁵

But while ancient writers like Paul did not have a scientific explanation of same-sex orientation, there is strong historical evidence that they did, in fact, recognize same-sex desires as being inborn and fixed. Bernadette Brooten, a leading scholar in feminist sexual ethics, asserts: "Contrary to the view that the idea of sexual orientation did not develop until the nineteenth century, the astrological sources demonstrate the existence in the Roman world of the concept of a lifelong erotic orientation."¹⁹⁶ Preston Sprinkle reviews multiple ancient texts showing that writers in that day "explored and affirmed what could be considered as an ancient version of same-sex orientation."¹⁹⁷ William Loader similarly states, "It is very possible that Paul knew of views which claimed some people had what we would call a homosexual orientation, though we cannot know for sure and certainly should not read our modern theories back into his world."¹⁹⁸

It is historically possible, therefore, that Paul knew of men who were born with a sexual desire for other men. Nevertheless, in the apostle's view, orientation makes no difference: same-sex acts violate the male-female relationship established by God at creation (Rom. 1:24-27) and are contrary to God's law (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10).

¹⁹³ See, for example, T. K. Hubbard, ed. *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003); L. Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁹⁴ Brownson, p. 166.

¹⁹⁵ Keesmaat and Walsh, p. 337.

¹⁹⁶ Bernadette Brooten, *Love between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 140.

¹⁹⁷ Preston Sprinkle, "Paul and Homosexual Behavior: A Critical Evaluation of the Excessive-Lust Interpretation of Romans 1:26-27," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 25.4 (2015), p. 505.

¹⁹⁸ Loader, pp. 323-24.

3. Claim 3: Parallelism with the significant church decision in Acts 15

Another argument advocated by some revisionists appeals to the decision-making process the early church used in Acts 15 to determine whether or not uncircumcised Gentiles should be welcomed into the church as Christians. Acts describes how the Holy Spirit came upon Gentiles, thereby prompting the early church to reexamine the Scriptures and determine that these uncircumcised believers ought to be accepted as full members. It is claimed that the decision-making process of Acts 15 is analogical for today. The experience of the Holy Spirit in the lives of practicing gays and lesbians, it is asserted, makes it necessary for the contemporary church to reexamine the scriptural texts dealing with homosexuality and welcome such persons as full members.¹⁹⁹

These are not parallel cases, however, so this revisionist argument faces several problems. First, the Acts 15 decision of the early church was prompted by special revelation from God: Peter experienced a vision in which God commanded him to eat animals that were unclean, thereby revealing the truth that certain elements of the Mosaic law were no longer morally binding. The church today does not have any special revelation from God that would require the acceptance of same-sex sex.

Second, when the early church reexamined Scripture, it discovered prophetic texts that promised the acceptance of the Gentiles into the people of God. James, the head of the early church in Jerusalem, bases his decision not merely on the experiences of Peter, Paul, Barnabas, or the Gentiles, but on the explicit teaching of Scripture. James quotes the words of Amos 9:11-12, in which God declares that he will restore his people in order “that the rest of humankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name.” In contrast, there are no scriptural texts that predict or even allude in a vague way to the acceptance of homosexual activity. As Richard Hays has observed, it is doubtful whether a comparison between the Jerusalem Council’s debate over accepting Gentiles and the contemporary debate over sexuality has the power to overturn the clear evidence in both the Old and New Testaments against accepting same-sex sexual practices.²⁰⁰

Third, the apostles at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, although not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised, nevertheless prohibited them from four specific things (the so-called “Apostolic Decree”): “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). There is compelling evidence that these four prohibitions are based on Leviticus 17-18, with its recurring phrase, “any foreigner residing among you” (Lev. 17:8, 10, 12, 13; 18:26). These occurrences explain what non-Israelite foreigners were required to do while living among the Israelites. Strikingly, the order of the four prohibitions in the Apostolic Decree in Acts 15:29 follows the same order in Leviticus 17-18:

¹⁹⁹ See, for example, Luke T. Johnson, *Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 1983), pp. 95-97; Jeffrey Siker, *Homosexuality in the Church: Both Sides of the Debate* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); Sylvia C. Keesmaat, “Welcoming in the Gentiles: A Biblical Model for Decision Making” in *Living Together in the Church: Including Our Differences*, eds. G. S. Dunn and C. Ambridge (Toronto: ABC Pub., 2004), pp. 30-49; Keesmaat and Walsh, *Romans Disarmed*, pp. 355-61.

²⁰⁰ Hays, p. 396.

“abstain from food sacrificed to idols” (Lev. 17:7-9)
“blood” (Lev. 17:10-12)
“meat of strangled animals” (Lev. 17:13-14)
“sexual immorality” (Lev. 18:6-23)²⁰¹

This strongly suggests that the Jerusalem apostles equated the fourth prohibition, against “sexual immorality,” with the sexual prohibitions of Leviticus 18, including the command of 18:22, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman.” If so, the decision-making process of Acts 15, rather than being an analogy for a process by which the church might reevaluate its prohibition of homosexual activity, actually confirms the nonnegotiable character of the church’s historic biblical teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual activity.

4. Claim 4: The Holy Spirit is leading the church to a new understanding.

Yet another common claim by revisionists is that as the Holy Spirit has led the church in the past to reinterpret Scripture on various social issues, so the Holy Spirit may be also leading the church today into a new understanding of same-sex sex. Classis Grand Rapids East, for example, in its study report on “Biblical and Theological Support Currently Offered by Christian Proponents of Same-Sex Marriage” (January 2016), observes how the church reinterpreted Scripture in response to the evils of anti-Semitism, slavery, and racism. The report then concludes: “Through these various means, the church was led to better interpretations of parts of Scripture. Comparing the issue of same-sex marriage to these other historical cases suggests that this might be another occasion in church history when the Holy Spirit is prompting a re-examination of Scripture” (p. 7).

It is one thing to reexamine Scripture, but it is quite another thing to ignore the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture in order to reach an alternative reading of the key texts and then claim that this all happened through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Is it not equally possible that all this happened through the guidance of another “spirit”—the “spirit” of our secular age and contemporary culture (1 John 4:1-3)? Is it not equally possible that what the Holy Spirit is leading the church to do today is not to change its interpretation of Scripture (after all, it is the same Holy Spirit speaking to the church today as to the church of Paul’s day) but to challenge contemporary Christians to love better and minister more effectively to those who are attracted to the same sex?

F. The testimony of progressive voices

As a corrective “check” against the possibility that traditionalists might be stubbornly clinging to an interpretation of Paul’s writings that is determined by a biased perspective and not genuinely open to alternative plausible interpretations, it may be helpful to consider the perspective of certain scholars who, despite affirming that the church should accept homosexual relationships today, nevertheless agree that the apostle clearly condemns all forms of homosexual relations.

²⁰¹ See especially Richard Bauckham, “James and the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21)” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 154-84, esp. pp. 172-78; Bill T. Arnold, “Lessons of the Jerusalem Council for the Church’s Debate over Sexuality,” *Asbury Journal* 69 (2014), pp. 63-83.

William Loader is arguably the leading scholar in the world on the subject of sexuality in Judaism and early Christianity, having written eight academic monographs and dozens of articles on the subject.²⁰² He is a strong proponent of the church's need to accept same-sex behavior and marriage. Loader recognizes that many revisionists hold a high view of Scripture that requires them to treat Paul's discussion of homosexuality as authoritative. This makes it necessary for them to reinterpret that teaching to bring it into line with the affirmation of homosexual relationships, however implausible such reinterpretation might be. After reviewing the various arguments proposed by revisionists, Loader observes: "For those of us whose understanding of Scripture does not entail such belief [i.e., that the biblical writers were correct in what they wrote], we can only stand and wonder at the *extraordinary maneuvers* which have been undertaken to re-read Paul as not condemning homosexual relations at all."²⁰³

Another progressive voice comes from the late Louis Crompton, a gay scholar whose work pioneered LGBTQ studies. In his award-winning book *Homosexuality and Civilization*, Crompton writes: "Some interpreters, seeking to mitigate Paul's harshness, have read the passage [Rom. 1:24-27] as condemning not homosexuals generally but only heterosexual men and women who experimented with homosexuality. According to this interpretation, Paul's words were not directed at "bona fide" homosexuals in committed relationships. But such a reading, however well-intentioned, seems *strained and unhistorical*. Nowhere does Paul or any other Jewish writer of this period imply the least acceptance of same-sex relations under any circumstances. The idea that homosexuals might be redeemed by mutual devotion would have been wholly foreign to Paul or any Jew or early Christian."²⁰⁴

G. Conclusion of the biblical evidence

This survey of relevant biblical texts has shown that Scripture teaches in a clear, consistent, and compelling way that homosexual acts of any kind are sinful and not in agreement with God's will for his covenant people. The debate about same-sex sex, therefore, is not a situation in which there are two equal and opposing interpretations of the biblical evidence. Although a variety of revisionist arguments have been made, none of them are convincing but, rather, ought to be justly judged as "strained and

²⁰² See, for example, William Loader, *The Septuagint, Sexuality, and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004); *Sexuality and the Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005); *Enoch, Levi, and Jubilees on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007); *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality and Related Literature at Qumran* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009); *Sexuality in the New Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2010); *The Pseudepigrapha on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Apocalypses, Testaments, Legends, Wisdom, and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011); *Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in the Writings of Philo, Josephus, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011); *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013); *The New Testament on Sexuality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2013).

²⁰³ "Reading Romans 1 on Homosexuality in the Light of Biblical/Jewish and Greco-Roman Perspectives of Its Time," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 108 (2017), p. 120; emphasis added.

²⁰⁴ Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 114; emphasis added.

unhistorical” and evidence of the “extraordinary maneuvers” involved in the attempt to reread Scripture.

It is important to conclude our consideration of Scripture’s teaching on homosexuality by emphasizing the fact that although Scripture condemns homosexual sex, it does not condemn people who are attracted to the same sex. Nor does it condemn all those who have engaged in homosexual activity. Indeed, Paul’s primary point in mentioning homosexuality in 1 Corinthians 6 is to remind the Corinthian believers that because of God’s grace such sinful conduct belongs to the past: “And 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 God” (1 Cor. 6:11).

This is the gift of God that we have through faith. Through faith in Christ, all of us, whether attracted to the same sex or not, are adopted as the children of God, sons and daughters united in the intimate communion of the body of Christ. The good news of the gospel is that through his Holy Spirit God enables all his children—heterosexual and homosexual alike—to be freed from the destructive forces of sin and to live a life of holiness to God (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

This does not mean that people who are attracted to the same sex will lose their same-sex orientation this side of Christ’s return. Nor does it mean they will cease being tempted, even as Jesus himself was tempted. All believers can expect to battle our deepest temptations to selfishness, lust, pride, arrogance, violence, and all others sins until we see Jesus’ face.

What it does mean is that God has promised to restore us fully to himself at the resurrection on the last day, and that even in this life, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be enabled to live in chastity and self-control as part of the justified and sanctified people of God. There are times when we will sin, but sin will not have mastery over us. And even when we do sin, God promises that if we confess our sin and turn from it, he will forgive us for Jesus’ sake (1 John 1:9; 2:1-2). And if he has granted us forgiveness in Christ, how will he not also give us all things? We can be confident, then, that the Holy Spirit will enable us to overcome even the most deeply rooted sin.²⁰⁵ We can consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, because sin’s power over us has been broken (Rom. 6).

In the world’s eyes it is outrageous to expect those who are attracted to the same sex not to express those desires in a sexual relationship, just as it is outrageous to refuse to use pornography or to refuse to have sex outside of marriage. This is why Jesus explains that in order to enter the kingdom of God a person must be born from above. He invites us to be born again by the Holy Spirit (John 3:1-21). Thus we join a new family of forgiven sinners, each of whom must rely on the power of God and the support of the community in holy living.

²⁰⁵ Article 29 of the Belgic Confession says of those who belong to the church, “Though great weakness remains in them, they fight against [sin] by the Spirit all the days of their lives, appealing constantly to the blood, suffering, death and obedience of the Lord Jesus, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins, through faith in him.”

XIII. Homosexuality: Pastoral care

Philip* went to Sunday school as a child in the church his parents occasionally attended. Coming out in university, Phillip had no particular interest in Christianity until he became an activist for housing and other justice concerns in the city. Here he met some Christians who lived in a house together and routinely offered hospitality to their low-income neighbors. Through their faith, Philip met Jesus and experienced deeper friendships than he'd ever known. Philip was impressed by how these Christian friends supported each other in their marriages or in living celibate lives through prayer and honest conversations about their struggles. Eventually Philip's sexuality and his Christian faith were in real conflict. He ultimately broke up with his partner, realizing that their values were so different. Although some years are harder than others, Philip found community and has followed Jesus day by day for ten years now. Philip is one of the strongest leaders in his church.

Darrell,* 32 (white), is an openly gay residence hall director at a large secular university. His staff of undergraduate resident assistants included two people who were part of a local Christian Reformed congregation. Darrell, who was unchurched, started visiting Sunday worship and soon developed a good relationship with the pastor and several other single adults, despite knowing about the church's sexual ethic of celibacy and opposition to same-sex marriage. While he continued to explore Christianity, Darrell, at his request, was added to the rotation of volunteers who read Scripture and made announcements during worship. Soon afterward Darrell told the pastor that he was getting the word out around the university campus that the congregation was gay-friendly. The pastor was surprised and urged Darrell to make sure any gay friends he invited were aware of the church's teaching about sex. Darrell explained that because the church was friendly and honest, he felt comfortable attending and thought that others would too.

A. *A word to congregations*

1. Repentance

The church's response to homosexuality must begin with confession and lament. Despite repeated and strong exhortations of past study committee reports to love and care for brothers and sisters who are attracted to the same sex as equal members of the body of Christ, the church has all-too-often ostracized, shunned, or ignored such Jesus-followers. Congregations need to honestly examine their attitudes and actions toward people who are attracted to the same sex and need to repent when such attitudes and actions are sinful: treating homosexuals as if they are worse sinners than those who are caught up in pornography, premarital, or extramarital sex; overlooking them for positions of leadership, including those of pastor, elder, and deacon instead of considering whether they are, like all officebearers need to be, living holy and godly lives; keeping them physically and emotionally at a distance because they make some feel uncomfortable; failing to stand in solidarity with them as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. For all of these and many other inappropriate ways the church has typically treated persons in its midst who are attracted to

the same sex, congregations must recognize their attitude and actions for what they are—sin—and ask God for forgiveness and healing.

2. Teaching

Congregations need to be clearly taught or reminded that the experience of attraction to the same sex is not sinful in itself. Some fifty years ago the first CRC report on homosexuality explained that sexuality is “the desire to give and receive in intimacy so that the ‘aloneness’ of a person is abrogated.” The report then made a clear distinction between longings for such intimacy and sexual activity. It also called on the church to welcome godly Christians who are attracted to the same sex into the use of their spiritual gifts and to include them in every way.²⁰⁶ One of the great harms the church has done is to refer to anyone who is attracted to the same sex as a sinner simply because of the experience of this attraction. The fact that some church members are especially aware of and emotionally drawn to the same sex in the same way that most others are drawn to the opposite sex is not in itself sinful desire, nor is it even sexual temptation. Instead, the Bible teaches that to act upon that wrongful sexual desire is sin (James 1:13-15). Jesus says that to even look at someone lustfully is sin (Matt. 5:28). Indeed, it is sin to nourish sexual desire for someone to whom we are not married. Sexual attraction becomes sin when we allow ourselves to desire a specific person or sexual act, unless it is our spouse with whom we are entering into the sexual act. Martin Luther reputedly said, “You can’t stop the birds flying over your head, but you can keep them from nesting in your hair.” No matter how often they experience sexual attraction, mature believers learn to reject the initial temptation toward acting on their sexual desire. Peter repeatedly calls us to discipline our minds in this way.²⁰⁷

3. False expectations

Congregations need to recognize that promoting the idea that believers who are attracted to the same sex can expect to experience attraction to the opposite sex as they mature spiritually is not just wrong but can be very harmful. When the “ex-gay” umbrella organization Exodus dissolved in 2013, they publicly apologized for promoting the idea that people could change their orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. The slogan of Exodus was “Change is possible.” Yet for decades many of its ministry leaders had hidden not only ongoing attraction to the same sex but even a return to gay relationships. At the same time, numerous believing men and women trying desperately to be heterosexual felt shame that they were not spiritual enough to change. Much of the church embraced and pushed this fallacious notion of change, wounding countless vulnerable children of the church.

The Bible talks about the sexual behavior of believers but does not describe an orientation to homosexuality or to heterosexuality. While most Christians describe a lessening of sexual temptations as they practice the spiritual disciplines of prayer, mutual confession, worship, and meditation on the Scriptures, the Bible tells us that the evil one wages war

²⁰⁶ *Acts of Synod 1973*, pp. 611-12, 631.

²⁰⁷ 1 Pet. 1:13; 2:11; 4:1-2, 7.

against our souls. Thus all believers can expect to battle their deepest temptations to selfishness, lust, pride, arrogance, and violence. Yet the church community offers to all the grace of God to enable holing living. All believers can be confident that, like Jesus, the Holy Spirit will help to keep us from sexual sin. As children of our heavenly Father, we are now free to obey God because sin's power over us has been broken (Rom. 6).

4. Practical advice

Congregations must create genuine fellowship and community for single and married people of all ages by practicing hospitality, holiness, honesty, and humility:

- Practice hospitality by welcoming both fellow believers and non-Christian neighbors into your living spaces and your lives (2 Cor. 6-7; Heb. 13).
- Seek sexual holiness for yourselves and encourage it in your sisters and brothers with your prayers and practical support (Heb. 12; Rom. 12).
- Honestly admit your own constant need of grace and ask fellow believers for support (James 5; 1 John 1-5).
- Humbly ask other believers for help with your deepest temptations (James 5; 1 Pet. 5).

Pastors, elders, and deacons should lead the way in this, serving by example. They should regularly confess their sins, acknowledge their struggles, and offer forgiveness and encouragement to others. They should talk about the ways in which God has enabled them to battle various temptations or besetting sins. This will encourage the members of the body to do the same, having the assurance that they too will be received with grace. The officers of the church and other mature Christians should seek out those who seem most vulnerable, praying with them and demonstrating hospitality and friendship. They should be prepared to offer spiritual and material support wherever needed.

In practical terms, congregations should seek to build intimacy among believers. This can take place in small groups who come together for prayer, worship, food, recreation, and mutual support. Such groups should consist of singles, couples, and families, including people of a broad range of ages. It might also come in the form of friendships in which two or more persons are committed to helping each other navigate the challenges and joys of life.

However supportive fellowship comes about, as congregations we must ensure that all believers are included in the network of such relationships. Make a concrete action plan to develop a loving community that includes people of every age and marital status. Encourage groups of believers to gather for meals in homes. Urge them to spend holidays or special occasions with people who do not belong to their family or network of friends, as Jesus commanded us to do (Luke 14:12-14). Mature Christians should model and encourage friendships between people of all ages and genders.

Congregations must also call people who are attracted to the same sex into recognized positions of service and leadership. Having been ostracized for so long, many will need support and encouragement in using

their gifts for the good of the body. They should be encouraged to use their unique experiences—including their attraction to the same sex—to help others. The church needs more godly people who are attracted to the same sex to serve as pastors, elders, and deacons.

Gay immigrant Han,* 35, was so used to hiding his sexuality that he referred to his longtime boyfriend back in South Korea as his girlfriend when he first met some people from the local church. They had invited him to dinner and then to hang out with them and some church members. Han came to a couple of Sunday gatherings and noticed that the church was full of single people and that a good number of them seemed to be gay. This gave him courage to talk to one seemingly same-sex couple and show them a picture of his boyfriend back home. Han was surprised to find out that these two Jesus-followers lived together but were not romantically involved and that the church was not affirming of same-sex marriage. Nevertheless, Han soon became a regular participant in worship, social events, and prayer meetings, as he drew nearer to Jesus.

B. A word to church leaders

1. How to promote sexual holiness in the entire church

- a. Regularly talk about sex and the Christian life in various contexts. Give as many examples from single lives as from married lives. Preach and host discussions about the Bible's positive view of sexuality as well as the difficulties and temptations that all believers face in this area of their Christian life.
- b. As council members, develop a regular practice of sharing weaknesses and confessing sins to each other, and encourage this practice also among the congregation. This will enable you to be humble, honest, and helpful if you must initiate difficult conversations about sexual sin with individual church members.
- c. Foster life as a community of sisters and brothers. Encourage groups of believers to gather for meals together in homes on major holidays instead of just gathering together with your biological family. Implement small groups that are made up of both singles and couples, are mixed in age, or are arranged geographically instead of, or in addition to, small groups that are couple-oriented or geared specifically to youth, singles, or older adults.
- d. Offer healing prayer teams. Issues of sexual identity as well as past memories of sexual abuse, hurt, and sin often result in destructive feelings of shame, which in turn inhibit spiritual intimacy with God and others. Books and other resources are widely available to equip small, trained teams to help people work through these issues by offering both one-time and ongoing prayer support.
- e. Model and encourage intimate nonsexual relationships with people of the same sex and the opposite sex. Demonstrate and refer to friendships between people of all ages and both sexes. Such friendships can

be fostered by, but are not limited to, various small-group Bible studies, ministry teams, and prayer partnerships.

- f. Advocate for and give practical support to communal housing options in which families and singles live together. Christians from various denominations are learning from old and new monastic traditions how to support each other spiritually by sharing housing, meals, and prayer rhythms and by providing practical help with childcare.
 - g. As elders or mature believers, visit with singles to see if there are specific ways they would like help following Jesus in their sexuality.
2. How to minister well to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in the church
 - a. Listen to and learn from members who are attracted to the same sex or from the families of gay people who have left the church. Set up an evening gathering at which you can hear such stories. Seek to understand the realities of your sisters and brothers. Assume that many of us have wrestled with the Scriptures and may know far more than you about what the Bible teaches and about what support we would like to find in the church. Know that we are individuals who have different opinions and needs. Some of us would like to live in a community of other believers; others want to live with an intimate friend; still others hope to marry, or already have married, someone of the opposite sex. Some of us identify as gay or lesbian because we find freedom in our same-sex attraction being known; others of us prefer not to be labeled because we think that God made us male or female but not homosexual or heterosexual; still others of us define ourselves in additional ways.
 - b. Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who affirm same-sex marriage. Take time to hear their story, their hurts, and how they came to their decision. Know that they may have become spiritually and emotionally weary of trying to live celibately in a church community that prioritizes marriage. Ask if the church or you in particular have hurt them; if so, be ready to apologize. Encourage their relationship with Jesus and affirm them for continuing in their faith.
 - c. Develop relationships with believers attracted to their own sex who obey the historically orthodox teaching on sex and thus reject same-sex marriage. Listen to their story, their hurts, and their explanation of their position. Encourage them to use their spiritual gifts in and outside the church. If they desire to live celibately, explore with them possibilities such as living in intentional community or committed friendships (celibate partnerships). If they hope to marry someone of the opposite sex, help them to be realistic about ongoing sexual temptation and encourage their honesty with dating partners.
 - d. Be proactive. As church leaders, work through potential scenarios so that you are ready to respond honestly and lovingly when a gay couple wants to join your church or have their newborn baby baptized; when a lesbian couple attending your church asks to be married or wants prayer for adopting a child; when members of your church ask you to

participate in or simply attend their same-sex wedding; when a member of the church tells you they are sexually active.

- e. Actively call all members of the congregation and people interested in membership to the standard of sexual holiness taught in the Scriptures and exemplified by Christ.

3. Practical ways to make the church inclusive

- a. Use language that describes the church community as the *family* of God. The church is a new community of Christ's followers who are single or married, heterosexual or homosexual, and from all varieties of backgrounds. In other words, ensure that the language used to describe the church clearly reflects the truth that it is not merely a collection of biological families but a gathering of a spiritual family united together through a common relationship to Christ. Since the church is a new community, it needs to provide a home—a safe haven—for all its members.
- b. Model leadership by godly single members. Seek out for service as elders, deacons, and pastors those who are single and/or who are known to be attracted to the same sex and celibate.
- c. Foster confession of sin and prayer for healing in which willing members talk publicly about battling specific temptations to deception, idolatry, slander, greed, and sexual sin.
- d. Encourage faith stories of God's power at work in our various weaknesses and in healing us from lifelong patterns of sin.
- e. Consider holding a special service to acknowledge the church's local lack of hospitality and its hypocrisy in singling out same-sex sexual practice as sinful while remaining silent about other sexual sins (pornography, premarital sex, extramarital sex, etc.).
- f. During corporate worship, plan congregational prayers that include the health and well-being of single Christians as well as of couples and families. As part of the time of confession, refer by name to specific sins, including homosexual practice. Train liturgists/worship leaders to use language indicating that every kind of sin displeases God but that no sin is beyond God's forgiveness. As part of the sermon, talk about a variety of sexual sins, including all sexual practices outside of marriage (premarital, extramarital, same-sex). Give examples of God's grace and comfort to listeners who struggle with brokenness, especially examples of people who have been freed from the power of different kinds of sexual sin.

4. Mission

- a. Only when we have become comfortable in close relationships with people who are attracted to the same sex, both inside and outside of the church, will we be able to minister faithfully to people. We should continually be seeking to establish and foster relationships with people who are different from us in our neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and recreational settings. Our primary goal in these interactions should not

be to change their behavior but to love and serve them as befits followers of Christ. Just as you would not expect to offer unsolicited biblical advice to a colleague living with her boyfriend or your soccer teammate who gambles on the weekend, so you should not expect to do so with an unchurched gay neighbor or acquaintance. Such familiarity requires trust and respect, and building trust and respect takes time.

- b. Acquaintances who are attracted to the same sex may seem uninterested in the gospel, or even antagonistic, but this should not hinder our ability to befriend them. Rather, as you show kindness in ways that encourage trust and respect, be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you. Seek opportunities to connect them to the body of Christ and to the Scriptures. Trust the Holy Spirit to work in their hearts. If they are drawn to the way of life reflected in you and in your church, they may become willing to hear more about the gospel. The more honest you can be about your own struggles in following Jesus, and about the practical ways God has given you power and joy, the more credible your faith will be.
- c. Expect to answer questions and explain why you and your church believe that homosexual activity is wrong. Always be prepared to summarize the gospel as it applies to same-sex relationships and to the way in which Christians have often mistreated gay and lesbian people. Take the time to speak carefully, even if that means inviting someone to chat over coffee or a meal. Be clear and consistent, loving and generous. Be up front about the fact that your church does not recognize same-sex marriage. Make your theological stance obvious and accessible and always show how it arises out of the good news of Christ. Highlight the many ways in which God's will for sexuality is good for all people. Remember that faithful Christlike leadership does not require you to compromise truth or love. If you tend to surrender one or the other, confess your sin to God, pray, and work hard to develop a more Christlike approach.
- d. If a gay couple starts attending your church, treat them as you would any other visitors. That is to say, show them hospitality! How would you treat a young man and woman who are living together outside of marriage, or a college student who does not believe in God, or a wealthy person who has spent their money on selfish and materialistic ends? Remember that we are all sinners in need of grace and love and that God wants all people to enjoy his salvation and full life in his kingdom (John 10:10; 1 Tim. 2:4). Invite them to participate in events and ministries and to build relationships with the members of your congregation. Show them the love by which Jesus said his disciples would be known (John 14:34-35). Again, do not focus on changing their behavior. Give them the freedom to wrestle with what it would mean to become disciples in a spirit of love and grace.
- e. If a gay couple asks about membership, explain why church members are held accountable to following Jesus in their sexuality and in other areas of life. If they want to become members, make sure they are committed to following Christ's teaching in their lives, including

their sexuality. But don't devote all of your attention to their same-sex desires, as if that were the only thing that God cares about. Ensure that they understand the grace of church discipline, how it works, and why it is beneficial. At the same time, remind them that membership is not for the perfect but for the repentant. Give them confidence that they will be supported in grace even when they stumble and fall.

- f. As they learn about the gospel and the cost of discipleship, some people may decide not to pursue membership. If so, continue to treat them with grace and love, just as you should any other person who has not yet become a Christian. You do not know when God may work in their lives to reconcile them to himself, whether through your church or through another church. Others may struggle to overcome their feelings of fear or hurt due to the ways in which they have been treated by Christians—possibly even your church—in the past. This may even be the case if your church has confessed or repented of its sin. If so, you should be understanding, affirm their desire to be in relationship with Christ and his people, and encourage them to find another church. Do what you can to keep the communication lines open in case there might be reconciliation in the future.

Sarah,* white and in her sixties, became a Christian in college through a campus ministry. When she met Kristine in her mid-thirties, she had drifted from the Christian community and from her previous spiritual disciplines of Bible study and prayer. Yet Sarah prayed about dating Kristine and believed God was answering her need for companionship. Ten years later, two colleagues invited Sarah to help their church in a professional capacity, and she started to have spiritual conversations with them and also with their pastor, since each of them showed great respect for her thinking and her experiences. Gradually Sarah became a member of a large, welcoming church. Soon after Kristine also started following Jesus, she became uncomfortable with the nature of their relationship, and they stopped being lovers. Now describing themselves as “spiritual friends” who have been together for decades, Sarah and Kristine gratefully experience the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The two are heavily involved in local ministry, and Sarah is a longtime deacon in the church.

Raised in the church, medical student Angela* (white) initially told no one about her two-year relationship with a woman. When her lover left her, she was bitterly angry and despairing of her future. At the same time, Angela began to feel drawn to walk closely with God. She threw herself into a Christian community and changed the kind of movies she watched and the music she listened to. Afterward she told a new Christian friend that focusing on spiritual things and friendships with deep Christians had freed her to make a completely new start and to follow Jesus. In medical practice later, she married a man and had children while continuing to develop strong, nonsexual friendships with women and other men.

C. *A word to church members who are attracted to the same sex*

1. Undeserved shame

God wants to release you from the shame that you do not deserve. You have been chided or scorned for being different from others around you. You carry a burden of shame because many in the church equate your longings with sin. Know that your sexual attractions do not make you sinful any more than your temptations to pride, selfishness, or idolatry make you sinful. Take comfort in the fact that Jesus knows your struggles, since he himself was tempted in all ways as we are yet was without sin (Heb. 4:14-16). Some of us find ourselves naturally inclined toward gluttony or to slander but, unless we act on those impulses, we are not sinning. Scripture makes clear that God wants to take away our shame and give us dignity.

2. Identity

a. We are all made in the image of God, so, to God, you have great worth and value just as you are. You are not less female if you are not interested in the same things as most other women are. You are not less male if you don't fit into the traditional boxes that contemporary culture wants to put you in. You are called to imitate Christ—not the culture's ideas of masculinity or femininity. Jesus himself was both gentle and strong, humble and bold, submissive and a leader. Your maleness or femaleness depends not on any human ideas of how you should act but on the biological reality of how God has created you.

b. Once you chose to love and follow Jesus, you became a child of God. As a child of God, you are also part of a family who are all forgiven sinners. Whatever the sins are that you leave behind, in this community your new identity is as one of the sanctified: "That is what some of you *were* [the greedy, sexual sinners, drunkards, thieves, slanderers, swindlers]. 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" (1 Cor. 6:11).

3. Minister to others

God has given you spiritual gifts and the ability to serve other people. Get involved in ministry teams or initiatives in areas that interest you. Allow God to use what you have suffered to make you more compassionate to others and also to seek justice for people who are oppressed in various ways. Pray regularly with and for the people in your home, your church, and in the communities around you.

4. Community of Jesus followers

a. Find a local church that values you and equips you for ministry.

b. Seek out other godly Christians with whom you can have deep spiritual friendships, supporting each other daily in prayer and in common interests.

c. Explore the wider community of believers who support each other in following Jesus through community-wide ministries, blogs, websites, and books (see suggested resources below).

5. Power over temptation and sinful patterns

- a. You are free. In common with every believer, your guilt and shame are taken away by the cross. But in the cross Christ also “disarmed the rulers and authorities . . . triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15, NRSV). This means that with the presence and power of Christ you have power over any lifelong patterns of bitterness, lust, rage, or other sins. Most longtime Jesus-followers also describe a lessening of the power of their same-sex attraction as they seek holiness, although it is unusual for an attraction to the same sex to completely disappear. Some also find themselves sexually attracted to an opposite-sex friend who knows their deepest struggles and joys, and they are able to marry.
- b. You are being made new. By the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in you, the old sinful self will be transformed, but it is a process. “His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3). God promises that one day you will be like Jesus, but it will take work and prayer. Since the Bible cautions us that nourishing evil desires leads to sin (James 1:13-16), that looking lustfully at another person is sin (Matt. 5:28), and that we must abstain from sinful desires (1 Pet. 2:11), we must be careful to avoid situations and environments that might lead to the sins that so easily entangle us (Heb. 12:1).
- c. You are not alone. Jesus is *Immanuel*, which means “God with us” (Matt. 1:23). Jesus lives up to this name as he promises, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20, NIV). So you are not alone, but Jesus is always with you. What’s more, Jesus has experienced what you are going through, so he is able “to empathize with our weaknesses. . . . Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:14-16).

6. Intimate relationships

Although many North American adults live alone, the full life Jesus offers is a *communal* life. From monastic and Christian communities, both ancient and contemporary, we learn that living with others can provide deeply meaningful human connections, allow us to serve others in practical ways, and challenge our natural tendency to selfishness.

a. Community houses

Some Christians may choose to buy or rent living space with shared space for cooking, eating, and socializing. Others may choose to live as singles and couples or families together in one large house, often with the intent to care for each other while also serving their neighborhoods.²⁰⁸ If neither your congregation nor a neighboring church already has such households, consider raising these housing possibilities with other singles or married couples. *Caution:* Accountability and support

²⁰⁸ gcbchurch.ca/blog/new-monasticism-an-old-idea-in-a-new-form.

from a church or believers outside your household will be essential to help when communication difficulties arise or if community members experience sexual attraction to each other.

Patrick,* a single, white Christian who is attracted to men shares a house with Rose, Eric, and their infant daughter, who are Chinese Canadians. Although Patrick had always wanted to raise his own children, he has found great joy in being loved by this baby—and later by two other siblings who join her. Patrick eats meals together with the family several days a week and also feels comfortable inviting his friends and some of his neighbors to join them. Sometimes Patrick has long conversations with Rose, while at other times he hangs out with Eric. For their part, Rose and Eric benefit greatly from Patrick's presence and help; they find that another adult in the house makes things in their hectic family life run more smoothly. At times Patrick finds himself longing for his own spouse, yet he derives great satisfaction in being intimately involved in the lives of this young family.

b. Living with another Christ-follower of the same sex²⁰⁹

Some Christians who are committed to holiness report that by living in a nonsexual relationship with another believer of the same sex, they are actually freer from sexual temptation than when living alone, even if they could potentially find their housemate sexually attractive. This might seem dangerous or counterintuitive to some people. Yet virtually all believers struggle with sexual temptation at times, no matter their attraction or living situation. And many single believers living alone find that loneliness triggers temptation toward sexual sin via porn use, hook-ups, or other ungodly relationships. In contrast, the ordinary daily interaction of meals, chores, and prayers with a fellow Christ-follower can be a healthy way to meet the basic deep-rooted need for intimacy that all humans share. If the two persons share a desire to follow Jesus, they can support each other and can also use their home in hospitable ministry to others. *Caution:* If you know that the person you would live with is also attracted to the same sex, honesty with yourself and with that person concerning your intentions for the relationship will be essential. In that case, other believers who know the status of your relationship and are holding you accountable will also be important in helping your living relationship to be healthy.

[12th-century Cistercian abbot] Aelred of Rievaulx's little treatise *On Spiritual Friendship* . . . helped me to see that, although Christian discipleship is costly, it need not be lonely. Our culture has become very fixated on sex, but sex and romance are not the same as love. Nor is Christian love the same as the kind of casual friendship that is common in our culture (Facebook informs me that I currently have 554 "friends"). . . . Aelred helped me to see that obedience to Christ offered more to me

²⁰⁹ *Note:* Not all committee members affirm the possibility of the living arrangement envisioned in this paragraph on the grounds that Christ-followers are exhorted to resist temptation (James 4:7) and that such a housing situation may cause other believers to stumble (Rom. 14). They would consider instances of such a living arrangement permissible only with the prior agreement of a counseling pastor and the knowledge of the local community of faith who can hold the relevant persons accountable.

than just the denial of sex and romance. Christ-centered chaste friendships offered a positive and fulfilling—albeit at times challenging—path to holiness.

(Posted by Ron Belgau at spiritualfriendship.org/2012/08/29/spiritual-friendship-in-300-words)

c. Marriage to an opposite-sex partner

Some Christians who are attracted exclusively to the same sex and who long for sexual intimacy and the blessing of children pray that God will allow them to be drawn to a partner of the opposite sex. They then find themselves sexually attracted to an opposite-sex friend who knows their deepest struggles and joys, and they are able to get married. Many men and women in such marriages continue to experience regular attraction toward members of the same sex, but the fact that they continue to face temptation is hardly unique. Like all faithful Christians, they are able to resist these temptations by the power of the Holy Spirit. *Caution:* It is essential that a person is completely honest with their potential spouse about their sexual attractions. If they are not, their partner will inevitably feel deeply betrayed. In addition, honesty is essential if they are to find the support and accountability they need. Realistic expectations are likewise crucial. Anyone considering such a marriage should be aware that this relationship is unlikely to remove a person's same-sex desires, although it may diminish them. Sometimes a spouse may reveal that they are attracted to the same sex after they are already married. This may cause feelings of hurt and betrayal, and the couple will need a high level of pastoral support, counseling, and prayer.

A radical feminist living in a lesbian community house, Suzanne,* white and in her twenties, met some Christian activists of various ethnic backgrounds and started hanging out with their Christian friends. Although she gently mocked those who were attracted to the same sex for not having lesbian lovers, encouraging them to “live freely and fully,” she appreciated their companionship. Some years later, she wrote to ask the pastor of that Christian community to officiate at her wedding to a man and to renew her interest in the Jesus Way.

Breaking up a two-year relationship with a man because he couldn't reconcile it with his love for Jesus and the Bible's teaching, David,* white and in his late twenties, went to seminary and gradually began to date some women. Always honest with these women about his sexual desire for men, David had some good relationships, but none led to marriage. Over the years, especially when traveling alone, David sometimes has experienced deep longings for a romantic relationship with a man. In the meantime, however, he has become a dynamic and beloved leader of growing new Christian communities. David's union with Christ has deepened as he has sought the constant presence of the Holy Spirit through sung worship, meditating on Scripture, and intercessory, healing prayer for new believers and nonbelievers. Sometimes sharing space with other single men, and sometimes living alone, David is a sought-after

companion by many because of his warmth and genuine love for others.

D. Selected resources

1. Books

- Allberry, Sam. *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* (Purcellville, Va.: The Good Book Company, 2020).
- Burk, Denny. *What Is the Meaning of Sex?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2013).
- Butterfield, Rosaria. *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Crown and Covenant Publications, 2012).
- DeYoung, Kevin. *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2015).
- Forston, S. Donald, and Rollin G. Grams, *Unchanging Witness: The Consistent Christian Teaching on Homosexuality in Scriptures and Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2016).
- Gagnon, Robert A. *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 2001).
- Grenz, Stanley J. *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1998).
- Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011).
- Hirsch, Deborah. *Redeeming Sex: Naked Conversations about Sexuality and Spirituality* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2015).
- Shaw, Ed. *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2015).
- Sprinkle, Preston. *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality Is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2015).

2. Websites and blogs

- Pastoral letter from Rev. David Beelen, "A Letter to Madison Church: Same-Sex Attraction" (madisonsquarechurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/15.10.28-Letter-from-Pastor-Dave.pdf).
- A Queer Calling (aqueercalling.com) features the journey of a self-described queer Christian couple committed to sexual abstinence.
- Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender (centerforfaith.com) provides articles and other help for Christians to engage questions about faith, sexuality and gender.
- Hole in My Heart Ministries (himhministries.com) features Laurie Krieg, a same-sex attracted woman who ultimately married a man and started both a family and a ministry focused on teaching the church how to approach sexuality with the gospel.
- Living Out (livingout.org) involves gay Christians talking about homosexuality from a biblical perspective. Includes stories, resources, and questions.
- Spiritual Friendship (spiritualfriendship.org) features the writings of several gay Christians committed to celibacy and others who hold a historically orthodox view of sexuality.

3. Videos

Sam Allberry, "You Are Not Your Sexuality," [youtube.com/watch?v=WnI2Vr4UIA4&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnI2Vr4UIA4&feature=youtu.be)

Deborah Hirsch, "Redeeming Sexuality," [youtube.com/watch?v=Jb96CCg5e50](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jb96CCg5e50)

XIV. Reflections on singleness, premarital sex and cohabitation, polyamory, and divorce

As part of our mandate, we have been asked 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." In preceding sections of this report we have summarized biblical teaching on sexuality and addressed the issues of pornography, gender identity, and homosexuality in substantial detail. In this section we offer some reflections on other matters of concern to the church: sex and singleness, polyamory, and divorce. We are aware that our study and discussion of these matters is less thorough than with those other issues. However, because these additional matters are so important to a balanced assessment of sexuality and the Christian life, we believe it is important to offer at least some guidance in these areas.

A. Singleness

According to the 2017 report of the U. S. Census Bureau, about 50 percent of all American adults are unmarried. Millennials are the most likely to be single, with close to 59 percent of millennials unmarried. This is partly the result of young people delaying the age at which they marry. The average age of marriage for a male in 2017 was 30, and for women it was 28, an increase of about five years for men and six years for women since 1980. But being single is not necessarily a factor of age. About 45 percent of persons 65 and older are single.

For a large part of church history, especially the first few centuries, unmarried persons were held in high honor. To encourage and validate singleness, leading church figures such as Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom invoked Jesus' words about marriage after the resurrection (Matt. 22:29-32), his praise for people who become eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom (Matt. 19:12), and Paul's encouragement and validation of singleness (1 Cor. 7:25-35). Drawing specifically on 1 Corinthians 7, the early church recognized that people who are married will have divided interests with respect to the Lord. By contrast, single people are less restricted by "the affairs of this world" and are free to pursue "the Lord's affairs" (1 Cor. 7:32-34).

Endorsing celibacy (the Latin word *caelibatus* literally means "unmarried state" or "singleness") in the early centuries of the church was radically countercultural. Marriage was not considered optional. Young men and women were expected to do their duties to their families and to society by marrying young, raising children, and establishing a prosperous household. For women in particular, life often consisted of marriage during a girl's teenage years, a decade or two of producing many children, and often death in childbirth. Whereas many Christians today experience singleness as a

burden, many in the early church experienced it as liberation. Women and men who did not marry were free from a plethora of social constraints to pursue the cause of the kingdom of God. They encouraged it as “an entire way of life . . . that is open to *any* who seek it.”²¹⁰

Sexual desire is a healthy and normal part of being human. Scripture teaches that we have been created for relationship with God and other humans. One mark of this capacity for relationship is the desire for intimacy with others. Sexual intimacy is just one form of this. The Oxford English online dictionary defines intimacy as “the state of having a close personal relationship with someone.” Intimacy is present in many different types of relationships, including among friends and between parents and their children, sisters and brothers, and a husband and wife. On the other hand, although all of these relationships may involve intimacy, intimacy is not necessarily a component of any of them.

Just as emotional intimacy need not include sexual intimacy, so sexual intimacy is often present without emotional intimacy. In fact, the irony of our time is that despite an amazing level of connectedness, particularly through social media, and despite widespread permissive attitudes toward sexuality, loneliness is reported to be at epidemic levels.²¹¹ One recent study even claims that “loneliness is a prevalent and urgent public health issue.”²¹² In 2018 Prime Minister Theresa May of the United Kingdom declared loneliness to be one of the great health issues of our time, even going so far as to appoint a Minister of Loneliness to help address the problem.²¹³

Many single adults are lonely. At the heart of this loneliness is not simply a desire for casual friendship, a handshake on Sunday morning, or participation in a “singles group” at church. Rather, singles, like all people, desire deep and lasting intimacy with other humans. Wesley Hill, a celibate gay Christian, writes,

The love of God is better than any human love. Yes, that’s true, but that doesn’t change the fact that I feel – in the deepest parts of who I am – that I am wired for human love. . . . And the longing isn’t mainly for sex (since sex with a woman seems impossible at this point); it is mainly for the day-to-day, small kind of intimacy where you wake up next to a person you pledged your life to, and then you brush your teeth together, you read a book in the same room without necessarily talking to each other, you share each other’s small joys and heartaches.²¹⁴

Hill notes that as human beings we desperately need “love, affection, companionship, permanent intimacy, life-giving community, a deep sense of belonging, a safe haven, a home.”²¹⁵ Unfulfilled, these longings are like a gaping wound and terribly painful.

²¹⁰ Kathryn Wehr, “Virginity, Singleness, and Celibacy: Late Fourth Century and Recent Evangelical Visions of Unmarried Christians,” *Theology and Sexuality* 17.1 (2011), p. 78.

²¹¹ Report of the U.S. Census Bureau, 2017.

²¹² “The Loneliness Epidemic,” hrsa.gov/enews/past-issues/2019/january-17/loneliness-epidemic, accessed 9-19-19.

²¹³ gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy, accessed 9-19-19.

²¹⁴ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), p. 105.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Part of the problem, Hill argues, is that the church has come to emphasize marriage and family rather than friendship as the most significant relationships in people's lives. Single people's need for intimacy is almost completely ignored. Further, even many married people are lonely. While there is nothing wrong with celebrating marriages, families, and all that goes with them, the church also needs to find ways to foster friendship and intimacy outside of marriage and family. Hill himself has written extensively about what he calls "spiritual friendship."²¹⁶

Hill's point is well taken. All too often our friendships are limited to the members of our families or to people with whom we have common interests and hobbies. They exclude people who are not our age, gender, or socioeconomic status. Yet it is through friendship that we most often find genuine intimacy with one another. Friendship leads us to take responsibility for one another, bearing each other's burdens and encouraging, exhorting, challenging, and rebuking one another to seek what is good. If, as Christians, we are not ultimately created for marriage but for friendship in the family of God, how is it that we have come to emphasize marriage and family more than the friendship to which all of us are called?

According to Christian teaching, to be an unmarried follower of Jesus is to be called to celibacy regardless of age.²¹⁷ Sexual relationships outside of marriage, whether casual or committed, are immoral. Celibate singleness is often difficult; it can be very difficult to accept and is often a call that materializes over time. Kathryn Wehr observes that over a period of years a person might gradually move from rejecting the call, to reluctantly accepting it, to accepting it with joy.²¹⁸ It should be remembered that for many people the call to lifelong marriage is difficult as well, albeit in different ways.

There are a number of things the church must do to help single people who are committed to honoring God with their bodies. We should recognize that our overemphasis on marriage and family has been hurtful and exclusive. We can focus not just on creation but also on resurrection, as Mary Hulst puts it, "rejecting the Gnostic notion that we can do what we want with our bodies because they are dust, and instead embrace that we will do what God wants with our bodies because they are his."²¹⁹ We can encourage singles to base their sexuality not on a potential future mate, but on their "present relationship to God."²²⁰ In addition, we can preach about sex and include in our pastoral prayers those who are struggling with loneliness and sexual temptations of various kinds. We can preach about celibacy and singleness, holding up Jesus and the apostle Paul as examples for Christians to follow. We can welcome those who struggle and fail by making clear that grace happens in the church.²²¹ We can say to the singles in our church, "We

²¹⁶ See Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2015).

²¹⁷ This is not just a problem for the young; many senior adults are choosing not to marry for financial reasons.

²¹⁸ Wehr, p. 88.

²¹⁹ Mary Hulst, "Belong," a presentation at Inspire 2019, a binational gathering of ministry leaders in the Christian Reformed Church in North America, held in Windsor, Ont., Aug. 1-3, 2019; soundcloud.com/crcna/inspire-2019-2019-08-01-mary-hulst; accessed, 8-21-20.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ *Ibid.*

see you, single people, and we know how challenging it is to follow Jesus in your sexuality, and we know that our emphasis on families and the idolatry of marriage has hurt you. Your singleness matters to God, and it matters to your church."²²²

One way the church can offer helpful teaching in the area of sex and singleness is to approach it as a matter of virtue. Virtue ethics focus on habits that enable a person to flourish in accord with his or her created purpose. The emphasis does not fall on rules but on practices and dispositions.²²³ The virtuous life is characterized by struggle, for it takes discipline to put vices to death and to turn new practices into virtuous habits. But this struggle to stay morally on target can be, as one author puts it "a sign of health—the growing pains of character."²²⁴ When the new practices do become habitual, they bring joy. They enable a person to flourish in a way that honors the creator.

In the area of sex and singleness the most important virtue is that of chastity. To practice chastity is to live out one's sexuality in a way that conforms to God's created purpose for human beings as male and female, whether married or single. Practicing chastity is characterized by seeking the flourishing of the persons with whom we are in relationships, the health of these relationships, and the honor and glory of God, who has created us for such relationships. As DeYoung puts it, "Proper use and enjoyment of our sexual nature should track the way sexual desire and its fulfillment can enhance our relationships with God and each other."²²⁵ This leads us to refuse to objectify other people or treat them as means to the end of our own sexual satisfaction. Simon notes: "Chastity, as a virtue, is not just the ability to 'do without sex' for weeks or months. More importantly, it keeps our sexual desires from making us view others as collections of sexually arousing body parts."²²⁶

The vice of lust, in contrast to chastity, makes sex primarily about me and my pleasure, rather than about God and my neighbor. "In lust, my own pleasure is the goal, and I decide where to get it, and when, and with whom," DeYoung writes.²²⁷ Lust is powerful because it is deceptive. It feels right. We often confuse it for love. Yet it is never loving to enter into a sexual relationship that is outside of the will of God. Such a relationship can never lead to genuine flourishing, even if for a time it feels like it does. Thus unchaste sexual activity—sexual activity that exhibits the vice of lust—includes such things as any sexual behavior prohibited by Scripture, living together in a sexual relationship outside the covenant commitment of marriage, having sexual partners outside of the marriage covenant, use of any form of pornography, prostitution, going to sexually charged environments like strip clubs, fantasizing about sex with persons to whom one is not married, and the list goes on. "Lust is always in pursuit and ends as empty-handed as it began."²²⁸

²²² Ibid. These are just a few of the ideas that Hulst presents.

²²³ For a more complete description of virtues, see DeYoung, pp. 14-18.

²²⁴ Caroline J. Simon, *Bringing Sex into Focus: The Quest for Sexual Integrity* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2012), p. 73.

²²⁵ DeYoung, p. 163.

²²⁶ Simon, p. 76. For a more complete description of the virtue of chastity, see Simon, pp. 71-79.

²²⁷ DeYoung, p. 167.

²²⁸ Henry Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), p. 179.

It does not ultimately satisfy, and it often causes tremendous harm by alienating a person from God or from other people, destroying relationships, even at times provoking a person to commit sexual violence or other abusive behavior. It can also lead to sexually transmitted diseases and infections, as well as psychological, emotional, and spiritual harm.

The virtue of chastity involves both married and single persons. Sex, as God designed it, is both psychologically and biologically good and purposeful. The penultimate ends of sex are, first, bonding two people into a one-flesh union, and, second, creating new life, something symbolized in the birth of children, in whom what God has joined together literally cannot be separated.²²⁹ In other words, sex is potentially both unitive and procreative. The effects of original sin as well as our own actual sin can thwart those potentials. Though marriage is not a guarantee of perfect intimacy, sexual or relational, sex in its proper context and directed toward its intended purpose is a wonderful gift.

Given that our society emphasizes sexual intimacy as the truest form of intimacy, it is no wonder that so many people feel that they have to have sex in order to have intimacy. But genuine intimacy need not take sexual expression. As a church, we need to reflect much more on how we can encourage and support one another to establish deeper friendships. Single and married people alike should be taught to invest in friendships with one another that are both chaste and intimate. Christians who are mature and who have mature friendships with other Christians should be held up as examples from whom the rest of us can learn. God has called us his friends. We need to learn to be friends with one another.

B. Premarital sex and cohabitation

In contemporary North American culture, where casual sex is commonplace and premarital sex is assumed to be part of a dating relationship, most younger people considering marriage are already sexually involved and would not consider marrying without first living together. Cohabitation is seen as a first step of commitment—a move toward faithfulness and a stable shared life. Analysis of national surveys indicates that while many choose to marry before they have children, permanent cohabitation with no plans for marriage is increasingly the norm.²³⁰

While a slim majority of black Protestants, as well as most white evangelicals, still believe that people should not live together unless they plan to marry, both serial monogamy in dating relationships and cohabitation have become the norm in the church.²³¹ Recent research reveals that virtually all never-married members of conservative denominations have had premarital sex, and most with several partners.²³² Many Christians plan to marry eventually but cite financial concerns as their reason to postpone marriage (until

²²⁹ DeYoung, p. 164.

²³⁰ Pew Research Center, “Marriage and Cohabitation in the United States,” Nov. 5, 2019; pewsocialtrends.org/2019/11/06/marriage-and-cohabitation-in-the-u-s/ psdt_11-06-19_cohabitation-00-010.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² David J. Ayers, *Christian Marriage: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2018), p. 68. See also Ayers’s review of General Social Surveys 2014-2018, ifstudies.org/blog/sex-and-the-single-evangelical.

they can afford a wedding, provide for children, afford a house, etc.). Some avoid a legal marriage altogether so as not to lose tax benefits they currently rely on in retirement. Others use the time living together as a couple to assess their potential spouse's sexual and relational compatibility and general reliability. Still others express uncertainty about their own readiness for marriage but desire daily intimacy to combat loneliness.

Pastors report hearing, from adults of all ages, such comments and questions as "Why can't we make a life commitment without getting married?" "My parents don't want me to get serious with anyone until I'm through grad school and am financially stable." "I know adultery is wrong, and I would never cheat on a spouse, but where does the Bible teach that premarital sex is wrong?"

So does the Bible address sex without benefit of marriage?

The Old Testament forbids adultery, incest, and sex between people of the same sex, making it clear that only sexual activity within the context of marriage pleases God. Thus, when a man seduced an unbetrothed woman, he was required to marry her, and if the father refused to let the man marry her, he was still required to pay the dowry price (Ex. 22:16-17). On the other hand, the Hebrew Scriptures celebrate the joys of married sex, beginning with the intimate and exclusive bond it produces, "That is why a man leaves his mother and his father and is united with his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). It suggests the lifelong pleasure it can provide: "May you rejoice in the wife of your youth. . . . May her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be intoxicated with her love" (Prov. 5:18-19). The sexually explicit love poem Song of Songs also makes clear that sexual intimacy and commitment go hand in hand. The woman exhorts her potential lover: "Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (Song of Songs 8:6-7).

Jewish tradition has always explicitly forbidden extramarital sex,²³³ considering marriage itself to be holy. Emerging from that context, Jesus and the New Testament writers speak even more directly, both to encourage sex in marriage and to condemn all sex outside of marriage as immorality. Jesus reiterates the Creator's intention for sexual partnerships to be enduring and monogamous when he references the one-flesh union of Genesis 2 and adds, "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt. 19:6).

Similarly the writer of Hebrews tells us, "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (Heb. 13:4). Paul also specifically delineates marriage as the site for all sexual expression in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). Paul even tells both husbands and wives that they have a marital duty to have sex with each other and should not deprive their partner (7:5). Though Paul recommends the celibate life that he himself lives, and he exhorts believers to control their own bodies (1 Thess. 4:3-5), he does command single believers

²³³ Michael J. Broyde and Michael Ausubel, eds., *Marriage, Sex, and Family in Judaism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 96.

to marry if they cannot control themselves (1 Cor. 7:9). In each of those texts, and many others in the New Testament, the Greek word *porneia*, usually translated as “fornication” or “immorality,” refers to all sexual activity outside of marriage.

The biblical writers acknowledge our physical and emotional longings for sexual intimacy. But whether we are single or married, we are called to use our bodies for God instead of immorality. We are called to seek to please the God who cherishes us. “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you . . . ? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19-20; see also Gal. 5:17-26; Eph. 5:3-20; 1 Pet. 4:1-7; 1 John 2:3-4). The God to whom we belong, and who has freed us from sin, makes it possible to walk in holiness, by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh [sinful nature]” (Gal. 5:16). “Live as children of light” and “be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:8, 18).

In short, the Bible teaches that sex unites a man and woman in body, soul, and spirit; that this good gift belongs in marriage and only in marriage; and that being born again by the Spirit makes holiness and joy outside of marriage possible.

Whether in dating relationships, hook-ups, or cohabitation, premarital sex is perhaps the most common sinful sexual practice in the contemporary church. Mores have so changed, even within the church, that some parents support its practice by allowing adult children and partners to save money for a house or a wedding by living together with them. And the practice is not confined to the young. Older divorced or widowed people, now accustomed to sexual intimacy, choose to have sex with their dating partners, even if they were not sexually active before their original marriage. Yet even while most single church members, as well as those who live together, now have sex outside of marriage, the church has done little to address it pastorally.

Elders and other mature Christians should disciple people who are sexually active outside of marriage into the freedom of life in the Spirit. Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well in John 4 is a good model of such pastoral care. Jesus began building a relationship through respectful dialogue, responding to the woman’s questions. He then gently confronted her sinfulness without shaming her. Finally, Jesus offered her grace. He invited her to a new life in which her deepest needs would be met in relationship with God. Her reaction was to run, leaving her water jar, back to her village to share the good news about her life-giving interaction with Jesus.

In the same way, loving Christians can help fellow believers to discern whether or not they want to be in a committed relationship with someone with whom they are sexually involved, and if they do, to work toward discovering ways to remove financial, family, or other obstacles to marriage. If they decide they are not ready for marriage, it’s important to help them understand the boundaries God has put around sex, explaining what it means to follow Jesus and inviting them to be filled with the powerful Spirit who will lead them and draw them into intimacy with Jesus, the living water (John 4:10).

C. Polyamory

Sarah^{*234} found herself attracted to her co-worker, Robert. At first she resisted her feelings and his rather obvious flirtations because she knew that he was married to Jill. After a Christmas work party, however, she gave in to her desires and started an ongoing, intimate relationship with Robert. This went on for three months until Robert unexpectedly invited Sarah to move in with him and his wife. Sarah's immediate reaction was to reject the idea. But not wanting to break off her newfound relationship with Robert, she gave him—and polyamory—a shot. She reasoned to herself: "I love him and really believe that he loves me. If parents can love more than one child, is it really crazy to believe that a great guy like Robert can love me even while he still loves his wife? Plus, now our relationship will be in the open, and I won't have to feel so guilty about hiding things from Jill."

Sam* and Becky,* both white, had been married for two years. Each grew up in a Christian home and considered themselves to be Christians, even though they only infrequently attended a local church. One of Sam's good friends, Justin, who was single, started spending more and more time at Sam and Becky's place and found himself increasingly attracted to his friend's wife. Becky reacted positively to the advances of Justin but did not want to begin a secret relationship with him behind her husband's back. She and Justin instead shared their true feelings with Sam and asked him to consider polyamory, in which Justin would be added to their marriage relationship as a significant other. Sam ultimately agreed to this proposal. When Christian friends of Sam and Becky learned about this new relationship, they could not help voicing their concern and objections. Sam and Becky, however, pushed back, arguing that their situation did not really qualify as adultery since everything was in the open and all three persons involved agreed to this relationship. Further, they argued, polygamy was practiced by many Old Testament heroes of the faith, and, as far as they could tell, they couldn't find any explicit rejection of these relationships in the New Testament.

Consensual nonmonogamy (CNM), or what is more commonly called polyamory (from the Greek *poly*, meaning "many" and the Latin *-amory*, meaning "love"), refers to a mutually agreed-upon sexual relationship between three or more people. (The first verifiable use of the word *polyamory*, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, occurred in 1992.) Some of these relationships are called "vees" (from the letter *v*), since they involve three people, one of whom is involved sexually with the other two, while the other two are not intimate with each other. This is slightly different from "triads," which involve three people, all of whom are sexually involved with each other. Another type of these consensual nonmonogamous relationships is a "quad," which involves four people, typically two couples who have an intimate relationship with each other.

Within these different types of polyamorous relationships there are varying degrees of commitment and exclusivity. Some polyamorous relationships are explicit in identifying one sexual partner as "primary" and others

²³⁴ *Names and minor details of the account have been changed.

as “secondary.” Other relationships do not make such distinctions among their members. Most of these polyamorous relationships expect the different members to be sexually active only with the members of their relationship. Other relationships do not have this restriction. The biggest feature that all polyamorous relationships have in common is a commitment to openness and honesty. The partners insist on being open and honest with each other about expectations and about the setting of ground rules with which everyone agrees.

Polyamory may sound strange and puzzling to many people. Nevertheless, polyamorous relationships are quickly becoming more common, not only in the broader culture but even among some Christians. It is hard to obtain definitive numbers because the phenomenon of polyamory is relatively new, and so far there have been few studies involving large sample groups. Yet the studies that exist show a range of 3-5 percent of people in North America currently living in a consensual nonmonogamous relationship. They suggest that 12-20 percent of Americans have been in some kind of open sexual relationship at some point in the past.²³⁵ Sociologist Mark Regnerus has claimed that 24 percent of people who identify themselves as Christians believe that polyamorous relationships are morally permissible,²³⁶ although he subsequently qualified this claim by saying that only 6 percent of Evangelicals and 19 percent of Catholics consider polyamorous relationships to be acceptable.²³⁷

A variety of different arguments have been forwarded by people who identify themselves as Christians to defend the practice of polyamory. What follows below is a survey and evaluation of the most commonly used of these arguments.²³⁸

1. Old Testament polygamy

The most common argument used to justify polyamorous relationships involves an appeal to the numerous instances of polygamy in the Old Testament. Many of the Old Testament heroes of faith had more than one wife: Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon. In fact, over forty key individuals in the Old Testament were married to more than one woman. Since so many persons in the Old Testament were in nonmonogamous relationships, it is claimed, similar consensual nonmonogamous relationships should be permitted today.

There are two main responses to this argument. The first involves distinguishing what is “descriptive” in the Bible—the report of something that happened—from what is “prescriptive” in the Bible—the positive or

²³⁵ See M. L. Hauptert, Amanda N. Gesselman, Amy C. Moors, Helen E. Fisher, and Justin R. Garcia, “Prevalence of Experiences with Consensual Nonmonogamous Relationships: Findings from Two National Samples of Single Americans,” *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* 43.5 (2017), pp. 424-40; Heather Smith, “National Survey Reveals Generational Differences in Consensual Nonmonogamy,” Institute for Family Studies (Sept. 11, 2019).

²³⁶ Mark Regnerus, *Cheap Sex: The Transformation of Men, Marriage, and Monogamy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 186.

²³⁷ Mark Regnerus, “How the Rise in Unreligious Americans Affects Sex and Marriage: Comparative Evidence from New Survey Data”; thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/08/55179.

²³⁸ The following section draws heavily from the excellent review of biblical arguments for polyamory by Branson Parler, “The Bible, Polyamory, and Monogamy,” available from The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender (centerforfaith.com).

negative judgment about what happened. The fact that many Old Testament figures took multiple wives is *descriptive*. There is nothing in the Bible, however, that indicates that polygamy is good and acceptable and ought to be practiced. In other words, these examples are not prescriptive. In fact, in the case of many Old Testament figures the Bible describes the pain, division, and strife that emerged within these polygamous relationships, thereby implying significant disapproval.

The second and more important response to the appeal to Old Testament polygamy as a justification of modern polyamory is that the rest of Scripture makes clear that God's intention is for sex to take place only in a marriage relationship between one man and one woman. This divine intent is revealed in the creation account of Genesis 1-2, in which God provides Adam with *one* other person. It is confirmed in the New Testament in Jesus' double citation of this creation account: "'Haven't you read,' he replied, 'that at the beginning the Creator "made them male and female" [Gen. 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" [Gen. 2:24]?"' (Matt. 19:4-5). God's expectation that marriage be between one man and one woman is assumed in Paul's exhortation to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5:21-33. His extended discussion concerning marriage in 1 Corinthians 7 asserts that each man should have his own wife (not wives) and each woman her own husband (not husbands).

2. Certain Old Testament laws

The second argument for polyamory is an extension of the first one. Proponents of polyamory sometimes claim that the laws of Deuteronomy 17:17 and Deuteronomy 21:15-17 show that God accepted polygamy. In a similar way, it is argued, God also accepts nonmonogamous relationships like that of polyamory. Deuteronomy 17:17 requires that the king of Israel "must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray." This command seems to prohibit marrying an excessive amount of wives, but that leaves open the possibility of marrying a few wives. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 deals with the inheritance rights of the oldest son in a family in which the father has sons from two different wives.

It is true that neither of these Old Testament laws prohibits polygamy, but it is also true that neither one sanctions the practice. Such laws ought to be viewed as the regulations of sinful practices that God tolerated due to the hardness of human hearts. Here the parallel with divorce is helpful. Jesus makes clear that the Old Testament law permitting divorce did not reflect God's will for the permanence of marriage but, rather, was a divine concession: "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" (Matt. 19:8-9).

Although God allowed divorce and regulated it through Old Testament laws, that did not mean such divorce was in accord with his will. Divorce was tolerated under the old covenant, but the new covenant reaffirms the creational requirement of lifelong fidelity between a husband and wife. In a similar way, although God tolerated polygamy and regulated it through

Old Testament laws, this was not his original intent for marriage; nor is it in accord with his will.

3. Certain New Testament commands

There are a few occasions in the New Testament where the apostle Paul commands that an elder must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6, RSV) and that a deacon must be the “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12). Some claim that, since Paul had to issue a special law against polygamy among those in leadership positions, this implies that the Old Testament toleration of polygamy remained in place in the New Testament church.

The key phrase in all these three texts, however, is capable of several different meanings. The phrase, which literally reads “a man of one woman,” can mean that an elder and deacon must either (1) be married rather than single, (2) be monogamous rather than polygamous, or (3) be faithful in his marriage. The first option is not likely, given Paul’s strong commendation of singleness (1 Cor. 7:7-8; 7:38) as well as his own single state (1 Cor. 9:1). The second option is also not likely. The exact same phrase occurs in 1 Tim. 5:9 but refers to “a woman of one man.” Here polygamy cannot be in view, since there are no examples in the ancient world of a woman having more than one husband. The meaning of the key phrase, then, is most likely the third option—namely, the need to be faithful in one’s marriage.²³⁹

Even if the phrase were a reference to polygamy, however, that would not mean Paul intended to lay down a requirement that applies only to church leaders and not to all believers.

4. Divine relationships

Another argument used to justify polyamory involves an appeal to divine relationships, including (1) the relationship that the members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—have with each other, and (2) the relationship between God and his people. Chuck McKnight, who self-identifies as a “progressive Christian,” argues that “God is not in any sense monogamous” and tries to prove this point by appealing to three things: the Trinity, God’s relationship with Israel, and Christ’s relationship with the church.²⁴⁰

McKnight appeals to the Trinity as the most intimate and loving relationship imaginable, shared equally and eternally between three divine persons. But although Christians ought to model the unity of the Trinity (John 17), there is no indication in Scripture that the relationship among the divine persons is intended as the paradigm for human sexual relationships.

McKnight also appeals to two Old Testament texts in which God is portrayed as having more than one wife. Jeremiah 3 describes God as being married to both the southern kingdom of Judah and her sister, the northern kingdom of Israel. Ezekiel 23 portrays both Jerusalem and Samaria as God’s two adulterous wives. When these two texts are compared to

²³⁹ See George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 156-59.

²⁴⁰ Chuck McKnight, “Is God Polyamorous?” (Oct. 2, 2017); patheos.com/blogs/hippieheretic/2017/10/is-god-polyamorous.html.

the testimony of Scripture as a whole, however, it is clear that Judah and Israel (and their capital cities, Jerusalem and Samaria) are both part of the one people of God. They were not supposed to be divided. Further, the language of marriage and adultery in these texts is used metaphorically, not literally. There is no justification for concluding, as McKnight does, that these two texts “portray God as polygamous,” and there is even less justification for inferring from these texts that consensual nonmonogamous relationships mirror God’s relationship with his people.

Finally, McKnight also appeals to the relationship between Christ and the church as described in terms of a marriage relationship in Ephesians 5. He wonders how the marriage between Christ and the church ought to be understood in the light of God’s previous marriages, as he calls them, to Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, and Samaria. He also stresses that although the church is a single, corporate whole, “God has an intimate relationship with each and every one of us. Christ’s marriage to the church is ultimately a marriage to billions of individuals.” This leads him to conclude that “polyamory does at least provide a more-accurate picture of God’s relationships than monogamy.”

The logic of this reasoning is extremely dubious. First, we are once again dealing with a metaphor, so it would be dangerous to conclude too much from this image about actual marriage relationships. Second, the metaphor identifies the bride of Christ not with each individual believer but as the collective body of believers. The bride is the church. Third, Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in the middle of this metaphor (Eph. 5:31), thereby stressing that marriage is a relationship between one man and one woman.

5. “Born this way”

A more common argument used by proponents of polyamory appeals to biology. This argument claims that some people have a sexual orientation that makes them predisposed against monogamy and gives them an innate desire for sexual relationships with more than one person. For people with such a polyamorous orientation, monogamy is unnatural. Nonmonogamy is not just something that they *do*. It is who they *are*. The argument that polyamory should be legally recognized as a sexual orientation has even appeared in a peer-reviewed law journal.²⁴¹

It is important to note that there is no evidence for the claim that polyamory is a biologically rooted sexual orientation. Yet even if it could be proven that polyamory is a genetically caused sexual orientation, it would not logically follow that consensual nonmonogamy is morally permissible for Christians. As we noted in our discussion of homosexuality, people are born with all kinds of biologically caused proclivities and desires that Scripture identifies as sinful. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to overcome these inclinations through the power of the Holy Spirit.

D. Divorce

In Matthew 19:8-9 (NIV) Jesus declares, “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

²⁴¹ Ann E. Tweedy, “Polyamory as a Sexual Orientation,” *University of Cincinnati Law Review* 79 (2011), pp. 1461-1515.

immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Since breaking the marriage covenant is sin and given the high divorce rate, the church must act more intentionally to call married partners to reconciliation and renewed commitment to the marriage covenant.

Synod 1980 of the Christian Reformed Church received a study report on divorce and remarriage. The authors of that report provided a thorough study of scriptural teaching on the topic. They concluded by calling the church to “reaffirm the general biblical principle that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery” (*Acts of Synod 1980*, p. 484).

The 1980 report also included guidelines to do the following:

- Deal pastorally with those who have failed to keep the biblical principle by
 - Refraining from a strictly legal approach to remarriage that tries to provide a basis for judgment that certain categories of remarriage are always compatible or incompatible with the teachings of Scripture.
 - Seeking to bring persons contemplating remarriage to a genuine awareness of what is involved in the covenant of marriage. The teaching of Scripture concerning marriage, grace, love, loyalty, vows, forgiveness, hope, and promise should be openly discussed.
 - Calling persons contemplating remarriage to an examination of their intentions in the light of the biblical teaching concerning reconciliation with the former spouse, the possibility of the single life, and remarriage.
 - Counseling firmly and compassionately against any remarriage that conflicts with the biblical teaching concerning marriage and divorce.
 - Exercising formal discipline when persons in hardness of heart refuse to heed the admonitions of the consistory and do not acknowledge and repent of their sins involved in divorce and remarriage.

(*Acts of Synod 1980*, pp. 484-85)

Despite the 1980 report’s emphasis on the “general biblical principle that divorce and remarriage constitute adultery,” divorce and remarriage have become widespread in the Christian Reformed Church in North America. As a committee, we therefore call upon the church to recover the teaching of that report and to hold one another accountable to practicing the teachings of Jesus on divorce and remarriage.

E. Selected resources

1. Books

De Young, Rebecca Konyndyk. *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2009).

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2. Internet

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XV. Sexual desire: Bodies, bonding, and boundaries in the Song of Songs

Inspired by a loving Creator who made us male and female in his image, the Song of Songs evokes the intensity, longings, delights, and pleasures of sexual love. Enduring centuries of scholarly debates about its authorship, its interpretation, and its primary value as a metaphor for God’s relationship with his covenant people or as a vivid picture of human love, the Song of Songs remains a vivid and exuberant piece of sexual love poetry. In an era of incessant media depictions of unrestrained lust, contrasted by segments of the Christian church, which speak mostly negatively—or not at all—about sexuality, the Song of Songs celebrates the beauty of bodies and the boundaries of sexual love. This erotic love poem is centrally located among the books of the Christian Bible, and for the following reasons the church would be wise to give it a central place in our understanding of the Creator’s intent for sexual intimacy.

A. *Song of Songs helps us recover a theology of the body rooted in creation and resurrection theology*

“I believe in . . . the resurrection of the body,” we confess with the global and historical church. Jesus, who “is the firstborn from among the dead” (Col. 1:18) is God become human. The mysterious incarnation dignifies our humanity because the Creator is now also a creature. Created in God’s image, male and female, we are not just embodied souls but physical beings who will live forever in glorified bodies. Somehow in our very fleshiness we image God. Through the apostle Paul, God also tells us, “Your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you. . . . Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor. 6:19-20), and “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom. 12:1).

The capacity for sexual desire is a gift from God. However, the church sometimes lapses into a form of the heresy of Gnosticism, believing that the material world is evil and the sexual act is itself shameful—or, more simply, that the soul is more valuable than the body and therefore sexuality is not spiritual. Unfortunately the church has also been deeply influenced by Augustine, who believed that all passion was lust, even within marriage.

Indeed, like other powerful desires such as hunger, sexual desire can easily lead us into sin.

But the Song of Songs unabashedly celebrates the physical nature of sexual love. God designed our bodies to be stimulated and aroused by the touch of the beloved other (“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine”—1:2), as well by the aroma (“Awake, north wind . . . ! Blow on my garden, that its fragrance may spread everywhere”—4:12), tastes (“his fruit is sweet to my taste”—2:3), and sight of that desirable body (“You are altogether beautiful, my darling; there is no flaw in you”—4:7). An entire biblical book devoted to sexual love, Song of Songs is neither crude nor degrading because it portrays sex as a gift from God for the joy and intimacy of material beings.

Thus the Song of Songs can free us from shame in our bodily desires and teach us to savor the act of love with joy and gratitude. The striking physicality of the Song of Songs can also remind the whole church of the hunger those of us without the privilege of sexual touch are likely to have for casual affectionate touches from others with whom we feel comfortable, as well as “greetings with a holy kiss” and supportive hugs.

B. The poem addresses the intense longing we feel for a beloved when we are apart

“I am faint with love. His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me” (2:5-6). How much we might sacrifice or endure in order to be in the same physical space with a lover. “I looked for him but did not find him. I will get up now and go about the city. . . . I will search for the one my heart loves” (3:1-2).

This intensity of desire holds up a mirror to human nature and reminds the church of the longings of all of those who are not in sexual relationships but wish they were, whether it be the longing of unrequited love or for a lover who never appears, the loss of sexual love by those who are divorced or widowed, or the longing of those who have chosen celibacy. The church can become willing to talk candidly about the physical remedy of masturbation people often choose as well as the ways to cultivate and support deep emotional intimacy within the church among sisters and brothers in the family of God.

C. The song focuses on the uniqueness and value of the beloved one

Repeatedly we hear the woman and the man refer to each other as “my beloved” and “my love.” “You have stolen my heart . . .” the man cries. “How delightful is your love” (4:9,10). “When I found the one my heart loves . . .” the woman remembers, “I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother’s house” (3:4).

As it did in the ancient world, Song of Songs confronts the common idea that sex is about self-pleasure and meeting our own needs. Instead the poetry shows the lovers actually seeing and valuing each other. Although every aspect of their physical bodies is accentuated in loving detail, neither man nor woman is objectified; instead, they are described in terms of love and eagerness for being bonded.

D. This poetry highlights equity between female and male lovers

The allure, physical virtues, and sexual beauty of both the woman and the man are extolled. The song is written in the woman’s voice at least as often

as the man's and shows a degree of male-female equality that brings us back to Genesis 1:26-31 before the fall into sin and anticipates Jesus' treatment of women and Paul's strikingly identical teaching about sexuality to women and men in 1 Corinthians 7.

In addition, the woman chooses to give of herself. She is not given. "Let my beloved come to his garden, and eat its choicest fruits," she says (4:16). (See 4:1-5:1.) In this way the Song of Songs challenges the contemporary commodification of the (usually female) body as well as the connection our culture has made between sex and conquest or domination.

The woman demonstrates the giving of oneself, not being taken and not being bought (8:7-14). Sexual intimacy will not be coerced or forced. She declares, "If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned" (8:7). Instead "my own vineyard is mine to give," she says (8:12). It is not for Solomon to buy with his money or to take. But to the one she loves and longs for, she calls, "Come away, my beloved."

E. Exclusivity of sexual love

Contemporary culture shouts about the pleasures of sex, frequently without any reference to being in a permanently committed context. In contrast, the Song of Songs teaches us to celebrate the sensuality of human sexual love without licentiousness.

By demonstrating a woman's openness to a man with the unashamed sharing of her naked self, we are reminded of how wonderfully such vulnerability builds trust. "Let my beloved come into his garden, and taste its choice fruits" (4:16). When we know we are loved and cherished, we dare to offer more of ourselves. When we risk such openness and are not rebuffed but received with appreciation, the fruit is increased confidence in the relationship.

This is why the poem warns us against sexual love without commitment. "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (3:5). Instead the woman calls for a covenantal relationship. "Place me as a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm" (8:6) And if you would be my lover, you must always be my lover, she implies, for "love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame" (8:6). This alerts us to the potential that strong emotions like jealousy and perhaps violence could be evoked if we enter into physical intimacy with someone and then betray their love, whether it is by physical adultery or abandonment, adultery of the heart through porn, or simply not following through into permanent public commitment. The Song of Songs enables us to see that the boundaries around love give us freedom.

F. In the Song, God sings the intensity of God's love for us

Across history the church has viewed the poem in two ways: "as a double love story: vertical and horizontal; divine and human."²⁴² Elsewhere Scripture also compares the relationship of God and God's people to lovers, spouses, affianced couples. These examples highlight the exclusivity of our relationship with God. In the same way, the Song of Songs affirms that this covenant of love precludes our having any other gods because God is a jealous God.

²⁴² Peter Kreeft, *Three Philosophies of Life* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1989), p. 100.

The Song's fleshly example of sexual delight also enables us to understand just how intimate God wants to be with us. As the Song of Song's lovers long for each other, so God longs for deep connection with his people together as well as with each one of us. (See also "deep calls to deep"—Ps. 42:7.) Moreover, just as the Bible tells us we are God's inheritance and God is ours, so the Song of Songs assures us, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" (6:3). As the woman seeks out her beloved, so God seeks us out when we become distant. We can be vulnerable with God, bare ourselves to God, knowing that this Lover delights in us fully. And, of course, this metaphor is also our reality. The children of God are God's Beloved. Jesus actually is the Bridegroom who is preparing the Bride for the consummation of our love when he returns. "Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love" (2:4).

XVI. Confessional status

Our committee has been asked to evaluate "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 . . . declaring a *status confessionis*" (*Acts of Synod 2016*, p. 920). This raises the question, What is a *status confessionis*?

Very simply, this Latin phrase means "confessional status." To raise the question of confessional status is to wonder whether some teaching or ecclesiastical practice, if adopted, would violate the teachings of the confessions of the church. This is important because the teachings of the confessions are understood to represent biblical teaching on the matter in question.

Confessional status can affect doctrines that are directly asserted in a creed, such as the two natures of Christ or, in the case of the Reformed confessions, the doctrine of providence. Confessional status can also extend to broader teachings that contradict the confessions in some way. So one can raise the question about whether some stance on a moral or political issue, if accepted by the church, would constitute a violation of the teaching of the historic creeds and confessions of the church.

Sometimes the church has to consider whether a particular teaching ought to have confessional status, even though it currently does not. For example, in 2012 the church was asked to consider adding the Belhar Confession to the list of historical documents to which all officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church in North America are bound. In 2017 the church decided that, while the issues addressed in this document are serious, the document itself does not rise to the level of a confession.

Two considerations might push one to consider whether an issue should be raised to the level of a confessional teaching. First, one might ask whether the teaching in question violates a clear teaching of Scripture. Second, one could consider whether the issue involves the heart of the message of the gospel. For example, in the case of the Belhar Confession, the church's rejection of institutionalized racism in South Africa could be understood to have confessional status because it involves the heart of the message of the gospel of reconciliation. Alan Boesak suggested as much in 1982 when he asserted at the synod of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church of South Africa that

apartheid was “anti-evangelical” because it takes “as its point of departure the irreconcilability of people of different race groups.”²⁴³

The CRC in the 1970s articulated several levels of authority of doctrinal and moral teaching:

- Scripture
- creed
- confession
- Church Order
- synodical decision

Other levels might include testimonies, decisions of a classis, and decisions of local congregations.

Scripture is the first and final authority to which all other levels of authority are subservient. The ecumenical creeds are broad statements of faith that are adopted or affirmed by a large portion of the universal church. They address the basics of the Christian faith and identify the essential teachings of a Christian church. They succinctly articulate to the world what we as Christians believe to be true and indispensable to our faith.

Confessions are statements that identify who we are within the larger body of the universal church. Thus, the Reformed confessions (in the case of the CRCNA, the Three Forms of Unity) identify this particular body of the church as Reformed and not, for example, Lutheran or Baptist, even though we share many things in common with these brothers and sisters.

Part of the work of synod is to decide on the proper interpretation of Scripture on any given topic (abortion was one such topic). Synod is also charged with deciding whether the confessions accurately represent the teaching of Scripture. For example, in 1958 synod replaced several paragraphs in Belgic Confession Article 36 on the relationship between the church and the state. Sometimes synod is asked to consider whether the confessions represent other traditions or teachings fairly. For example, Synod 2006 chose to bracket Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 80, which misrepresented the teaching and practice of the Roman Catholic Church about the mass.

Even if a teaching has confessional status, that does not mean there is no room for disagreement within the bounds of that teaching. In addition, the church sometimes allows for pastoral accommodations. For example, our confessions say that the children of believers should be baptized. Yet some congregations are willing to allow members not to baptize their children.

If a teaching is declared to have confessional status, questions arise about what that means for those who sign the Covenant for Officebearers (CFO) in the CRCNA. Will those who have already signed it need to accept this new item as having confessional status? What happens if they don't? Will those who subsequently sign the CFO need to accept this new item?

A. *The confessional status of church teaching on sexuality*

To repeat the issue at hand, we have been asked to consider “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 . . . declaring a *status*

²⁴³ See *The Acts and Proceedings of the 201st Regular Session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2007), p. 279; images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2007MGS-complete.pdf.

confessionis.” However, this raises the question, Does the church’s teaching that homosexual activity, as well as premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, pornography, and polyamory already have confessional status?

It is important to remember that the question is not whether a particular *action* violates the confession but whether a particular *teaching* violates the confession. To put it another way, is it a violation of any of our current confessions to teach that it is acceptable for Christians to use pornography? Is it a violation of our confessions to teach that it is acceptable for Christians to engage in homosexual activity, extramarital sex, or adultery?

Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 108, which explains the meaning of the seventh commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”), states that “God condemns all unchastity, and that therefore we should thoroughly detest it and live decent and chaste lives, within or outside of the holy state of marriage.” By the word “unchastity” the catechism intends to encompass all sexual immorality, including homosexual activity. The Reformed Church in America acknowledged this in 2017, affirming that in the catechism “God condemns ‘all unchastity,’ which includes same-sex sexual activity.”²⁴⁴

Ursinus, one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism, confirms this in his commentary on Q&A 108. He writes that the first class of lusts included in unchastity “are those which are contrary to nature and from the devil. . . . The lusts of which the apostle Paul speaks in the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans are of this class, as the confounding of sexes, [and] also abuses of the female sex.” He goes on to say that unchastity includes incest as well, even though this sin is not mentioned in the catechism by name.²⁴⁵ As a committee, we note that pornography, polyamory, and all forms of premarital and extramarital sex are also encompassed in the catechism’s condemnation of unchastity.

It is also worth noting that the Belgic Confession affirms that church discipline is one of the essential marks of a true church. Article 29 declares that the true church “practices church discipline for correcting faults.” Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81 declares that people “who are unrepentant” should not come to the Lord’s table lest they “eat and drink judgment on themselves.” For this reason, Q&A 82 adds, the church is required to “exclude such people, by the official use of the keys of the kingdom, until they reform their lives.”

We conclude, then, that the church’s teaching against sexual immorality, including homosexual sex, *already* has confessional status. According to our confessions, the church may never approve or even tolerate any form of sexual immorality, including pornography, polyamory, premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, or homosexual sex. On the contrary, the church must warn its members that those who refuse to repent of these sins—as well as of idolatry, greed, and other such sins—will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-11). It must discipline those who refuse to repent of such sins for the sake of their souls (1 Cor. 5-6).

As a committee, we also wrestled with the question of whether the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory,

²⁴⁴ *The Acts and Proceedings of the 211th Regular Session of the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America* (New York: Reformed Church Press, 2017), p. 161; images.rca.org/docs/mgs/2017MGS-Complete.pdf.

²⁴⁵ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, p. 1043; rcus.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/UrsinusZ_HC-Commentary-17-NEW-HC.pdf.

the use of pornography, or homosexual sex ought to have confessional status. We did so by asking two questions.

First, does teaching that affirms such behavior violate the clear teaching of Scripture? The biblical portion of our report is clear. Marriage between one man and one woman is the only appropriate place for sex. Anything that deviates from that teaching is contrary to Scripture. Thus premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, the use of pornography, and homosexual sex all fall under the heading of sexual immorality and are therefore morally impermissible. To teach that any of these behaviors is permissible undermines the teaching and authority of Scripture. Whenever the church teaches that a form of behavior forbidden in Scripture is morally permissible, it is guilty of false teaching.

Second, does teaching that affirms premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, the use of pornography, or homosexual sex involve the heart of the message of the gospel? At the heart of the gospel is the call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Through the power of Christ's death and resurrection we receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of righteousness. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to practice this righteousness, putting our old sinful nature to death and being conformed more and more into the image of Jesus. We are "washed . . . sanctified . . . [and] justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

This new life is characterized by ongoing repentance, a daily dying and rising with Christ. If the church chooses to call any form of immorality, including sexual immorality, permissible, it places a dangerous stumbling block in the path of our sanctification. Scripture repeatedly warns us against deceiving ourselves in this way, specifically naming the sins of homosexual sex, sexual immorality, and adultery. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God."

Likewise in Ephesians 5:5-7 he warns, "Of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them." In Galatians 5:19-21 he warns, "The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God."

In fact, the New Testament repeatedly warns us that in the latter days false teachers will come who will deceive the people by telling them that they are free to practice various forms of sin, including sexual immorality. Jude 4 warns against "ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality." In 2 Timothy 4:3 Paul also warns that "the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear."

The Old Testament similarly asserts that if a prophet does not warn the people of their sin, God will hold that prophet accountable for that sin. God declares to Ezekiel, “When I say to the wicked, ‘You wicked person, you will surely die,’ and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood” (Ezek. 33:8). As leaders of the church, we must take this warning seriously.

B. Conclusion

As a committee, we conclude, therefore, that *the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extramarital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status*. As such, there is no need for a new declaration. We also conclude that this status is warranted because these sins threaten a person’s salvation. The Scriptures call the church to warn people to flee sexual immorality for the sake of their souls and to encourage them with God’s presence and power to equip them for holy living. A church that fails to call people to repentance and offer them the hope of God’s loving deliverance is acting like a false church.

In coming to this conclusion, we observe that we stand with the majority church worldwide, including the Roman Catholic Church, all branches of Orthodoxy, the non-Western global church, and a majority of active Protestants in North America and Europe. Indeed, the global church finds the Western church’s challenges to biblical teaching on human sexuality incomprehensible and offensive.²⁴⁶ To refuse to uphold Christian teaching on sexual immorality would signal that the Christian Reformed Church in North America is deviating not only from Scripture but from the shared confession of the historic and worldwide church.

By the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, may the Great Shepherd of the sheep lead us together into the joyful freedom of obedience. “To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen” (Jude 24-25).

XVII. Recommendations

- A. That synod grant the privilege of the floor to the following members of the committee: Mary-Lee Bouma, Jim Vanderwoerd, and Jeff Weima.
- B. That synod recommend the foregoing report to the churches as providing a useful summary of biblical teaching regarding human sexuality, as well as offering sound pastoral advice concerning this area of our lives.
- C. That synod encourage the churches to make use of the curriculum prepared by Pastor Church Resources, in conjunction with members of the committee, to help small groups study and discuss aspects of the committee’s report which may be controversial.

²⁴⁶ See, for example, various statements by non-Western bishops in the United Methodist Church at their 2019 General Assembly.

D. That synod declare that the church’s teaching on premarital sex, extra-marital sex, adultery, polyamory, pornography, and homosexual sex already has confessional status.

E. That synod declare that Church Order Article 69-c is to be interpreted in the light of the biblical evidence laid out in this report.

Ground: A change in the main text of the Church Order is (1) not necessary and (2) would require an overture to synod.

F. That synod not appoint a team of individuals to draft a statement of faith on human embodiment and sexuality that reflects and secures the conclusion of the present report.

Grounds:

1. Such a team of individuals would in effect duplicate the work of the present committee.
2. It seems unwise to give the conclusions of the present report the quasi-confessional authority of a statement of faith.
3. There are existing contemporary statements on human sexuality, such as the RCA Great Lakes Catechism on Marriage and Sexuality, which are in broad agreement with the conclusions of the present report, and which could be adopted or adapted by a future synod.

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

Mary-Lee Bouma

Charles Kim

Jose Rayas

Paula Seales

Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (*promotor fidei*)

Mary Vanden Berg

Jim Vanderwoerd

Jeff Weima (cochair)

Al Wolters (cochair)

Appendix A

What Can Science Tell Us about the Biological Origins of Sexual Orientation?

I. Preamble: Reasons for the turn to biology

Biological theories about the origins of sexual orientation have a long history, but for much of the 20th century they were eclipsed, both academically and clinically, by *psychoanalytic* and *behavioral* explanations. While each of these theories is not without some supporting evidence, each also has significant weaknesses, and these helped to “spur the search for other *biological* explanations,” beginning around the final third of the 20th century.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁷ Simon LeVay, *Gay, Straight, and the Reason Why* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 27 (emphasis added).

Psychoanalytic, or depth-psychological, explanations focus on unconscious emotional conflicts that, according to the theory, need to be identified and addressed in order to relieve symptoms of anxiety, the cause of which, to the sufferer, is not clear. Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) theorized that such conflicts were rooted largely in early childhood family dynamics—of a sexual nature (for classical Freudians), or in more general failures of attachment between a child and its caretakers (for theorists and clinicians of a more neo-Freudian bent). Freud’s theory was not systematically tested beyond clinical cases from his middle-class, turn-of-the-20th-century, mostly German patients. And not a few critics have cast him as a “pseudo-scientist,” since he tended to explain away challenges to his theory by proposing (equally untested) auxiliary hypotheses to shore it up.²⁴⁸

The general problem with psychoanalytic theories about the genesis of sexual orientation is not so much “that they’ve been proven wrong; it’s just that there’s no good reason to think they’re right. In that situation, their implausibility and complexity count against them.”²⁴⁹ Thus alternative theories about the causal origins of homosexuality have arisen and generated their own bodies of research. Simon LeVay,²⁵⁰ as a neuroscientist, was among those who joined forces to look for possible biological causes. In the meantime, others explored environmental explanations, drawing on behaviorist principles such as those originally set forth by B.F. Skinner (1904-1990).

In stark contrast to psychoanalytic theorists, early behaviorists renounced the quest to understand what was happening in the mind, on the grounds that it was at best inaccessible and at worst constantly changing in response to any attempts to study it. It would be more scientific, they said, to study outwardly observable *behavior* and the ways in which it was influenced by observable (and more easily controllable) events in the *environment*. On this account, one’s eventual sexual orientation is the product of one’s reinforcement history – the result of positive and/or punitive feelings that have accompanied early sexual experiences. Undergirding Skinnerian behaviorism is a largely Lockean view of the child’s mind as a blank slate, whose future contents are almost entirely determined by subsequent environmental events.

The weaknesses of both psychoanalytic and behavioral explanations for sexual orientation have resulted, over the past several decades, in a turn toward biological explanations as a plausible alternative.

II. Biological research on sexual orientation

Given the variety of previously discussed definitions for homosexuality (desire, attraction, self-identity, behavior) and the different prevalence rates each measure yields, it might seem strange for biologists to make statements of any confidence about what causes it. Nevertheless, many adherents of brain organization theory (BOT) do this and more, claiming that sexual orientation *and* gender identity *and* gender role behavior in humans are a “package deal.” That is, they are *all* seen as minimally affected by cultural factors and largely determined by prenatal (and, to a lesser extent, later

²⁴⁸ Most famously, the philosopher of science Karl Popper in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).

²⁴⁹ LeVay, p. 33.

²⁵⁰ LeVay, chap. 2.

pubertal) hormonal processes. To complicate matters, there are many “quasi-BOT” sympathizers who strongly reject the BOT claim that gender-stereotypical *roles* in men and women are more biologically than culturally driven, but who are quite ready to believe (often in the interest of supporting the rights of sexual minorities) that gender *identity* and sexual *orientation* have been “proven” to be almost completely determined by biology.

The reverse is also the case. Some conservative (including Christian) groups are quite prepared to believe the part of brain organization theory that biologically essentializes stereotypical gender roles (and for some, the status differences between the sexes that have historically accompanied them), but not the part that does the same for homosexual identity formation (since one could hardly “blame” anyone for a condition if it was predetermined before birth). But in either case, this selective overconfidence in brain organization theory is based largely on animal research, the applicability of which to humans should not be overstated.

What arguments are advanced for thinking that sexual orientation in humans might be biologically driven to the same extent that it seems to be in animals? Here is a summary of the main arguments:

A. The timing of fetal reproductive development vs. brain development

In human fetuses, the development of reproductive structures is completed several months before the brain begins to differentiate. So it is conceivable that even after reproductive structures have developed in a standard way, something might disrupt standard sex-hormonal circulation in the brain or (alternately) to the brain’s sensitivity to normal hormone levels. This might explain why a physically and physiologically ordinary person could have a homosexual rather than a heterosexual orientation. Though the disrupting “something” (or things) in humans is not yet definitively known, animal—and some human clinical—research suggests testosterone as a prime candidate.

B. The sexually dimorphic brain nucleus and other brain structures

Since the early 1990s, studies of brain structure and sexual orientation have been done both by the examination of post-mortem human brains and, more recently, by the use of imaging techniques (such as PET and MRI scans) on the brains of live adults. Note again that, as in animal studies, more of this research has been done with males than with females. Note also that imaging studies (for all their technological impressiveness) are not much better than any other nonexperimental method for ascertaining causality. They can show structural and functional correlations, but as limited “snapshots” at only one point in time they cannot ascertain causal connections.

C. Other physical differences correlated with sexual orientation

Androgenic hormones are known to affect not just the development of reproductive structures *in utero*; they also prime male and female fetuses for average differences in bone development. One result is that adult males are on average taller than females (the long bones of their limbs have had more androgenic priming). Androgenic priming *in utero* may also account for the fact that, on average, males’ ring fingers are longer than their index fingers, whereas in females, the length of these two digits is more likely to be more equal. (This is sometimes called the D2:D4 ratio difference.) Several

studies assessing these digit ratios in both heterosexual and lesbian women have found that the latter have D2:D4 ratios closer to those of heterosexual men, which could (like their homosexual “brain sex”?) be the result of higher than usual testosterone circulating at some point *in utero* after their standard female reproductive structures have been laid down.

Another sex difference (in humans and other mammals) that may be the result of prenatal androgenic priming is a phenomenon called oto-acoustic emissions, or OAEs. These are minuscule clicks that are emitted by the inner ear, but on average less often at lower amplitude in males than females—unless those females happen to be lesbian, in which case their OAE pattern is much closer to that of heterosexual men. Again, the BOT “package deal” inference is that abnormal androgenic priming could be jointly responsible for the lesbian sexual orientation *and* their “more masculine” D2:D4 finger ratios *and* their “more masculine” OAE emissions pattern. However, neither D2:D4 ratios *nor* OAE emission patterns show any correlation with measures of *male* homosexuality. This is awkward for brain organization theory, which would presumably expect an obverse pattern—i.e., that male homosexual D2:D4 ratios and OAE patterns would more resemble those of heterosexual women. So far, no hypothesis has been advanced for this gender asymmetry of results.

D. “Unplanned” experiments such as Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH)

As noted in Appendix B: Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications, this intersex syndrome is caused by abnormally high amounts of adrenal androgen circulating during fetal development, resulting in partially to completely masculinized external genitals if the fetus is a girl. Whether wisely or not, plastic surgery is often used to “refeminize” the genitals shortly after birth—but of course that does not alter the fact that the girl had extra testosterone circulating not just during early genital development but also, presumably, at a later fetal stage when the brain was developing. This has been often been taken as a quasiexperimental test of the brain organization theorists’ “package deal” model. So BOT researchers ask this question: Compared to normal control girls (e.g., their own sisters), how likely is it that, despite being raised as girls, CAH females end up (a) acting more like boys in terms of gender roles in childhood, and (b) developing homosexual desires and/or identities and/or behaviors after puberty? According to BOT researchers’ reading of the relevant literature, all of these occur often enough to support the theory that higher fetal testosterone levels have “masculinized” not only CAH girls’ external genitals but probably also their brains. In sum, BOT adherents suggest that in the case of genitally normal lesbians, only prenatal *brain* masculinization has occurred—whereas in the case of CAH females, *both* genital sex *and* “brain sex” have been masculinized.

In the opinions of many other brain researchers, as well as of social psychologists, the evidence for such a conclusion is thin. For starters, the parents of girls with surgically “re-feminized” genitals obviously know about their child’s original anatomical ambiguity, and thus may or may not socialize their daughters in a standardly “feminine” way. Unlike a true clinical trial (for example, of an experimental drug), this quasiexperiment is not done “blind,” since those raising the child are not ignorant of her medical history. Hence nature and nurture are confounded: if the child is “tomboyish,” is this

due to her hormonal history, to expectations on the part of her parents, or both? We don't know.

Second, gender differences in behavior are historically and culturally a moving target, and they show more variation within than between the sexes. BOT researchers have underplayed such findings and, as it turns out, to their own detriment. For example, in normal populations of males and females, there is a modest but statistically significant difference in some spatial skills, in the direction of slightly higher average scores for males. (These are the sort of skills that help you figure out how to fit jigsaw puzzle pieces together, or to find your way through a maze.) BOT researchers attribute this to greater prenatal, testosterone-related brain organization in males, and the researchers hypothesize that it should therefore also occur in CAH females. But when assessing CAH females, most studies either show no advantage, or (more embarrassingly) *poorer* spatial skills in CAH females than in normal XX controls.²⁵¹ Nor are CAH girls reliably more aggressive, assertive, competitive, or socially dominant than their non-CAH peers. Nor are they more likely than girls in general to engage in rough-and-tumble play as children, or to prefer male playmates in childhood, or to seek out female sexual partners in adulthood. And all this is *despite* the fact that, having been born with masculinized genitals, there may be the expectation by parents and others who know of their condition that they *will* be stereotypically more like boys. Remember, you can't do a double blind experiment when you're raising children.²⁵²

One exception to these disconfirmations of brain organization theory is that CAH girls, compared to matched controls, are more likely to say they prefer stereotypical boys' toys, such as building blocks or vehicles, to toys like dolls or cooking sets. But here we run into two problems. The first is that what people say and what they do are often discrepant, and few studies

²⁵¹ This is also the case with CAH males, who, like CAH girls, have also had extra testosterone supposedly "organizing" their brains *in utero*, even though it has not affected their internal or external sexual anatomy. Some BOT theorists have tried to explain these counter-intuitive findings by suggesting that the "dose-response" relationship between testosterone and spatial skills is curvilinear (an inverted "U-shape") rather than linear. That is to say, the best spatial skills might be associated with *intermediate* rather than *very high* levels of testosterone, such as those associated with both boys and girls who have CAH. However, there is as yet no empirical study that has supported (or negated) this "auxiliary hypothesis." In the meantime, invoking it to "explain away" the unexpectedly low spatial abilities of CAH children suspiciously resembles the kind of refusal to accept falsifying results that BOT researchers originally leveled against Freudians.

²⁵² Because studies of girls with CAH are assumed to be the "ideal" quasiexperimental test of brain organization theory, hardly any developmental tracking has been done of the hormonally "opposite" syndrome—namely, XY children who have androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS) from the time of fetal development and throughout life, and thus have been born with partially or completely feminized external genitals. BOT adherents assume that (a) these XY infants' brains were already "demasculinized" *in utero* (due to their androgen insensitivity) and (b) they continue to have a "demasculinized" (i.e., feminine) upbringing as girls, and hence are not suitable test subjects for BOT theory. (See Jacques Balthazart, *The Biology of Homosexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chap. 6.) But as with the case of CAH girls, there may be expectancy effects in the parents. That is, if parents *know* that their child was born with an XY karyotype—and also with internal testicles (that may or may not have been removed postnatally), their "feminine" expectations of their (sex-reassigned) "daughter" may be muted. That XY females with complete AIS remain, on average, pretty strongly female-identified in spite of a possibly gender-ambiguous upbringing might arguably be even better evidence for brain organization theory than the convoluted case made on the basis of CAH girls.

have looked at what toys CAH girls actually *do* play with in comparison to normal controls. A 2003 study that did so (in an individualized playroom setting) found that CAH girls were indeed more likely than others to play with a toy garage, cars, and Lincoln logs than with baby dolls. This was taken as support for a version of BOT that sees people with testosterone-organized brains as more likely to be “systematizers” (interested in how things are put together, both concretely and abstractly) than “empathizers” (interested in understanding other people).²⁵³ However, a closer look at the data shows that even the normal control girls spent three times as much time playing with the garage and cars as with the baby doll, and six times as much with the Lincoln logs. And at the end of the play period, when offered the choice of a doll, a car, or a ball to take home, they chose the doll least often, by a wide margin.

If you’re wondering why, in 2003 (well after girls started playing soccer in droves) BOT researchers were coding “masculine” and “feminine” toys the same way they did in the 1950s, that’s another problem. It reflects the essentialist presumption that gendered behaviors, along with gendered genitals and brains, are parts of a fixed package, so their measures can remain as unchanging as measures of genital anatomy. It presumes that normal girls with low testosterone can be only minimally influenced by cultural shifts to start preferring Lincoln logs to baby dolls (once an empathizer, always an empathizer) even when data gathered by BOT researchers indicate otherwise.

In the face of such contradictions some BOT researchers have over the years quietly changed their definitions of what is “natural.” For example, the BOT view of “natural” female sexuality originally excluded things like masturbation, erotic dreams, and initiating sex, all of which were regarded as quintessentially masculine. These days BOT researchers treat all of these as “natural” for both sexes. But they did not make this shift because they suddenly admitted that cultural forces (for example, the second wave of feminism) might be stronger than they previously thought. Instead, they underplayed the changes they’d made to accommodate those very same cultural forces, and they continued to embrace a biologically essentialist paradigm. The result is that current definitions of female sexuality are treated as equivalent to past ones for purposes of supporting the theory, when in fact they are more like apples and oranges.²⁵⁴

E. Genetic studies

As early as the mid-19th century, even before Gregor Mendel’s pea plant experiments suggested the existence of what we now call genes, scientists were taking advantage of another “experiment” of nature—namely, the occasional occurrence of twins—in an attempt to assess the relative effects of nature and nurture on human traits. Identical twins share each other’s genes virtually completely (and are always of the same sex) whereas fraternal

²⁵³ A chief proponent of this theory is Cambridge researcher Simon Baron-Cohen. See his volume *The Essential Difference: Men, Women, and the Extreme Male Brain* (London: Penguin Science Press, 2004).

²⁵⁴ Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, *Brainstorm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), chap. 6. Jordan-Young’s critique of brain organization theory is based on an analysis of approximately 300 studies and detailed interviews with two dozen BOT researchers.

twins (whether of the same or opposite sex) are no more genetically similar than ordinary sibling pairs. So, for example, it has been shown that if one of a pair of identical twins is diagnosed as schizophrenic, the likelihood that the other twin will be is close to 50 percent (and this holds true even for identical twins who have been reared separately). By contrast, the schizophrenia “concordance rate” (as it is called) for same-sex fraternal twins is only around 15 percent. The fact that the concordance rate is so much higher for identical than for fraternal twins suggests that nature (in the form of genetic factors) contributes considerably to the risk for schizophrenia. But the fact that the concordance rate for identical twins is *not* 100 percent, in spite of their identical genes, suggests that nurture (in the form of prenatal and/or postnatal environments) also plays a part.

Twins of either kind are, of course, a rare enough occurrence—and twin pairs in which one or both are homosexual are even rarer. As a result, early studies using twins to ascertain the contribution of nature vs. nurture to homosexuality relied on opportunistic sampling (e.g., finding twin pairs by word-of-mouth contacts from people who frequented gay bars or read gay newspapers) instead of randomly sampling the wider population. This made any conclusions about homosexual prevalence rates suspect, due to possible sampling bias and often small sample sizes. In opportunistic studies of this sort, the lowest homosexuality concordance rate for identical male twins has been 47 percent, and for females, 48 percent, suggesting (as in the example of schizophrenia) a strong genetic influence on sexual orientation.

More recent studies have tried to better approximate random sampling by using data banks called twin registries, of which there are several in modern Western countries, including the government-funded Australian Twin Registry. Since the early 1980s both identical and fraternal twin pairs of all ages and classes have registered at this office, resulting in a data bank of over 25,000 twin pairs that is fairly representative of the wider Australian population. A study team in the late 1990s surveyed over 4,000 sets of twins from this registry, from whom they obtained measures of sexual orientation. It found homosexuality concordance rates substantially lower than those reported by earlier opportunistic studies. They were only around 25 percent for both male and female identical twins, and less than half that for fraternal twins, showing that sampling methods matter a great deal to the outcome of such concordance studies.²⁵⁵

Another way to assess a possible genetic contribution to homosexuality is to do genealogical studies to see if homosexual persons have other homosexual relatives, and, if so, where in the family. Most of these studies show that a gay male has a higher probability of having a gay ancestor on his mother’s side than on his father’s side, and this has led to the suggestion that something on the gay male’s X chromosome (which all males get from their mothers) might be responsible. Recent molecular genetic studies have

²⁵⁵ J. Michael Baily, Michael P. Dunne, and Nicholas P. Martin, “Genetic and Environmental Influences on Sexual Orientation and Its Correlates in an Australian Twin Sample,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (2000), pp. 524-36. The authors point out that even though their sample was larger and more random than that of previous studies, it still yielded only a modest percentage of twin pairs in which at least one member identified as homosexual, which lessens the power of their concordance measures. They indicated interest in doubling the sample size for a future replication study, possibly by using twin registries from other countries.

tried to narrow down the area of the X chromosome that might be involved in such “maternal transmission” cases, and several have found that about 50 percent of the gay males with gay maternal (but not paternal) relatives share a common set of markers on the end of one arm of the X chromosome (called region Xq28). If that gay relative is a brother, the likelihood that both brothers share this regional marker goes up to over 60 percent.

Molecular geneticists point out that the Xq28 region is quite broad and probably contains many genes, none of which have been individually identified. Thus popular claims about the discovery of a “gay gene” are unjustified exaggerations. For one thing, complex behavioral (and even physical) traits almost always involve multiple, not single, genes. For another, those genes might not all be on the X chromosome. Recently, regions of some nonsex (autosomal) chromosomes have also been correlated to male homosexual orientation, with maternal *and* paternal contributions being about equal. By contrast, genealogical studies with lesbians have shown that they are more likely (but not exclusively) to have lesbian relatives on their *father’s* side of the family. These results are harder to interpret, because women inherit two X chromosomes—one from each parent—either or both of which might be influential. But we don’t know, because molecular-level studies of XX (and other) chromosomes in lesbians have not yet been done.²⁵⁶

A 2019 study published in *Science* examined genetic markers in nearly half a million participants and concluded that the influence of a person’s genetic makeup on their sexual orientation was about 32 percent and, further, that this genetic influence was not from one gene but many.²⁵⁷ Although one of the largest studies of its kind, its sample was still not representative of the general population. Nevertheless, this study affirms findings of previous research that together raise questions about the genetic basis for claims that persons who experience same-sex attraction are “born that way.”²⁵⁸

F. Progressive maternal immunization (or “the older brother effect”)

Intriguingly, the factor that is the most consistently correlated with male homosexuality is one that is less often cited, and rather different from all the others that have been put forward. It is simply the number of older brothers that a man has. An analysis of fourteen birth-order studies involving a total of about 10,000 people has shown that for each older brother that a man has, the probability of his being gay (compared to the actual rate of gays in the population at large) increases by about 33 percent. The probability that the fourth boy in a family being gay becomes about twice as high as it would be if he were a firstborn son. The overall “older brother” effect on prevalence rates for homosexuality is actually fairly small, but still larger than other factors that have been studied. Moreover, it is not altered by the age spread of the boys in the family, or the number of sisters—older or younger—or the age of the parents when a boy is born, or the number of younger brothers any given man has. It is specifically and only correlated with the number of brothers previously born to the same mother. And it is specific to men: there is no increase

²⁵⁶ Balthazart, chap. 10.

²⁵⁷ Andrea Ganna et al., “Large-Scale GWAS Reveals Insights into the Genetic Architecture of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior”, *Science* (Aug. 30, 2019).

²⁵⁸ Paul Sullins, “‘Born That Way’ No More: The New Science of Sexual Orientation, *Public Discourse* (Sept. 30, 2019); thepublicdiscourse.com/2019/09/57342.

in the likelihood of homosexuality in women that correlates with the number of brothers or sisters she has, whether born before or after her.²⁵⁹

An explanation advanced by those studying this phenomenon is that with each successive fetal son a woman carries, she builds up some kind of as-yet-unidentified immune response (hence the term “maternal immunization effect”) that does not occur when she carries a daughter. This may seem intuitively implausible, but there is a well-attested clinical phenomenon that provides an analogy—namely, the accumulation of antibodies an Rh-negative woman builds up if she carries successive fetuses (of either sex) that have an Rh-positive blood type. The first child is hardly affected by this blood-type discrepancy, but later ones may be so severely affected by the accumulation of maternal antibodies from previous pregnancies that they need an entire postnatal transfusion of new blood to avoid life-threatening damage.

Just *why* a cumulative immunization effect might occur due to discrepant blood types in a mother and her successive children—or the sex discrepancy between a mother and her male children—remains a mystery. But the maternal immunization hypothesis in the case of “the older brother effect” suggests the possibility that some mothers who have successive sons accumulate antibodies against as-yet-unidentified male fetal proteins, and that these antibodies affect later sons’ fetal brain development in ways that might contribute to development of a postnatal homosexual orientation.²⁶⁰ But for now, this remains an intriguing hypothesis without systematic empirical support. Moreover, when we turn to the research literature on *bisexuals*, the debate about the origins of sexual orientation becomes even more complex.

III. Bisexuality and sexual fluidity

Bisexuality is formally defined as having romantic and/or sexual attraction to, and/or having sexual experiences with, both men and women, and/or self-identifying as bisexual. The definition is complicated, as is the definition of homosexuality—and for some of the same historical reasons. In the first half of the 20th century it was generally assumed that people were either completely heterosexual (the majority) or completely homosexual (a small minority). Scholars often referred to homosexuals as “inverts”—a term that reflects this essentialist, either/or way of thinking. Alfred Kinsey departed from this assumption with his development in 1948 of a seven-point sexual orientation scale, aimed at measuring self-reported sexual behavior, from “completely heterosexual” (0) to “completely homosexual” (6). Kinsey’s work confirmed that there were indeed degrees of orientation between these extremes, with point 3 (for example) indicating more or less equal sexual experience with both men and women. As with the study of homosexuality, the use of Kinsey’s scale (and others like it) was later expanded beyond measuring only bisexual *behavior* to measuring bisexual *romantic attraction* and *sexual desire*. Each of these may or may not coincide with others, just as they may or may not do so for self-identified homosexuals or heterosexuals.

²⁵⁹ Raymond Blanchard, “Quantitative and Theoretical Analyses of the Relation between Older Brothers and Homosexuality in Men,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, Vol. 230 (2004), pp. 173-87.

²⁶⁰ Anthony F. Bogaert and Malvina N. Skorska, “Sexual Orientation, Fraternal Birth Order, and the Maternal Immune Hypothesis: A Review of the Evidence,” *Front Neuroendocrinol*, Vol. 32 (2011), pp. 247-54.

However, bisexuality is still a comparatively under researched topic, for reasons both methodological and political. In both arenas, it is far from settled as to who should “count” as a “true” bisexual. Should we only count those who rate themselves a “3” (right in the middle of the Kinsey scale)? What about people who rate themselves as 1 or 2 (closer to, but not completely heterosexual)? Or those who rate themselves as a 5 or 6 (closer to, but not completely homosexual)? Are any or all of the former just trying to get the best of both worlds, keeping one foot in the safe, socially normative heterosexual camp, while dabbling—perhaps just out of curiosity—in the other (i.e., homosexual activity)? Are some or all of the latter complete but timid homosexuals, unwilling to embrace their true orientation because of the social and political burdens it may entail? On the research level, debates like these have resulted in inconsistent use of the Kinsey scale’s intermediate categories, and consequent difficulties in comparing results across studies. As a result, many sexual orientation researchers have simply avoided including bisexuals in their studies, either because of definitional problems or because they suspect bisexuality is too fluid a state to qualify as a “real” phenomenon.²⁶¹

Moreover, activist groups for sexual minorities are often hostile to self-identified bisexuals, suspecting them of false consciousness about their “true” orientation or of being political opportunists trying to get the best of both worlds. Nevertheless, the continued sidelining of bisexuality as a research topic is puzzling, particularly since the 1994 *Sex in America* study found that in its large, population-based sample—and especially among women—significantly more people reported bisexual attractions than reported exclusive attraction toward their same sex.²⁶²

The challenge of recognizing and measuring bisexuality may also help to explain the underrepresentation of women in sexual orientation research. Neither the old, dichotomous categorization of sexual orientation nor Kinsey’s seven-point scale allows for the possibility that one’s self-categorization might change over time. The implicit assumption has been that adults will be stably homosexual, heterosexual, or (more vaguely) bisexual. Indeed, this is seen as one of the strongest reasons for expanding civil and ecclesiastical privileges to sexual minorities. (How can you penalize people for a condition that is innate and unchangeable?) It is also, as we have seen, a key assumption of brain organization theory. However, as documented by University of Utah psychologist Lisa Diamond, evidence of change over time, especially among women, “has circulated in the scientific literature for decades, though it has tended to be submerged in data rather than explicitly theorized.”²⁶³ One set of post-Kinsey researchers, headed by American psychiatrist Fritz

²⁶¹ Earlier exceptions to this neglect of bisexuality include John Money, *Gay, Straight, and In-Between: The Sexology of Erotic Orientation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Douglas W. Pryor, *Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁶² Edward O. Laumann, John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels, *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). This finding has since been replicated in other national-sample surveys in other nations.

²⁶³ Lisa M. Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 3. This book received the 2009 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues Distinguished Book Award by Division 44 of the American Psychological Association, which represents scholars and clinicians who work on these topics.

Klein, did develop a complex measure of sexual orientation in the early 1980s that included changes over time—but it never really caught on among researchers.²⁶⁴ Most have continued to measure only current sexual behaviors, attractions, and/or identities on the assumption that the direction of one's sexual attraction is an early-developing and stable trait—due to nature, nurture, or the interaction of both. But, observes Diamond,

What few people realize is that these assumptions are based on men's experience, because most research on sexual orientation has been conducted on men. Although this model of [early developing, fixed adult] sexual orientation describes men fairly accurately, it does not always apply so well to women.²⁶⁵

Sexual fluidity: Diamond uses this term to refer specifically to women's somewhat greater flexibility regarding the targets of their romantic and sexual attraction. It refers to the finding that a significant percentage of women can, under certain circumstances, find themselves experiencing desire for a person not of the sex that they are usually attracted to—for example, a longtime lesbian may find herself unexpectedly attracted to a particular man, or a longtime heterosexual woman to a particular woman.²⁶⁶ By contrast, the proportion of men showing such sexual-attraction fluidity is much smaller. Both gay and straight men are more likely to say they experience their sexual orientation as innate and fixed, while women—regardless of stated or felt orientation—are more apt to say that changed circumstances have led (or might lead) them on occasion to be strongly attracted to a person not of the sex they are usually drawn to.²⁶⁷ Diamond notes that this known but rarely publicized gender asymmetry may be one reason for the dearth of research on women's sexual orientation:

It is interesting to note that early studies investigating biological causes of sexual orientation included both men and women. Over time, it appears, researchers shifted their emphasis to men because the findings for men were so much more consistent and promising than the findings for both sexes considered together.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁴ Klein used a spreadsheet-like grid and had respondents rate themselves simultaneously on degrees of attraction, desire, and behavior—and how each of these had changed (if at all) over time. See Fritz Klein, Barry Sepekoff, and Timothy J. Wolf, "Sexual Orientation," *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 14 (1-2), 1985, pp. 35-49.

²⁶⁵ Diamond, p. 2. Chapter 1 of this book summarizes the previous social science research literature on this topic.

²⁶⁶ See, for example, Martin S. Weinberg, Colin J. Williams, and Douglas W. Pryor, *Dual Attraction: Understanding Bisexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Roy F. Baumeister, "Gender Differences in Erotic Plasticity: The Female Sex Drive as Socially Flexible and Responsive," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 126 (2000), pp. 247-74.

²⁶⁷ Diamond, chap. 2. See also Richard Lippa, "Sex Drives, Sociosexuality, and Height across 53 Nations: Testing Evolutionary and Social Structural Theories," *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2009), pp. 631-51; and Roy F. Baumeister, "Gender and Erotic Plasticity: Sociocultural Influences on the Sex Drive," *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2004), pp. 1468-79.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18. The tendency to confine natural and social science research studies to male subjects extends well beyond the study of sexual orientation. The American National Institutes for Health finally set up a corrective to this skewed practice (in the form of its Office of Research on Women's Health) only in 1990. In spite of such efforts, it is still very common to do male-only research (whether with humans or animals) on the assumption that the results will be equally applicable to both sexes—thought few seem to think (if that is the theoretical assumption) that studies could equally well be done drawing on female-only populations. The same point applies to the underrepresentation of non-Caucasian ethnic groups in health (and other) research. See for example the four editorials under the heading "Putting Gender on the Agenda," *Nature*, Vol. 465, No. 7299 (June 10, 2010), pp. 665, 668-90.

Diamond (who is a self-identified lesbian) examined the assumption that one's direction of sexual attraction is both rigidly fixed and gender-symmetrical, by conducting a ten-year longitudinal study on almost a hundred same-sex attracted women—aged 16 to 23 at the outset, and self-identified as lesbian, bisexual, or simply “unlabeled”—and a comparison group of self-identified heterosexual women.²⁶⁹ All were interviewed in depth about their sexual attractions, desires, and behavior five times over the ten-year period of the study, including assessment of these three indicators using a scale similar to Kinsey's. One of her main findings was that fully two-thirds of the women who initially identified as other than heterosexual changed their identity label at least once over the 10-year study period—usually as the result of a relationship they had entered between interviews. So, for example, some of the initially self-identified lesbians later reidentified as bisexual, unlabeled, or heterosexual, and some of the initially self-identified bisexuals or unlabeled later reidentified as lesbian or heterosexual.²⁷⁰

Diamond concluded that this was probably not evidence of an orientation change *per se*, since her respondents' attraction and desire measures tended to stay within a consistent and fairly narrow range throughout the study. That is, most originally self-defined lesbians continued to score in much the same range for same-sex attraction over the ten-year study, despite sometimes changing both their behavior and self-identity in a heterosexual direction. The same was true for those originally self-identified as bisexual or “unlabeled.”²⁷¹ While cautious about taking sides in the nature / nurture controversy concerning the origins and stability of sexual orientation (her own study was mainly an investigation over time of a large group of women's lived experiences), Diamond suggests that sexual orientation is not a single, unvarying point on a feeling scale that unvaryingly predicts which sex(es) a person will be attracted to. It is rather a generally stable range of feeling—hetero-, homo-, or bisexual—from which departures can occur. And when they do occur, they are likely to come as a surprise and not be seen as any more willful than one's normally experienced sexual orientation.

²⁶⁹ Those of her respondents who preferred to be “unlabeled” might, in other circumstances, have identified themselves as “queer”—that is, rejecting not just dichotomies such as gay / straight but even the trichotomy of gay / straight / bisexual, and asserting instead complete randomness and / or arbitrary choice in human sexual attraction. Diamond is careful to point out that her overall study sample is not a random one, since recruiting (and funding for a 10-year study) a random sample of bisexuals would be prohibitively expensive. Her respondents were recruited mainly from northeast U.S. university classes and from ongoing LGBT events, so they are disproportionately middle class, educated, and Caucasian. Consequently, she regards this as a preliminary and exploratory study, though a needed one in light of the paucity of research on sexual orientation shifts across time.

²⁷⁰ The capacity for sexual fluidity was also evident in Diamond's heterosexual controls, but the sample size was small (10 women) and revealed no instances of actual change in self-labeling during the ten-year study period.

²⁷¹ By the end of the ten-year study, Diamonds says, “It became quite clear that the [main, nonhetero- sexual] sample could be divided into two groups: 1) lesbians who had been exclusively attracted to and involved with women throughout the study, and who were least likely to change their identities; and 2) everyone else. [Regardless of initial self-labeling] these other participants consistently reported non-exclusive attractions, increasing other-sex behavior [i.e., emotional and / or sexual involvement with men], and were the ones most likely to change their identities. Clearly, the women who were changing their identities were not undergoing change in their orientations. They had been attracted to both women and men all along” (*Sexual Fluidity*, pp. 67-68).

What accounts for the possibility of such sexual fluidity and the fact that it is more common in women than in men, regardless of their dominant sexual orientation? Biology has a role, Diamond theorizes, but not in the testosterone-explains-everything fashion that is assumed by brain organization theory. Even if one accepts the BOT hypothesis that sexual orientation is caused by prenatal disruption in the circulation (or alternately the uptake) of testosterone in the developing brain, there are two other biological processes that may account for observed fluidity differences in men's and women's sexual expression, regardless of sexual orientation. The first has to do with the distinction between two types of sexual arousal—namely, *proceptivity* and *receptivity*. The second has to do with the distinction between *romantic love* and *sexual desire*—and the biological contributors to each. Again, these processes have been explored more extensively in animals than in people, though the animal models suggest human parallels. And in contrast to most sexual orientation research, females are given much more sustained attention.

IV. Proceptivity vs. receptivity

Mammalian researchers coined the terms *proceptivity* and *receptivity* to distinguish between two different modes of female sexual behavior. Some mammalian species engage in sexual behavior only when the female is “in heat.” While the males’ relatively steady levels of androgens keep them ready for sex just about any time, the females only go into estrus, or “heat,” around the time they are ovulating. Motivated by rising levels of estrogen (and smaller rises of androgens), females in the ovulatory period will actively seek out sexual contact with males, and then cease being sexually proactive as their estrogen levels decrease after ovulation. Thus in many mammalian species there is a gender-asymmetry in the process of “feeling horny”: more constant in males, but clearly cyclic in females. In either case, this hormonally driven, proactive sexual urge is what animal researchers have labeled *proceptivity*.

Receptivity is a term coined to describe another, specifically female, sexual behavior observed in many other mammals, including primates. In these species, a “receptive” female may respond to sexual overtures even if she is not in estrus. In other words, even if she is hormonally less motivated to initiate sexual contact, she may be induced by certain environmental cues to accept it. These nonovulating females are more choosy about potential mates than when they are in estrus, and the external cues inducing them to respond may be any or all of visual, vocal, smell, or tactile stimuli associated with a preferred male.²⁷² And in humans, social and cultural factors interact with biology to facilitate even more variation in sexual behavior so that the processes of proceptivity and receptivity operate in both sexes. “In fact,” Diamond observes, “any particular instance of sexual desire probably involves some degree of each. A sudden, automatic feeling of lust might be primarily driven by proceptivity, whereas a gradual increase in sexual arousal while

²⁷² Frank A. Beach, “Sexual Attractivity, Proceptivity, and Receptivity in Female Mammals,” *Hormones and Behavior*, Vol. 7 (1976), pp. 105-38; Kim Wallen, “Desire and Ability: Hormones and the Regulation of Female Sexual Behavior,” *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Review*, Vol. 14 (1990), pp. 233-41.

watching a romantic movie might be primarily driven by [receptivity]. Most experiences fall somewhere between these two extremes.²⁷³

As in other mammals, normal-range levels of testosterone in men correlate with non-cyclic [read: fairly steady] proceptive sexual feelings, while cyclic, ovulatory rises in estrogen are correlated with the same urges in women.²⁷⁴ Interestingly, men who have lost testicular function (due to chemical castration, disease, or other damage) and who thus have the lowest possible levels of testosterone, also lose their proceptive desire: they cease to have spontaneous sexual urges, and they no longer seek out sexual stimuli or activities. But they are still capable of receptivity—that is, they can be aroused when presented with familiar sexual stimuli. This is further evidence of the role learning plays in human sexual arousal.²⁷⁵ In addition, the balance of proceptive and receptive influences may be different for most women and men, Diamond suggests:

If female proceptivity peaks for only a few days per month, then during the rest of the time a woman's sexual desire will be primarily driven by [receptivity] and therefore will be dependent on her exposure to various situational cues. These cues should have comparatively less influence on men's day-to-day sexual desires because men have such consistent levels of hormonally driven proceptivity. This is not to say that men's sexuality is not influenced by situational factors and cues—it most certainly is! Yet the balance of influences is different for men versus women, in that situational factors play a bigger role for women.²⁷⁶

Diamond seems to concur with brain organization theorists that sexual orientation results from standard or nonstandard hormonal circulation in the prenatal brain. But she theorizes that it affects only the proceptive—not the receptive—aspects of sexual attraction.²⁷⁷ From a purely reproductive

²⁷³ Diamond, p. 206. Note that she uses repeated qualifiers (“might,” “probably”), which she continues to do throughout her report. This is to remind readers that even though her theory of sexual fluidity is more nuanced than brain organization theory, it is likewise based largely on animal models, the application of which to humans is still underresearched. Likewise, her theory must rely on less-intrusive research techniques than those that can be used with animals, thus yielding more correlational than causal findings.

²⁷⁴ D.B. Adams, A.R. Gold, and A.D. Burt, “Rise in Female Sexual Activity at Ovulation and Its Suppression by Oral Contraceptives,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 299 (1978), pp. 1145-50. However, increased testosterone levels are less reliable predictors of proprioceptive arousal in women: clinically, they work for some women who are experiencing low levels of libido, and not for others. Moreover, oral contraceptives change the nature of the menstrual cycle, such that ovulation—and hence the increase in proprioceptive arousal that would commonly accompany it—do not occur.

²⁷⁵ Marie Kwan, Walter J. Greenleaf, Jay Mann, Lawrence Crapo, and Julian M. Davidson, “The Nature of Androgen Action on Male Sexuality: A Combined Laboratory-Self Report Study on Hypogonadal Men,” *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, Vol. 57 (1983), pp. 557-62. The receptivity-inducing stimuli “could be almost anything—different images, environments, smells, or ideas—and they will vary not only from culture to culture but from individual to individual, as a function of someone's particular pattern of sexual experiences, expectations, memories, and attitudes” (Diamond, *Sexual Fluidity*, p. 207).

²⁷⁶ Diamond, p. 209. For a review of studies examining these differing (average) differences in men's and women's arousal patterns, see Baumeister, “Gender Differences in Erotic Plasticity.”

²⁷⁷ From an evolutionary perspective, Diamond writes, “It makes sense for proceptivity [in both men and women] to be intrinsically targeted to other-sex partners, to ensure that these desires result not only in sexual activity, but *reproductive* sexual activity. In this model, homosexual and bisexual orientations represent (at least in some cases) intrinsic deviations from this program” (*Sexual Fluidity*, p. 210).

point of view, if enough males and females have “proceptive sex” when both members of the pair are optimally aroused (on average, more cyclically for females, more steadily for males) that would suffice to keep the human race going. Receptivity, by contrast, is “gender-neutral,” in the sense that it works alongside (but largely independent of) the strong proceptive urges that ensure sexual reproduction. It is far less dependent on hormones like estrogen and testosterone than on conditioning to a wide range of cultural, situational, and interpersonal cues—music, clothing, interpersonal compatibility, frequency of contact, etc. And since women—whatever their dominant sexual orientation—usually spend less time than men in a state of urgent proceptive arousal, they will likely develop a wider range of conditioned receptive responses to such cues. As a result, Diamond suggests, regardless of their dominant sexual orientation, we should expect “more women than men to report more abrupt disjunctures in their desires and behaviors as a result of changes in their environments and relationships; and more women than men to report that their same-sex desires are linked to a specific individual—one of the most potent and common cues for same-sex receptivity. [And] this is exactly what has been found in extensive research on female sexuality.”²⁷⁸

V. Romantic love vs. sexual desire

A second factor relevant to sexual attraction fluidity in women is the distinction between romantic love and sexual desire. Here again, biological research with animals dominates, so generalizations to humans should be taken as tentative. That said, there is a recent and substantial body of research on two neuropeptide hormones—*oxytocin* and *vasopressin*—that originate separately from sex hormones and that appear to be implicated in long-term “pair bonding” in mammals, including humans. Variations on these two hormones appear in all vertebrates, and they are related to each other both in location (the genes responsible for them are in the same chromosomal region) and in biochemical structure (suggesting a common ancestor gene). In the first half of the 20th century, two of oxytocin’s important functions in female mammals—including humans—were identified. Specifically, oxytocin is released during labor to aid birth contractions, and later during breastfeeding to promote the milk “let down” reflex. Later studies showed that oxytocin, while not implicated in sexual arousal *per se*, is released during orgasm in both men and women, and contributes to the sense of well-being and connection that follows.²⁷⁹ A vital function of vasopressin, also identified around the mid-20th century, is to regulate water retention in bodily tissues—so it is often referred to as the “antidiuretic hormone.” But recent mammalian research suggests that it also plays a role in facilitating pair bonding.

Much of the work on these hormones’ relationship to pair bonding originated in the field observation of two intriguing species of small rodents known as mountain voles and prairie voles. The first of these, as is the case in many rodent species, mates promiscuously; but its cousins—the prairie voles—form permanent monogamous bonds. Further examination

²⁷⁸ Diamond, p. 212.

²⁷⁹ See, for example, Marie S. Carmichael, Valerie L. Warburton, Jean Dixon, and Julian M. Davidson, “Cardiovascular, Muscular, and Oxytocin Responses during Human Sexual Activity,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1994), pp. 54-79.

showed that these behavioral differences are correlated with differences in the amounts of oxytocin and vasopressin available to each of the types of voles, as well as differences in the concentration of brain receptors for these two hormones.²⁸⁰ Later experimental work showed that chemical tinkering with these hormones could reverse the mating patterns of the two species: experimentally reduce them in the prairie voles, and they will start mating promiscuously like their mountain cousins. Experimentally inflate them in the mountain voles, and they will abandon their promiscuous ways and settle down in monogamous pairs.²⁸¹

In both humans and other mammals, oxytocin is implicated in the formation of other social bonds too, particularly those associated with caregiving. Analogous to the experiments with reproductive pairs of voles, administering oxytocin enhances infant-parent attachment, whereas chemical interference with its natural levels disrupts the formation of such bonds. And the causal pathways run both ways: oxytocin leads to caregiving behavior, and caregiving behavior (e.g., physical closeness and tactile activities such as licking) leads to an increase in circulating levels of oxytocin, both in the caregiving animal and the one cared for.²⁸² In fact, oxytocin levels are associated with more general social affiliation in both adult humans and other mammals, and even in cross-species relationships, such as those between humans and pets.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ While both oxytocin and vasopressin influence pair bonding—or its absence—in both male and female voles, oxytocin has a greater effect on females while vasopressin appears to be more influential in males.

²⁸¹ Thomas R. Insel, James T. Winslow, Zuoxin Chan, and Larry J. Young, "Oxytocin, Vasopressin, and the Neuroendocrine Basis of Pair Bond Formation," *Advances in Experimental Medicine and Biology*, Vol. 449 (1998), pp. 215-24.

²⁸² In humans, hormonally mediated attachment processes characterize both maternal and paternal parents to a greater degree than in other mammals. See for example Sandra J. Berg and Katherine E. Wynne-Edwards, "Changes in Testosterone, Cortisol, and Estradiol Levels in Men Becoming Fathers," *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, Vol. 76, No. 6 (2001), pp. 582-92; Johanna H. Hume and Katherine E. Wynne-Edwards, "Parental Responsiveness in Bipotential Dwarf Hamsters Does Not Require Estradiol," *Hormonal Behavior*, Vol. 49, No. 4 (2006), pp. 533-44; Ilana Gordon, Orana Zagoory-Sharon, James F. Lechman, and Ruth Feldman, "Oxytocin and the Development of Parenting in Humans," *Biological Psychiatry*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2010); and Adrian V. Jaeggi, Benjamin C. Trumble, Hillard S. Kaplan, and Michael Curven, "Salivary Oxytocin Increases Concurrently with Testosterone and Time Away from Home in Tsimane Hunters," *Biology Letters*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (2015).

²⁸³ For a review of the pertinent literature, see, for example, C. Sue Carter and E. Barry Keverne, "The Neurobiology of Social Affiliation and Pair Bonding," in J. Pfaff, A.P. Arnold, A.E. Etgen, and S.E. Farbach, eds., *Hormones, Brain and Behavior*, Vol. 1, pp. 299-377 (New York: Academic Press, 2002). As a cautionary note, it should be said that the clinical psychological use of oxytocin with humans may be proceeding at too fast a pace. In light of the genomic discovery that persons with autism or schizophrenia often have defects in genes responsible for oxytocin production and/or reception, it became something of a vogue to administer intranasal oxytocin in order to facilitate these persons' social skills, with varying levels of success. However, this practice has been tested only over short-term administration of the hormone, and recent animal research has shown that long-term administration of oxytocin in voles eventuates in the reverse effect: it impairs their adult social relationships, for reasons not yet completely understood. This suggests that enthusiasm for "the love hormone" (as oxytocin is popularity called) should be tempered pending further research into its long-term (as opposed to short-term) effects, also in humans. See Karen L. Bales, Allison M. Perkeybile, Olivia G. Conley, Meredith H. Lee, Caleigh D. Guoynes, Griffin M. Downing, Catherine R. Yun, Marjorie Solomon, Suma Jacob, and Sally P. Mendoza, "Chronic Intranasal Oxytocin Causes Long-Term Impairments in Partner Preference Formation in Male Prairie Voles," *Biological Psychiatry*, Vol. 74, Iss. 3 (Aug. 2013).

Although it makes intuitive sense that male-female pair bonding (mediated by hormones like oxytocin and vasopressin) would enhance sexual desire, and sexual desire (mediated by hormones like testosterone and estrogen) would enhance pair bonding, the two systems do not necessarily have a common biological origin. Many biologists and social scientists argue that the strong emotions associated with human pair bonding—what we call romantic love—originated “not in the context of mating, but in the context of infant-caregiver attachment, a biologically based bonding program that evolved to ensure that highly vulnerable mammalian infants stayed close to their caregivers to improve their odds of survival.”²⁸⁴ Attachment formation between primate (including human) infants and their caregivers is characterized by the infant’s increasingly selective preference for the primary caregiver, regular pursuit of physical contact with the caregiver, increasing distress when separated, and a gradual reduction of distress when contact is resumed.²⁸⁵ And in the best-case scenario, these emotions become reciprocal, which is why we often speak of parents “falling in love” with their infants.

What has this to do with sexual fluidity and its greater likelihood in women? Note that the above-mentioned emotions (intense fixation, frequent contact, distress over separation, and relief when reunited) also typify romantic attachments between adults. This is why, in the late 1980s, social psychologists Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver proposed that human romantic love—long assumed to be driven simply by the same hormonal processes as sexual desire—might instead be a later-life version of infant-caregiver attachment.²⁸⁶ Indeed, it can be observed in close, same-sex adolescent and adult friendships, and even in friendships between prepubescent children, even though they are still in a state of sex-hormonal latency. This widespread occurrence of “romantic” or “passionate” attachment beyond sexually involved adult pairs has led Lisa Diamond to describe it in terms of “the unorientation of love.”²⁸⁷

Going from attachment-based love to sexual desire seems to be a “biosocial-psychological” process in the case of sexually fluid women. For starters, cultures vary in the degree to which they encourage the expression of intimacy, and for the past century or more Western society has assigned women—much more than men—to be the interpersonal attachment specialists. If you combine this with the asymmetry of proceptive desire (more cyclic in women, more steady in men), then, Diamond suggests, women will often spend much of their receptive-stage time developing nonsexual attachment bonds, often with people of both sexes. “If so,” she writes, then

it makes sense that when individuals form unexpected attachments to people who are the wrong gender for their sexual orientation, they might also end up developing sexual desires for these individuals. Because these “cross-orientation” desires should be dependent on the emotional and biological

²⁸⁴ Diamond, p. 224 (emphases added).

²⁸⁵ John Bowlby, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (London: Tavistock, 1979).

²⁸⁶ Cindy Hazan and Philip R. Shaver, “Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 52 (1987), pp. 511-24.

²⁸⁷ Diamond, pp. 223-31. On the breadth of romantic (or passionate) love, also among prepubertal children, see Elaine Hatfield, “Passionate and Companionate Love,” in Robert J. Sternberg and Michael Barnes, *The Psychology of Love* (New Haven, Conn.; Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 191-217.

processes of attachment, they should be specific to the relationship in question. This . . . is exactly what so many women have described, in my own study as well as in many others. It certainly fits with [their reports] of being first attracted to the person, not the gender. . . . [This] may in fact be the psychological experience of attachment formation, with its associated experiences of preoccupation, fixation, separation distress, possessiveness, and so on.²⁸⁸

That this process can happen in men as well as in women is attested to by a substantial minority of same-sex attracted men married to heterosexual women who say that their wives were (and are) the only women for whom they had developed sexual attraction.²⁸⁹ But Diamond hypothesizes that women's greater sexual-attraction fluidity may be facilitated by their higher levels of estrogen, because estrogen stimulates the release of oxytocin from the hypothalamus and also increases uptake in its brain receptors.²⁹⁰

Given the ethical restrictions on doing intrusive experimental research on humans, doing a longitudinal study is regarded as at least a quasiexperimental way of getting at causal connections, in that there are "before" and "after" measures of the variables (e.g., relationship involvement and direction of sexual attraction) thought to be causally connected. However, unlike laboratory studies with animals, the human participants in a longitudinal study cannot be randomly assigned to treatment conditions (nor randomly drawn from a wide societal population), so such studies remain "quasi"—not true—experiments. Diamond is well aware of—and regularly affirms—these limitations to her research, seeing it as provisional and suggestive of further work to be done on sexual orientation with more representative groups of people. But in addition to its use of longitudinal methodology—gathering repeated measures across time to demonstrate the fluidity of sexual attraction—it helps to correct the skewed attention to males over females in sexuality research, and it helps to bring attention to other hormonal systems (those associated with attachment behavior and romantic love) that may interact in complex ways with both sex (male or female) and sexual orientation. In this way it challenges and complicates brain organization theory—with its singular focus on the supposed effects of testosterone—while also acknowledging the importance of cultural forces on the shaping and expression of sexuality.

Appendix B Disorders of Sexual Development and Their Implications

I. Introduction and background

"Standard" (or "normal") sex development in both females and males is usually taken to mean the alignment of certain biological elements in a developmental sequence, from conception to birth, through childhood,

²⁸⁸ Diamond, pp. 230-31.

²⁸⁹ See, for example, Joel Kort, "Straight Women and Their Gay Husbands," *Psychology Today* (Jan. 14, 2015); Warren Throckmorton and Mark A. Yarhouse, "Sexual Identity Therapy: A Framework for Addressing Sexual Identity Issues"; sitframework.com (accessed 9-12-2017).

²⁹⁰ Alexandra Acevedo-Rodriguez, Shalla K. Mani and Robert J. Handa, "Oxytocin and Estrogen Receptor *Beta* in the Brain: A Review," *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, Vol. 6 (2015), Art. 160.

adolescence, and then adulthood. A certain pattern of sex chromosomes (XX or XY) at conception leads to a differing balance of hormones (e.g., estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone), a differing pattern of internal sex organs (e.g., ovaries, uterus, and fallopian tubes in females; testicles, seminal vesicles, and prostate gland in males), and at birth a set of differing external genitals (e.g., clitoris, labia, and vagina in females; penis and scrotal sac in males). When childhood merges into puberty, a new surge of hormones—again in different ratios for girls and boys—leads to differing secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breasts in girls, beards in boys) and to the possibility of parenthood, as ova mature on a cyclic basis in girls, and boys begin to produce sperm.

Of course, this summary of sex development masks the sheer complexity of the pre- and postnatal processes that take place from conception to standard adult reproductive maturity. To understand various disorders of sex development and their medical, psychological, legal, and pastoral implications, it helps to know in more detail the process of standard reproductive development. It is when that course of development takes a different turn—for one reason or another, at one developmental stage or another—that a disorder of sex development results.

Both a mother's and father's gametes (ova and sperm) are needed to conceive a child. The mother's ovum—always formed from an X chromosome—combines with a sperm from the father that is formed from *either* an X or a Y chromosome. If two X-chromosome gametes (one from each parent) unite, the eventual child is usually an anatomically and physiologically normal girl. If an X and a Y combine (from mother and father respectively), the child is usually a normal boy. A father's gametes are thus responsible for the sex of the child: a father's X plus a mother's X results in a girl; a father's Y plus a mother's X results in a boy.

The developmental processes by which this happens are complex and not neatly separable along parallel "X-directed" or "Y-directed" paths *in utero*. Right from conception, normal male reproductive development requires something more than just a Y chromosome: it requires vital cooperation from a range of genes on the X chromosome. In addition, reproductive development in both sexes also needs the help of many genes not located on the sex chromosomes at all, but rather on various nonsex (or "autosomal") chromosomes.

However, none of this begins to happen until toward the second trimester of pregnancy because, for the first several weeks, male and female embryos share a single, undifferentiated developmental platform. Indeed, if we were to examine a tiny fetus that miscarried around the ninth week of pregnancy, we could not tell by examining either its external or internal structures whether it was female or male.

Externally, we would see only an undifferentiated "urethral groove" and a bump called the "genital tubercle" that is neither penis nor clitoris. Internally, we would find neither testes nor ovaries. Instead, attached to the indifferent gonads would be two sets of tubes—one looking like a tiny set of combs (the Wolffian ducts), the other like a pair of slender trumpets (the Mullerian ducts). Wolffian ducts are the precursors of male internal reproductive structures, such as the prostate gland and the seminal vesicles. Mullerian ducts are the precursors of female internal reproductive structures, such as

the uterus and fallopian tubes. But the normally developing fetus with XX or XY chromosomes comes preloaded, so to speak, with both. And that is why almost all of us have vestigial remnants of one or the other on our gonads even now.

It is at this point that standard male/female sexual differentiation begins to take place, continuing in a step-wise (or we could also say “domino”) fashion until birth. In other words, certain processes need to occur at the right time and in the right order for a standard newborn girl or boy to result. But these processes do not occur in a completely symmetrical fashion for boys and girls. Biological research seems to show that, for humans as well as other mammals, the fertilized zygote’s default setting is to produce a female. In other words, male development requires certain additions along the way if it is not to default toward the female direction.

The first of these asymmetries occurs in those early, bean-shaped “indifferent gonads.” If they are to become testes, an additional substance (known as H-Y antigen, which is controlled by genes on the Y chromosome) needs to kick in. In the rare instances where this does not occur, the indifferent gonads will become ovaries, regardless of the XY sex-chromosomal makeup of the fetus. Moreover, there does not seem to be an analogous antigen needed for the indifferent gonads in an XX fetus to begin developing as ovaries: around the eighth week, they just begin to do so without any (so far known) additional input.

Only about a week later, a second asymmetry occurs when the tiny Wolffian or Mullerian ducts are ready to start developing, respectively, as male or female internal sexual anatomy. With the help of another biochemical substance (called MIS, or Mullerian-Inhibiting Substance), the comb-like Wolffian ducts in the male fetus start differentiating into structures like the prostate gland and seminal vesicles, while the accompanying Mullerian ducts (the precursors of internal female development) regress until they become vestigial remnants on top of the now-developing testes. In female fetuses the male-leaning Wolffian ducts regress and become vestigial remnants on the now-developing ovaries, apparently without any added biochemical help, while the uterus and fallopian tubes also begin to form.

If these standard processes occur without interference, the now-differentiated ovaries and testes will begin to produce sex hormones, one of whose main jobs (from about the ninth week) is to turn the undifferentiated external genital area of the male fetus into a penis and scrotum. This too is a complex process. It is misleading to refer to these reproductive hormones (which include testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone) as “female” or “male,” since all of them are normally produced, though in different ratios, by both ovaries and testes—and in the case of testosterone, in smaller amounts by the adrenal glands. In optimal amounts, testosterone is crucial at this stage for the formation of the external genitals and the prostate gland in the male fetus—but also for egg development in the ovaries of the female, showing again how interwoven are the processes of girls’ and boys’ prenatal sex development.

At this stage, a third asymmetry between male and female development occurs. Testosterone—normally produced in greater quantities by a male than a female fetus—is needed to masculinize a boy’s originally undifferentiated external genitals. But to complete the process, a kind of “super

testosterone”—called DHT, or dihydrotestosterone—must also be added. DHT is formed when a certain enzyme acts on ordinary testosterone, and in very rare cases, when DHT is absent, the fetal male’s penis is apt to be small and also to lack the seam underneath it that normally encloses the earlier, open urethral groove into the scrotal sac.

If the above-described fetal developmental processes proceed in the usual male or female direction, they will result in standard male or female internal/external anatomy at birth, and in the physiological potential for fertility in adulthood. Knowing about these processes in somewhat more detail should now make it easier to understand how they may depart from the norm to become various disorders of sex development. It is customary to divide these conditions between those that result from ‘chromosomal anomalies,’ which occur before the zygote even becomes a developing embryo, and those that result from “hormonal anomalies,” which occur in the postconception stages of development.

More will be said below about the frequencies of various disorders of sex development, but overall, some estimates suggest that a disorder of sex development of some sort may be found in as many as one in a hundred people (see Table 1). Estimates vary, depending on the populations sampled and the sampling methods used. Either way, these conditions are frequent enough that it is likely almost all of us know someone who has one, even if we have not been told about it.

Table 1. Selected Chromosomal and Hormonal Disorders of Sexual Development and Estimated Incidence

Chromosomal DSDs		Hormonal DSDs	
Name	Estimated Incidence	Name	Estimated Incidence
De la Chapelle Syndrome	1 in 20,000	Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome	1 in 20,000
Jacob’s Syndrome	1 in 500	Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia	1 in 15,000
Klinefelter Syndrome	1 in 500	5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency	“very rare” ²⁹¹
Metafemale Syndrome	1 in 1,100		
Swyer Syndrome	1 in 80,000		
Turner Syndrome	1 in 2,000		

II. Sex chromosomal anomalies

A sex chromosomal anomaly is a condition in which the affected person is conceived with other than the standard number of sex chromosomes for a female (XX) or male (XY). This can also happen with nonsex chromosomes: most of us, for example, know about Down Syndrome, or Trisomy 21, where an individual has three instead of the standard two copies of chromosome 21.

A. Turner Syndrome (*Monosomy X, or X0*)

Earlier we mentioned that a zygote with a single Y (but no X) chromosome cannot survive in utero beyond that stage, but that the opposite case—persons who have only a single X (but no accompanying X or Y)

²⁹¹ G. Kumar and J.J. Barboza-Meca, “5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency,” *National Center for Biotechnology Information* (Mar. 24, 2019); ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK539904.

chromosomes are not uncommon. Known as Turner Syndrome, it is estimated to occur in 1:2,000 or 3,000 births. Its fetal developmental journey is largely that of a standard female in terms of both internal and external anatomy—except that the ovaries are underdeveloped, often to the point of being just streaks of undifferentiated tissue. Streak ovaries usually cannot produce sufficient amounts of hormones like estrogen and progesterone needed for later breast development, fertility, and menstrual cycle regulation. Children with Turner Syndrome tend to be short in stature and to have broader than average chests and a weblike neck, but are otherwise not noticeably different from their female peers. They are, however, at risk for heart defects, thyroid disease, diabetes, and/or other immune disorders, and a small percentage exhibit signs of mild cognitive retardation.

Until the advent of hormone replacement therapy, Turner syndrome children were unlikely to undergo puberty, and thus were not likely to menstruate or develop breasts. Estrogen replacement therapy has changed this, and it is even possible for some Turner persons to gestate a child via egg donation. The possibility of such interventions is usually welcomed, as most Turner persons have a quite stable female gender identity. Is a Turner person, with only single-X chromosomes, someone who *should* be routinely expected to undergo estrogen replacement therapy? After all, the original missing chromosome was just as likely to have been a Y as an X, so perhaps testosterone therapy beginning in adolescence should be a routine possibility for Turner persons who might prefer to look and function more like a male. Or what if no hormone intervention at all is preferred, no matter what the result might be for adult bodily appearance?

B. Metafemale Syndrome (Trisomy X, or XXX)

At the other extreme from X0 Turner persons are women who have an extra X chromosome—hence the designation XXX, or Trisomy X (analogous to Trisomy 19 for Down Syndrome persons). More rarely, this syndrome can appear as XXXX, or even XXXXX. Its frequency is estimated to be about 1:1,000 persons and (like Down Syndrome) is more likely to occur in the children of older mothers. Women with Trisomy X (or its variations) tend to have longer legs and more slender torsos, but otherwise present as standard females in terms of internal and external sexual anatomy, secondary sex characteristics, fertility, and childbearing potential. Historically, before the advent of microbiology, these women would not have been identified as out of the ordinary at any stage of their life, though they did (and do) have a greater than ordinary chance of premature ovarian failure.

C. Jacob's Syndrome (XYY or Metamales)

As females can be conceived with one or more extra X chromosomes, so can males be conceived with an extra Y chromosome (XYY) or, more rarely, two (XYYY). The frequency of XYY males is estimated at between 1:1,000 and 1:2,000, and, like females with extra X chromosomes, there is little to distinguish them from standard chromosomal males, other than the likelihood of being taller than average, and sometimes having mild cognitive developmental delays. The same is not true for (the very rare) XYYY males, who are more likely to have skeletal abnormalities, delayed bodily development, and much lower intelligence scores than either multi-X females or males who have only one or one extra Y chromosome.

Since mandated chromosome checks of newborns are usually just the ones needed to identify intersex syndromes with serious health implications (of which XYY is not one), a large percentage of XYY males live ordinary lives not even knowing about their extra Y.

D. *Klinefelter Syndrome (XXY males)*

Klinefelter Syndrome males have an extra X chromosome (or, much more rarely, an extra two or three). The classic XXY version is one of the more common sex chromosomal anomalies, with a frequency of about 1:500. Like XYY males, XXY males are not usually identified by a chromosomal check in the delivery room, and so may go through childhood or even beyond without being detected. Their external appearance at birth is standardly male, because although their extra X chromosome results in a lowered level of fetal testosterone, it is not usually low enough to visibly affect external genital appearance.

However, lower testosterone production also occurs prior to puberty, with the result that secondary sex characteristic development is slow or incomplete. Klinefelter adolescents may have less developed musculature, less facial and bodily hair, weaker bones and somewhat broader hips. They may also develop breast tissue (a condition known as gynecomastia). By adulthood their appearance is similar enough to fit within the standard male range, though they tend to be above average in height, and to have a lanky build and youthful facial appearance, or alternately, a rounded body with some continuing gynecomastia. They also have reduced (or sometimes no) sperm production, and it may only be if they are unsuccessful in fathering children that their XXY condition is detected.

Klinefelter syndrome is not life threatening, though it does increase the risk of health problems more typical of women, such as breast cancer, osteoporosis, and autoimmune disorders. In terms of gender identity, most people with Klinefelter syndrome identify as male and are less apt to be homosexual than somewhat asexual. Many of their physical challenges can be alleviated by testosterone replacement therapy. Their biggest challenge may be gaining acceptance by others despite having less than stereotypically masculine appearance and interests.

E. *XX Males (de la Chapelle Syndrome)*

Strictly speaking, the last two syndromes to be discussed are not sex chromosomal anomalies in the sense that they do not involve nonstandard numbers of sex chromosomes. But because they can be clinically mistaken for other sex chromosomal or hormonal anomalies, it seems appropriate to deal with them here.

From the earlier discussion about standard male development, you may recall that a gene on the Y chromosome, called the SRY (or sex-determining region of the Y) is a necessary—but not sufficient—condition to produce a standard male child at birth. But in rare instances (about 1:20,000), this area of the Y chromosome breaks off during meiosis (when XY cells divide to form the two types of sperm in the father's testes) and attaches to its neighboring X-chromosome instead. If the SRY-added X chromosome from the father fertilizes a standard X chromosomal egg from the mother, the result will be what is called an XX (or de la Chapelle syndrome) male.

De la Chapelle, or XX, males are born with a penis and testes but no internal female reproductive structures, such as ovaries and uterus. However, their testes are sterile and sometimes remain undescended after birth, and the urethra sometimes appears on the underside—rather than on the tip—of the penis (a condition known as hypospadias). Yet most de la Chapelle children have the external appearance of a standard male, and almost always grow up with a male gender identity. The condition is often not diagnosed until after puberty, when the smaller size of their testes, their failure to produce sperm, and the development of breast tissue become causes for concern. Sometimes, in the absence of further tests, they may be misdiagnosed as XXY (Klinefelter) males.

F. XY Females (Swyer Syndrome, or XY Gonadal Dysgenesis)

Swyer syndrome is more or less the opposite of de la Chapelle's syndrome, in that it also involves problems with the Y chromosome's SRY gene—not when that gene is transferred to the X chromosome, but rather when it fails to function on its own Y chromosome due to certain genetic mutations. It is rarer than de la Chapelle's syndrome, with a frequency of about 1:80,000. Swyer fetuses, despite their XY chromosomal makeup, illustrate the principle that, in the absence of a functional SRY gene, the embryo will travel along the female path, developing a uterus, fallopian tubes, cervix, vagina, and standard female external genitalia at birth. However, Swyer syndrome gonads are neither ovaries nor testes, but merely “streak gonads” which can produce neither gametes nor sex hormones of any kind.

Swyer newborns are rarely diagnosed as such at birth, and are raised as girls, typically with female gender identification. When menstruation and female secondary sex characteristics (other than pubic hair, thanks to the adrenal testosterone) fail to appear, an initial diagnosis of (X0) Turner syndrome, or AIS (androgen insensitivity syndrome, which is discussed below) may be considered. But when karyotyping reveals an XY chromosomal pattern, and internal body imaging tests confirm the presence of streak gonads, a diagnosis of Swyer syndrome may be made. As with most intersex conditions, this syndrome is not life threatening. But because the streak gonads are at some risk of becoming cancerous, they are often surgically removed.

As in Turner syndrome, both menstruation and breast development can be induced in these XY females with estrogen and progesterone replacement therapy, and some may become pregnant with a donor egg or embryo.

III. Sex hormonal anomalies

Sex hormonal anomalies do not involve nonstandard numbers of sex chromosomes but occur in persons conceived with the usual XY male or XX female sex chromosomal pattern. They begin instead when something hormonally unusual happens during postembryonic fetal development. In a sense, there are both fewer and more of them compared to sex chromosomal anomalies. In their classic forms, there are three syndromes—but all three come in various gradations, and thus are divided into what are called “partial” and “complete” types. Indeed, part of the problem of making accurate frequency estimates of these syndromes may stem from ongoing discussions about how (or if at all) to subdivide the “partial” types into more and less severe forms. Moreover, of all the disorders of sex development (both

chromosomal and hormonal), these three are probably the most heavily “politicized” in discussions of sex and gender.

A. *Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS) in XY fetuses*

Intersex persons with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome have an XY sex chromosomal pattern but (in its complete form) are born with standard female external genitals at birth. However, their internal reproductive anatomy, including gonads, is that of a standard male. They are almost always raised as female, have a strong female gender identity, and in adolescence undergo normal-range female breast development. Complete AIS (CAIS) persons, who identify as female (as almost all do) often marry and have “normal heterosexual” relations with their (standard XY) husbands. Because there are few health risks to this syndrome, sex chromosome karyotyping at birth is not always mandated, so CAIS infants may nonetheless leave the delivery room having been recorded as ordinary XY males. The combined frequency of CAIS and Partial AIS (PAIS) births is estimated at about 1 in 20,000.

How does AIS come about? Testosterone in optimal amounts is needed in an XY male fetus to complete the conversion of the early, undifferentiated genital area into a standard penis and scrotal sac after the testes, prostate, and other internal male structures have been laid down. But in a CAIS fetus, there is a mutation on the X chromosome that makes the fetal body unable to use any of the testosterone being produced by the testes or (in smaller amounts) by the adrenal glands. So normal-range testosterone is being produced, but it is functionally unusable. This means that the rest of the fetus’s reproductive development defaults to the female direction, and the penis and scrotal sac do not form.

We might well ask why AIS persons develop breasts at puberty, and this is where another complexity of hormonal ratios needs to be explained. We know that both ovaries and testes—though normally in differing ratios—produce the complete range of reproductive hormones, including testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone. This is the case both in fetal development, and later again at puberty. Because AIS is a lifelong condition, and not just limited to fetal development, the adolescent CAIS person is producing testosterone in the amounts needed to bring about male secondary sex characteristics—but again, the body cannot use any of it, so the voice does not deepen, nor does a beard grow or other bodily hair thicken. Instead, the smaller amounts of progesterone and estrogen (which are *not* affected by the original genetic mutation, and so can be taken up by the body’s cells) get to work and do what they do in standard XX adolescent females: they produce breast tissue.

What they do *not* do (as you may have already guessed) is produce a menstrual cycle, which cannot occur in the absence of a uterus. So it is in adolescence that CAIS may be identified, if a diagnosis has not been previously made. Medically speaking, the only thing to be concerned about are the still-undescended testes, which are at some risk for cancer, and thus are usually removed.

So far we have been discussing only Complete Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (CAIS). In its less common, “partial” form (PAIS), for reasons still largely unknown the original X-chromosome genetic mutation is only partially operative. This means that functional fetal testosterone levels are

reduced, but not to a zero level of effectiveness. The result at birth is a varying level of external genital ambiguity—from not quite standard male, to not quite standard female. This of course means that the requisite chromosomal and internal scanning tests for AIS will be done, and a diagnosis made shortly after birth. But that can also lead to difficult decisions.

In the centuries before cosmetic surgery became safer and more technically sophisticated, persons born with ambiguous external genitals simply grew up with them. Now it is possible to surgically “feminize” the ambiguous genitals of a PAIS infant to look like those of a more standard female. But should it be done if the parents request it? Should it wait until the child is old enough to state a preference? Moreover, such genital surgery in infancy is a delicate business, and can result in (often seriously) reduced sexual arousability in adulthood, if a penis-like clitoris has been surgically reduced for reasons of appearance. There are many adults who, having had such surgery when they were too young to consent to it, are vocally angry about the problems—not life threatening, but still serious—that have resulted, including not just reduced genital sensitivity, but also the development of painful scar tissue. It is becoming more common in medical circles to recommend delaying surgery (if any) to well beyond infancy, then raising a PAIS child to have a (provisional) gender identity as either male or female, and making a decision about surgery on a case-by-case basis, with various people—including parents, the child, medical, and often psychological personnel involved.

B. Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH) in XX fetuses

In a rough sense, this hormonal anomaly is the reverse of the one just discussed, in that in its extreme form (Complete CAH) a fetus with XX or standard female chromosomes is born with standard male external genitalia. In its less extreme form (Partial CAH), the external genitals may be ambiguous to varying degrees, just as they are in Partial AIS births—and this leads to the same challenging decisions regarding genital surgery in infancy and/or how to raise the child initially in terms of gender assignment.

The mechanism behind Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia, however, is quite different, though its awkward name summarizes what it is: *congenital* means that the syndrome occurs before birth and continues beyond; *adrenal* means that the adrenal glands are involved; and *hyperplasia* means that those adrenal glands are overproducing something. In this case it is testosterone, which is usually only produced in minute amounts in standard female and male adrenals. But in CAH, due to the mutation of a recessive gene on one of the nonsex (autosomal) chromosomes, the adrenal glands overproduce testosterone greatly. Because it is a recessive gene, both the child’s mother and father must have it in order for CAH to occur. When this happens in a XX fetus (whose gonads and internal reproductive structures have already differentiated as female), the remaining external genital development will be partially or completely male.

CAH can occur in either a female or a male fetus, and it occurs in about 1 in 15,000 births. It is also involves a serious health risk in that it is accompanied by salt imbalances that, without appropriate medical treatment, can cause bodily dehydration and death. For this reason, it is one of the conditions usually tested for among newborns in hospital delivery settings—although even today, about 25 percent of Complete CAH cases are not

diagnosed until later. In boys it has no effect on external genital appearance, but it can lead to premature puberty (with a growth spurt and secondary sex characteristics) as early as about age seven. And the same can happen in girls: pubertal development is too early and too typically male—all this in addition to the partial or complete masculinization of external genitals that is present at birth.

Medically, the solution for both the risky salt imbalances and the overproduction of adrenal testosterone is to prescribe various forms of cortisone (continuously) and other medications (temporarily) to slow down the premature pubertal growth spurt. Girls with CAH most often have a female gender identity and if successfully treated medically will be fertile and able to bear children.

C. 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency Syndrome (5-ARD) in XY fetuses

One of the hormones needed to complete external genital formation (i.e., the closing of the underseam of the penis and scrotal sac) is a kind of “super testosterone” known as dihydrotestosterone, or DHT. This hormone is formed when an enzyme known as 5-Alpha Reductase acts on ordinary testosterone. But in very rare instances this does not occur, due to a recessive gene mutation on a nonsex chromosome. As with CAH, the condition depends on inherited genetic factors, but the recessive gene must occur on both the father’s and the mother’s chromosome in order for 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency (5-ARD) Syndrome to occur—and when it does, it only affects male, not female, fetuses. As in two previously described syndromes, it results in partially to completely feminized external genitals in an XY male infant, even though the internal reproductive anatomy, including gonads, is that of a standard XY male. However, it is unique in one respect: when puberty arrives, the renewed surge of testosterone (for reasons that are still unclear) is enough to make the previously internalized testes descend, and the penis to enlarge, and its underlying seam to be completed. Typically male secondary sex characteristics also appear, and sperm production begins.

There have been a few 5-ARD cases identified in North America, and slightly more have come from countries in the Middle East and the Far East. But the largest frequency is found in an isolated village located in the Dominican Republic, where about one in 90 males are affected. These males are almost always raised as girls. But with the arrival of almost complete masculinization in puberty (the locals sometimes call it “Penis-at-Twelve”), they must decide whether to switch to a male identity. Most of them do, are accepted as such, and many go on to marry and father children.