BOARD OF THE ORDERED MINISTRY

REPORT TO THE 2007 COVENANT ANNUAL MEETING

Human Sexuality & the Ethic of Marriage and Singleness

Towards a Biblical & Theological Discernment of God in Human Sexuality

I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.

Psalm 119:32

A study guide for teaching & conversation

(abridged version)

THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH

Introduction

For the Evangelical Covenant Church, the starting place for our ongoing discernment is our historic belief that the Scriptures are the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct. Our shared confidence in the love of God, the life-giving presence of Jesus Christ, and the freedom we experience in the Holy Spirit are at the root of our Covenant identity. It is our vision to be "a companion of all those who fear Thee" (Ps. 119:63).

Like many Christian denominations in our time, the Evangelical Covenant Church has been studying and discussing issues related to human sexuality over many years. What is the Creator's will for human sexuality? Which forms of loving relationships are blessed by God? These questions emerge both from external pressures from the broader culture and from our own desires to reflect biblically and compassionately as a missional church regarding the ministry of the Gospel in a created and fallen world where these realities stand within the greater hope of Christ.

In 1996 a resolution on human sexuality was adopted by the Covenant Annual Meeting. The core declaration of the resolution stated:

> God created people male and female, and provided for the marriage relationship in which two may become one. A publicly declared, legally binding marriage between one woman and one man is the one appropriate place for sexual intercourse. Heterosexual marriage, faithfulness within marriage, abstinence outside of marriage—these constitute the Christian standard. When we fall short, we are invited to repent, receive the forgiveness of God, and amend our lives.

Later that year, a paper was commissioned by ECC President Dr. Paul E. Larsen as an exploration of biblical themes related to human sexuality[1]. It was published in 1997 in conjunction with a seminar presented at the Annual Meeting.

In 2003 a further resolution offered from the floor of the Annual Meeting was referred to the Board of the Ordered Ministry, resulting in a report endorsed by several boards, councils, and the Executive Board in 2004 that reaffirmed the 1996 resolution, and acknowledged it serves as the current consensus of the church, and the foundation for current policy and practice. That Annual Meeting requested the Board of the Ordered Ministry work to produce additional resources for the church to stimulate and resource our ongoing reflection. This paper is a first response of the board to that request, and focuses on biblical and theological foundations.

Our hope is that this resource will facilitate discussion about how we read and participate in the Scriptures related to human sexuality, and how we live in faithful obedience to Jesus' moral vision. Some in the church are seeking more definitive pronouncements on these moral issues. On every side attractive and persuasive voices urge us toward conformity to the spirit of this age. Only the church that hears, prays, and responds to the Word will find a way to be a royal priesthood – a people with a listening ear, a prophetic voice, and a compassionate heart who bring hope and healing to a troubled world. The church needs compassionate truth-telling and compelling truth-living to be relevant and authentic witnesses of Jesus Christ.

We seek to stimulate prayerful discernment about how the Scriptural witness speaks to shape our life together and our mission in the world. As a community shaped by a pietistic heritage, we live in the dynamic tension of being a *separated* people who live "in the world, but not of it" while being a *servant*

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[1] See "A Biblical Perspective on Sexuality" by Linda L. Belleville, published by Covenant Communications, 1998.

people who learn from the incarnation to live and love graciously and mercifully in this world. This is the world that Christ died and rose to redeem and is presently laboring to renew as God's kingdom advances. How do we respond to people in ways consistent with the gospel? How do we promote the liberating power of God's grace and truth? How do we bear one another's burdens in love and respect?

The Scriptures have so much to say that is good and gracious news regarding human sexuality. Sex is good because the God who designed sex in all its mystery is good. While there are some who feel a need to mount a strong defense against the cultural onslaught of immorality and indifference to the teaching of Christ, we feel a greater need to mount a biblically affirming offense – without being unnecessarily offens*ive* – a positive celebration and exposition of God's generous gifts of human sexuality, lived out together in the chaste biblical vocations of marriage and singleness within the community of the church.

We do not express a lack of conviction about the authority of Scripture, but only a humble admission that we read in a dim light, and that our knowledge is incomplete. We invite the whole church to reflect prayerfully and biblically about human sexuality within the humility that attracts grace, for there are many questions unanswered, hurts unhealed, and injustices unresolved even as we seek to allow the Word and the Spirit to guide us in our fellowship and in our witness in the world. The final word on human sexuality we seek is not found in the inked markings of this paper, but in "bearing the marks" of the Word made flesh as we live out our redeemed and redeeming identity as male and female persons who share the new life in Christ.

Board of the Ordered Ministry - *Task Force on Human Sexuality (2004-2006)**

Rev. Howard K. Burgoyne
Superintendent, East Coast Conference

Rev. Sherry Peterson
Chaplain, The Samarkand, Santa Barbara, California

Rev. Dwight Nelson
Pastor, Libertyville (IL) Covenant Church
Department of the Ordered Ministry, Chicago, Illinois

Rev. Dr. David Kersten
Executive Minister

The Lordship of Jesus Christ

The first and primary Christian confession is "Jesus is Lord!" (Rom 10:9). Followers of Jesus Christ take upon themselves the yoke of discipleship, an embodied relationship of grace through faith. By "embodiment" we mean the actual life we live in our bodies by faith in Christ. The daily rhythm of grace is carried not merely in beliefs held in the mind, but in beliefs practiced in bodies being reoriented in community as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2); our bodies, and not just our minds and hearts, belong to the Lord (1 Cor 6:13). The Christian viewpoint of human nature affirms that we are created as unified beings, "ensouled bodies, and embodied souls."[2] Created as embodied persons, the sexual dimension of our identity, like every other dimension, bears on our relation to God.

Being followers of Christ requires daily practices of surrender and mutual submission, out of reverence for Christ. We cannot love God with all our heart and soul if we seek to divorce it from all the strength and passions of the body, including our sexuality. As Stanley Grenz claims, "The biblical doctrines of creation and resurrection imply that our sexuality is basic to our sense of self and foundational to our understanding of who we are as God's creatures. God intends that we be embodied beings who are either male or female."[3] God, who is the Lord and giver of every perfect gift, created sexuality as a compass, leading us to the intimacy with God we are created to experience. God, not sex, is our true path to fulfillment in life.

Because our sexual identity as male and female is an *expression* of God's creative *impression*, it forms an essential part of our identity before God. As God's creatures, humans are accountable for God to be stewards of all they are. This stewardship extends to our sexuality, for our sexual identity is a precious gift from God with a profoundly eternal purpose. Therefore as followers of Christ we are expected to heed the apostolic warning, "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins people commit are outside their bodies, but those who sin sexually sin against their own bodies. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor 6:18-20). Human sexuality honors God by exercising our bodies within divinely bound restraint. The boundaries and proscriptions of sexual expression in the Bible are established and maintained for the sake of good sex and a just society where the peace (*shalom*) of God is reflected and reigns over all.

Creation and Sexuality in Genesis 1-3

The opening stories of Genesis provide the theological foundation for a biblical reflection on human identity. Gen 1-11 is central to describing God's covenant purposes. Creation was established by God and described from the outset as a rhythmic pattern for daily human living in sync with a divine eternal purpose. Jesus and the apostles repeatedly appeal to the events recorded in Genesis as a revelation of God's abiding will for humanity (Matt 19:4-8; 1 Cor 11:8-9; 1 Tim 2:14).

The story of Genesis 1:1-2:3 is a statement of covenant identity for the people of Israel among their polytheistic neighbors. In Genesis 1, the creative works of God establish and outline the sovereignty of Yahweh as both creator and redeemer, Alpha and Omega, in the divine rhythms of weekly work and Sabbath rest. In Eden both sexuality and Sabbath are gifts from God. In the 10 Commandments both gifts are endorsed and given protective boundaries; this legislation becomes necessary because of

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[2] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* ¾ (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 358-59.

[3] Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 29.

God's holiness and human sin. Failure to keep the Sabbath holy and marriage sacred is rebellion against both Creator and creation (Lev. 26:34; 2 Chron. 36:21; Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6).

In Genesis 1:26-27, the decision of the Triune God at the apex of creation, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule…" results in the outcome "So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Just as the Trinity is a differentiated unity, so we see this reflected in the male/female distinctions of humanity. The mystery of the triune God is a complex simplicity (three differentiated persons, one God). The mystery of marriage is also a complex simplicity (two differentiated persons, one flesh). Sexuality, then, is a witness to the mutuality and relationality of the Triune God.

The man and the woman are seen bearing the fruit of recognizing the complementary work of God in one another, and embracing each other in the unabashedly naked intimacy of sexual oneness. Creation is holy and good. Sexuality is holy and good. The Song of Songs serves as an additional witness within Judaism and Christianity to the goodness and beauty of sexuality as a gift created by God. The Song may be seen as an extended commentary on the creation story – an improvisation of the first recorded love song in history, "This at last is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23).

In the vision of Genesis, sexuality is the basis for affection and relationship. It is the root of desire, our need to share in wholeness and intimacy through relationship with others, and our desire to embrace the mystery of becoming "one flesh" with one who complements our identity as male or female. Sexuality is the initiative for the man to "leave" and "cleave" to the woman in the consummation and celebration of the "one flesh" relationship. In Gen 1-2, sex is more than the *union* of male and female; it is the *reunion* of humanity, the image and intimacy of God. This is a union marked by the making of covenant vows (cf. Gen 2:23 with 2 Sam 5:1). God is a lover passionate for intimacy, fidelity, and fruitfulness with us. Just as true spirituality prays and lives out of a deep desire to know and be known, love and be loved by God, so human sexuality mirrors this God-given desire. In marriage, sexual desire is yoked, directed, matured, and fulfilled by surrendering to the Spirit and to the discipline of unconditional, faithful covenant love. In this way, fidelity in marriage is often seen to mirror or imitate the fidelity of God.

The creation stories affirm that male and female were not created as sexual beings in isolation from each other, but for community with each other. While surrounded by animals, Adam was alone in that he had no one to bond with as an equal partner. "But for Adam no suitable helper was found" (v. 20). Not to be thought of as an inferior term, the Hebrew word "helper" (*ʿēzer*) refers to one who saves or delivers. Apart from this usage it is only used to refer to God in relationship to Israel, "The Lord is our helper" (Deut 33:7; Ps 32:20; 115:9). God's plan was to create a complementary human being who could deliver Adam, not from boredom, but from bondage to a solitary existence. By being an equal partner with Adam in the divine mandate to be fruitful, multiply, and rule over the creation, woman is a complement, not just as a mate and companion, but politically as a co-regent and economically as a co-steward to tend and tame the earth. Only in the introduction of the woman to the man in Gen 2 does the image of God promised in Genesis 1 actually appear in full human form as male and female stand together.[4]

The mystery of how God made one into two foreshadows the greater mystery of how two become one flesh. The "one flesh" relationship is expressive of more than the mandate to multiply; this unity

[4] For further reflections on the image of God in male and female, see John E. Phelan, *All God's People* (available at Covenantbookstore.com).

brings two embodied persons into a shared embodiment that God forms, blesses, protects, and sustains in the marriage relationship (Matt 19:6). It is here that Adam and Eve come to "know" each other. The underlying Hebrew word for "know" often serves as a bold sexual allusion. "The best knowledge, the knowledge that is thorough and personal, is not information. It is shared intimacy – a knowing and being known that becomes a creative act."[5]

The creation stories affirm that we are created both as sexual persons (male and female) and as a sexual people (family and community). To be sexual is far more comprehensive than the performance of sexual acts. In the account of Genesis, sexuality is a primary influence that sustains in us a desire for bonding. For the followers of Jesus, however, this desire will be fulfilled ultimately through the fellowship of the community of disciples who are being redeemed by grace through faith and so enjoy eternal fellowship with the triune God. The New Testament will point us to the body of Christ as the purest, most fulfilling, demanding, and enduring form of community as we live out the ethic of Jesus' great commandment and commission together (John 13:34-35).

The Incarnate Way of Jesus

While the claim that sexuality belongs to the essential nature of humanity arises from the doctrine of creation, it is enriched by the doctrine of the incarnation ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," John 1:14), and confirmed by the doctrine of the resurrection. When Jesus died and was raised he appeared to the women and men who followed him as a transformed human being in the flesh, not as a disembodied spirit. The Risen Lord remained the recognizable Jesus, still bearing the marks of suffering (John 20:27). Christian teaching affirms the resurrection of the *body* (1 Cor 15:35-57) – a gloriously transformed body, but a body still.

Jesus was both fully human (i.e., a fully sexual being) and fully chaste, as an unmarried person. By choosing to live within Israel in singleness and celibacy, Jesus did not avoid human sexuality, but embraced it and affirmed singleness as a path of life and discipleship that is of equal value to marriage. Singleness is a chaste expression of openness and inclusiveness to others – a complement to the exclusiveness and monogamy of marriage and family. While most of his disciples were married, Jesus was unencumbered with the responsibilities of spouse and children in order to focus on the mission God had given him. His family consisted of those who do the will of the Father, a lineage of faith and not physical descent (Luke 8:20-21).

The Impact of Sin on Human Sexuality

While the Bible affirms that human sexuality is created and affirmed by God as good and holy, it also affirms that our sexuality is deeply vulnerable to brokenness. The twisting of human sexuality is described in Genesis 3 by chronicling the curse of sin in the sexual roles of the man and the woman. Created to supplement and protect each other, marital mutuality disintegrated into triangulation, competition, and blame. Innocence has been overcome by shame, denial, and hiding from one another. While mutual desire is still present, it now works in an inverted relationship of male rulership, not mutual servanthood. Sin is also the root of many kinds of sexual brokenness: domestic violence, rape, and all forms of sexual abuse or sexual violence.

In Genesis 3, the story of the deception and fall of humanity into sin is described by a *corruption of desire* (the temptation to be "like God"), a *confusion of thought* ("did God really say…?"), a *collusion of action*

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[5] Eugene H. Peterson, *Earth and Altar* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1985), 81-82.

("she…he ate it"), a *conviction of sin and righteousness* ("what is this you have done?"), and a *clarification of consequences* ("Because you have done this"). The humans, seeking to become like God, became alienated from God. Into this tragedy, God graciously comes seeking to reestablish community with the lost man and woman ("Where are you?"). Yet there are consequences for all action. The desires of the body, although God-designed, may now lie to us. They make deceitful promises, ones that are half-true. Sin always seeks to subject us to a lie about God, ourselves, and others.

The Bible names sin, including sexual sin, as an expression of idolatry – a discounting, minimizing, or eliminating of God as Lord of all creation. Idolatry happens when we use God in lieu of worshiping God. Unconsciously and self-justifying, the object of the sinful desire slowly erodes and replaces all other desires. In this way humanity worships the creation instead of the Creator, violating the first commandment (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:7), as the apostle Paul also confirms (Rom 1:25).

As the Genesis narrative unfolds, God laments the evil and violence of humanity, which leads to God's judgment on human wickedness, the deliverance of the righteous Noah and his family, and the renewal of creation through a cataclysmic flood (Gen 6-9). In spite of God's dramatic deliverance, the effects of the fall continue to unfold in Noah's own family; Noah's vulnerable nakedness becomes the foil for Ham's illegitimate path to personal and probably sexual knowledge of his father.[6] The sin of Ham, like the sins of Eve, Adam, and Cain, was a lust for power at the expense of covenant loyalty. The dishonoring of Noah by Ham provides an intentional backdrop and theological commentary for discerning the root of the sexual sins of the Canaanites strongly condemned by the Old Testament.

A biblical anthropology summarizes the general human situation with two affirmations. First, we are the good creation of a gracious God, formed to be the image of God, reflecting the divine nature. Second, we are fallen creatures. Our current experience of being human is not fully expressive of God's good creation – we fall short of God's purpose, including in the area of our sexuality. As Lauren Winner insightfully comments: "We were created in particular ways, with particular longings and desires and impulses. Those desires have become distorted in the fall, but they are still here within us, shaping our wants and our actions and our thoughts and our wishes. This is nowhere clearer than in human sexuality." [7]

Yet the New Testament gives ample evidence that these corruptions are overcome through the coming of Christ, who establishes women with men as co-heirs of salvation (1 Pet 3:7) and co-workers in the mission of Christ (Rom 16:3). If the consequence related to the death of Adam and Eve is defeated in the victorious resurrection of Christ, so is the consequence of female subjection to male dominance. In the promise of the defeat of the serpent (Gen 3:15) the church is foreseen as the community where the life of the kingdom is to be on display before the world, which includes the recovery of the egalitarianism of the creation (Gal 3:28).

Because in Christ there is no advantage or disadvantage between male and female (Gal 3:28), hierarchies of power give place to a new form of relationship: mutual submission (Eph 5:21). In this setting, mutual submission calls for husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church and enjoins wives to respect and submit to their husbands in reverence for the Lord (Eph 5:22-32). The headship of Christ as suffering servant and sacrificing savior becomes the model for husbands. The submission

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[6] See Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice;* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), p. 63-71 for a thorough analysis of the nature of Ham's violation of Noah, where the language of "uncovering" and "seeing the nakedness of" connects with similar phrases denoting sexual intercourse, such as Deut. 24:1.

[7] Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 38.

of Christ to the unconditional love and eternal care of the Father becomes the model for wives. Lived out together they depict the covenantal marriage as an analogy of the relationship between Christ and the church.

It is through the embodiment of Christ in human flesh and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit that God overcomes the enslaving power of sin. Jesus' virtuous life and death make possible the path of redemption for those who exercise faith in him (John 1:12-13). None of us is sexually perfect. We are all sexually broken; the subtleties of self-centeredness and lust tempt us to use others to fulfill our desires. And yet, because the nature of salvation is to transform all areas of brokenness due to sin, honoring God with our bodies becomes the arena where this salvation is worked out with fear and trembling as God works in us.

The Witness of the Law and the Prophets

From Genesis onward, the Scriptures elevate a specific sexual ethic as the ideal for humankind. Repeatedly, the biblical authors either explicitly instruct or implicitly assume that the institution of marriage joins together a man and a woman in what is intended to be a permanent, monogamous union. According to Gen 2 this ideal was part of the original intent of the Creator. Jesus radically reaffirmed this ideal in his own teaching (Matt 19:4-6), and the early Christian community continued the practice in the midst of the paganism of the Gentile world (1 Cor 7:2; 1 Thess 4:3-6; 1 Tim 3:2).

Despite this, concessions to the fallen human condition are also reflected in the Scriptures without assuming divine endorsement. Neither monogamy nor permanence was strictly followed by all members of the ancient Israelite community. This broken reality brought forth a realistic response from the biblical authors. Concessions emerge due to hardness of heart and the weaknesses of people.

The failure of society to live up to the ideal of monogamy is acknowledged by the incorporation of polygamy into the culture. Polygamy is acknowledged as early as in the account of Lamech (Gen 4:19) and more notably in the life of Jacob, where his marriage to Leah and Rachel produces jealousy and rivalry. Polygamy subverts the equality of male and female in marriage, instituting a potential for anxious rivalry in lieu of the security of mutuality.

A second concession to the brokenness of humanity came in the form of divorce.[8] The presence of this practice compromises the ideal of the permanence of marriage as recorded in Gen 2 and affirmed by Jesus (Mark 10:9). However, in both the ancient and contemporary worlds, this bond was not always maintained with permanence. At times and for various reasons it was severed, a reality that is visible in the regulations concerning divorce found in the Old Testament laws. These concessions emerged in response to the sinful tragedies of life, not as an expression of the divine intent, as Jesus also notes (Matt 19:8). The Mosaic instructions were an attempt to regulate with some justice an unregulated practice already present in Hebrew society; they attempt to make the situation more humane for the divorced woman by demanding that her status be clearly spelled out by the man who was putting her out of his household. Yet God hates divorce, drawing a connection between faithlessness to the marriage covenant and faithlessness to the covenant with God (Mal 2:10-16).

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[8] For a helpful exploration of the ethics of divorce and remarriage, see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper: San Francisco, 1996), 347-378.

The Holiness Code

In Genesis, holiness derives from the Creator's acts of bringing distinction out of chaos. In creation the Word of God ("and God said…") sanctifies the cosmos by separating and naming the elements. The creative acts of God involve majestically "separating" (Gen 1:4, 6, 7, 14, 18) elements into orderly relationships, each wisely "according to their kind" (Gen 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25). The zenith of this distinction is expressed in the creation of humanity as "male and female" (Gen 1:27). The order and distinctions of the creation became a blueprint for the people of God. In Israel's life the Levites are "separated" from the other Israelites to maintain the Temple (Num 8:14). To "separate" and to "make holy" are synonymous terms. They involve the capacity to make distinctions based on the categories and kinds God has established in creation. Such discernment is to be required of Israel. The priests are to teach it (Lev. 10:10-11) and the people to practice it (Ezek 22:26) in every dimension of life – spiritual, personal, familial, and societal. God is holy, and God's people must be holy.

The holiness code of Leviticus 18-20 covers a wide variety of aspects of life in Israelite society. The holiness of the Lord extends beyond personal habits to embrace every dimension of personal and social life, embracing both action (19:9) and matters of affection (19:17, 18, and 34). To be holy is, in part, to use the body in the correct way, in the correct relationship, at the correct time. The polygamous arrangement that befell Jacob is now outlawed (18:18). Same sex relations are "detestable" (18:22), as is bestiality for male and female in the passive or active sexual role (18:23).

These injunctions do not arise in an abstract environment, but are embodied responses to the sexualized idolatry of the nations surrounding Israel, particularly Egypt where they had been, and Canaan where they were going (Lev 18:3). The sanctions in the "Holiness Code" of Leviticus are intended to articulate the boundaries of what is holy for Israel in distinction from the various immoral sexual practices of their close neighbors (Lev 18:1-5, 24-30). In that respect, practicing divination, withholding the wages of the laborer, perverting justice, showing disrespect for the elderly, and mistreating foreigners were to be equally avoided. Refraining from these practices expresses God's call to Israel to "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:8), a phrase Jesus used to affirm and summarize the profound intent of the entire holiness code and the law (Matt 22:39).

All sexual activities that violate the covenantal marriage relationship by diversion, competition, confusion, or avoidance are rejected by the biblical authors as a rejection of the divine purpose Maintaining a unique identity as the people of God requires a particular spirituality and a distinctive sexuality in the world. This is how, as Paul says in reflecting on Lev 26:12, we are to "purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Cor 7:1).

Prohibited Sexual Behaviors

In both Old and New Testaments, all sexual activity is understood in relation to its participation in or rejection of the covenant of marriage.[9] Fornication (consensual sex before or in lieu of marriage) falls short of the covenant of marriage.[10] Merely practicing "safe sex" in terms of disease and pregnancy prevention does not address the core risks of such covenantless intimacy. This widespread cultural practice constitutes a primary pastoral challenge and compassionate mission for the church in our

[9] Many New Testament texts warn against sexual immorality: Matt. 15:19; Acts 15:29; 1 Cor. 5:9; 6:9; 6:13, 15-16, 18; 7:2; 10:8; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 4:19; 5:3; 5:5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; 7:7; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; Heb. 12:16; 13:4; Rev. 2:20; 21:8.

[10] It is probable that various forms of sexual activity that involve sexual stimulation without full intercourse would be included in this term.

times. It is far more prevalent and overlooked in pastoral care and discipline than many of the practices described below.

Adultery is the violation of sexual fidelity within marriage by either partner, and is explicitly forbidden in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:14). Through it the unfaithful partner is articulating their intent to violate their marriage covenant and vows. It is a forsaking of the commitment made to the marriage and to one's spouse.

Pornography has emerged as an arena of sexual activity that requires Christian discernment. Whether accompanied with or as a stimulus to sexual activity, alone or with a partner, pornography participates in a form of prostitution (the selling of sexual activity) and oppression that often leads to addiction. Both men and women suffer from this temptation, whether in visual images, Internet chat rooms, "romance" novels, or movies. Pornography, however it is used, does not equip persons to share in the rigors and requirements of mutual intimacy within marriage. The prevalence and growth of the child pornography industry and related abuse is an alarming example of the sexual confusion and brokenness of our world.

Incest is the violation of sexual boundaries within close family relationships. It involves two people who are too much alike and have a preexisting identity before God that precludes sexual intimacy. Because of this, the scriptures uniformly prohibit sexual relations between "close relations" (Lev 18:6-17; Lev 20:11-21) as a perversion of the created order. Incest includes both blood and family kinship. The apostle Paul denounces even consensual incest as incompatible with the law and the gospel (1 Cor 5:1-5), requiring public discipline and censure. The loving intimacy and fidelity of family relationships must not be confused or confounded for the purposes of individual sexual gratification.

Each of the sexual practices mentioned above are symptomatic of a deeper brokenness that is at odds with love of God and neighbor. We escape the rigors of spiritual formation in our bodies through abstinent singleness or marital fidelity in a sterile search for the fulfillment of desire. In each of these forms, a person has sexual relations with the wrong object of desire. While these wrongful sexual relations can occur either in reality or in fantasy, they all contort a good and gracious embodiment into an inhospitable imprisonment, sentencing us to serve as prisoners of desire rather than as prisoners set free for the fellowship and service of the risen Lord (Eph 4:1-2). Of all these Paul says, "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Col 3:5).

Homosexual Practice in Biblical Reflection

Scripture contains a handful of references to homosexuality practice or behavior. The passages at stake in the OT include Gen 9 (Noah and Ham); Gen 19 (Lot and the city of Sodom); purity code proscriptions in Lev 18:22 and 20:13; and perhaps the tragedy at Gibeah, which includes an array of sexual violence (Judg 19). In the clearest passages, Leviticus 18:22 states: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination," a command that is repeated in Lev 20:13. In Leviticus homosexuality is addressed as an issue emerging from and associated with a particular kind of pagan religious commitment found in the surrounding cultures.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19, somewhat like the tale in Judges 19, records a threat of homosexual rape to a guest. (Elsewhere in Scripture, when the sins of Sodom are addressed, focus is placed on the sins of oppression and injustice, lack of regard for the poor, and violence - see Ezek 16:49; Amos 4:1, 11; Isa 1:10-17.) The Gospels make no overt mention of homosexuality; their

teachings in this area can only be inferred from Jesus' teachings on marriage.[11] In letters from Paul and Peter, relevant texts are Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor 6:9; and 1 Tim 1:10. Both 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 condemn homosexual behaviors along with a number of other sins, including slave-trading, idolatry, and adultery.[12]

A more sustained argument is given in Romans 1:18-32, which describes homosexual behavior as a form of idolatry. Paul writes that God gave the Gentiles up to "degrading passions" because of their worship of creatures rather than the Creator and because of their sinful passions. He continues, "Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Rom 1:26-27).

Many detailed studies have been published in recent years seeking a better understanding of the biblical texts and contexts.[13] The Covenant has always had a strong commitment both to careful Bible study ("Where is it written?") and to honest, respectful conversation about difficult issues among people who hold a diversity of views. It is therefore hoped, however, that congregations may engage in study and dialogue around these issues and the biblical witness to human sexuality and sexual expression.

Until the mid-20th century, engaging in same sex acts generally carried broad social condemnation, particularly where Christian influence has been dominant. Two recent movements, however, have brought dramatically new perspectives to bear on the societal understanding of homosexuality per se and same sex practices in particular.

The first movement arises from the modern discipline and practice of psychiatry. Here the concept of individual sexual orientation has emerged, along with a perspective that a homosexual orientation may be "normal" or genetically determined – that is, beyond conscious choice for some people. This has gained increasingly wide acceptance in academic and professional circles. In 1974 the American Psychological Association removed homosexuality from its list of pathological psychiatric conditions. Meanwhile, much debate surrounds the issue of how large a role social norms play in the defining of psychiatric disorders, as well as in perceptions of homosexuality in general. In addition, the modern disciplines of biology and psychology continue to explore an understanding of the sources of orientation in heredity and environment (nature and nurture).

Since 1969, a new social movement of support for gay and lesbian persons has emerged. This has come with increasing political and social influence in advocacy of homosexuality as a matter of civil rights and liberties. From a focus on religious holiness, the cultural debate has shifted to one of social justice. The voices calling for this profound change include noted Christian theologians, church leaders, pastors, and ethicists in both mainline and more conservative traditions. This has led to profoundly painful and divisive struggles within the Anglican Communion, the Episcopalian Church,

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[11] See Matt 19:3-6; Jesus is addressing divorce, but grounds his marriage ethic in the creation narrative of Gen 1-2.

[12] The Greek terms that refer to homosexuality in 1 Cor 6:9 and 1 Tim 1:10 are difficult to translate, but they are generally taken to refer to homosexual practice of some kind; scholars disagree on which variety of homosexual behavior is meant.

[13] For a comparison and dialogue between the affirming and non-affirming views within a Christian ethical context, see *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, by Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon. For more substantial treatments see Robert A. J. Gagnon, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*; and John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality*.

the Lutheran Church, and many other denominations. Fears abound regarding both the biblical integrity of the church and its ability to maintain unity.

The new social context for the consideration of the claim of homosexuality as an orientation (and not solely a chosen sexual practice) presents a significant challenge to the church. Some claim that homosexuality as a natural, lifelong orientation was not what the biblical prohibitions had in view. This is at the heart of the contemporary debate where our discernment needs to be informed and prayerful. How might the concept of sexual "orientation" affect our way of reading Scripture and responding to persons? Is it warranted to speak of *orientation* as a permanent state, or should we speak of *affections* that are subject to change? In what ways are our sexual longings to be understood as pointers to our createdness; in what ways are they a manifestation and form of our fallen human nature?

Some ethicists call for the church to recognize that a homosexual *orientation* is not sinful per se, for the Bible does not condemn it as such. Discussion within the spheres of biology, psychology, and sociology challenges the church to broaden its treatment of human sexuality beyond the arena of the morality of various behaviors to include theologically informed discussion of the dynamics that form sexual preference or desire. The church should take care to understand and respectfully address these debates, including the position that homosexuality is an issue of advocacy for the oppressed or civil rights for the marginalized, lest it risk being misunderstood or mocked.[14] But to simply accept the popular cultural framing of the issue is also dangerous. The church must speak from Scripture, which calls people to define their personal identity and express their sexuality in relationship to the Triune God.

The New Covenant Community: The Sexual Identity of the Body of Christ

Within the divine plan for human community there are two expressions of human sexuality: fidelity in marriage, and chastity in singleness, both lived out within and supported by the worshiping community. Both are presented in the New Testament as equally valid forms of Christian discipleship and avenues for flourishing in God's purposes.

Marriage: Leaving and Cleaving in the Body of Christ

While marriage is not a specifically Christian institution, marriage does take on special significance in Christianity, for it becomes a form of Christian discipleship, a *vocation*, in which a woman and man together follow Christ as Lord.

In Matt 19 Jesus interprets the Genesis accounts of the creation of male and female as underlying the purpose of God in instituting marriage as the union of a male and a female in a permanent commitment to each other bounded by fidelity. This, he declares, has been the essential purpose of God for marriage from the beginning. Jesus' radical conclusion arises from an understanding of this union as a covenant God enters into with the couple: "So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matt 19:6).

For the followers of Jesus, the community of believers is the primary center of the experience of true community and the essential grounding point for the formation of personal identity. This is heard in Jesus' declaration (Matt 12:50) and in Paul's instruction regarding the Lordship of Christ in personal decision-making (1 Cor 7:29-35). For the New Testament, baptism is the primary bond, not marriage.

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[14] See Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 176ff.

Can we accept that God designed the church to be a better and more fulfilling experience of genuine intimacy than marriage affords? What does this vision require of us within our congregations?

Within the inclusive mission of the church in the world, marriage assists in serving that mission within the local church community. Marriage becomes a vehicle for disciples to carry out the great commission mandate of the church through the witness of a believer in the home (1 Pet 3:1-6; 1 Cor 7:12-16) and through the ministry of parenting as children are born and raised in the fear and knowledge of the Lord (Eph 6:4; 1 Cor 7:14b).

The homes of believers were also missional centers for the gathering and sending of the church. Priscilla and Aquila are a well-known illustration of the positive influence of a Christian couple engaged together in the mission of Christ (Acts 18:2-3, 26; Rom 16:13; 1 Cor 16:19). Within the purpose of God, marriage can become a means of grace where the gospel can be incarnated as a living witness to others inside and outside the family.

Seen through the inspired and imaginative perspective of Revelation, where the holy city Jerusalem is pictured as the bride of the Lamb, marriage serves as a prophetic landmark of that yet to be consummated reality, pointing towards this as our future hope. As a male and female enter into the bond of marriage in all fidelity, they offer a glimpse of the community planned by the Creator and recovered by the Redeemer. The purpose of marriage is not to replace heaven, but it can serve to prepare us for it.

Singleness in a Gospel-Shaped Perspective

Fundamental to the issues of singleness is the affirmation that God's intent is not that all persons marry; there is a particular place for singleness in God's purpose. Both marriage and singleness constitute two equal and reciprocal alternatives for articulating our identity as sexual beings. Biblically, we should affirm and hold to a balanced emphasis on both expressions of human sexuality, for the New Testament emphasizes positive examples of both.

Singleness carries with it its own unique challenges and freedoms. Yet like marriage, it has the capacity to serve as a means of grace and an avenue for faithful ministry. Marriage and singleness are complementary vocations for the development of discipleship, ministry, and friendship within the fellowship of believers. The apostle Paul affirms both, while even noting the potential advantages of singleness for a life of ministry (1 Cor 7).

For some, singleness is a deliberate choice, for a variety of reasons: some choose singleness because of painful experience or out of pragmatic reasons, while others feel a vocational call to singleness as a mode of discipleship that creates unique opportunities for ministry. For others, they find themselves single by virtue of circumstance, whether through complicating life factors such as lack of opportunity or unavailability of a suitable partner. Still others are single again after a divorce or the death of a spouse. Because of this, both the pains and joys of singleness can be profound.

With Jesus emerged a significant shift in the place of the single person and the potential goodness of lifelong singleness as a calling (Matt 19:11-12). Because of Jesus' example and teaching, the single life becomes one means a person might utilize to fulfill the call to follow Jesus in the life of the Kingdom. Other examples of single disciples are John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, and several of the women close to Jesus in the Gospels (Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Martha).

To be human means we exist as male or female, as embodied beings who share the divine image both singularly and in community with others. Our embodiment demands sexuality, but it does not require

genital sexual activity. Chastity in singleness is an embodied way of expressing human sexuality in a chaste form. Chaste singleness disciplines the believer in forms of establishing intimacy with others in friendships rather than marriage. If sexual desire is a compass pointing us ultimately to God and God's longing for us, the compass of a single person is trained wholly on God rather than on a human lover. For all of us, sexuality equips us for community with God and with one another, where our complementary relationships are framed in intimacy, mutuality, and fidelity.

ECC Affirmations on Sexuality: *How shall we proceed together?*

First, we affirm the biblical witness that declares humanity is created in the image of God as male and female persons together in community. The nature of our creation is experienced as embodied souls, or ensouled bodies. It is in the body that we come to know God, ourselves, and others. Sexuality and sexual desire are affirmed and located in the wisdom and purpose of God, but sexual desire is not allowed a life of its own; humanity exists in freedom to reflect God's glory to the principalities and powers that observe in wonder or interfere in rebellion (Gen 3:1; Eph 1:21; 3:10-13).

Second, we affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord. Our identity as created, yet fallen persons is transformed by this relationship beyond every other label or mark of identity. Our historic identity as male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free is exceeded by a new and ultimate identity as persons "in Christ" (Gal 3:28), God's "beloved children" (1 John 3:1).

Where the world is sexually broken and confused, our compassionate mission is to trust and proclaim the sacrificial death of Christ as the basis of salvation and healing for all that has gone disastrously wrong in life and history. Standing at a distance and posting regulations or casting stones at those whose sin is uncovered is not the way of Christ, who suffered on the garbage dump of Golgotha to redeem sinners by his death. We are invited and ordered into the glorious mess of the world where Christ is present, even among the most despised and disordered – the least, the last, the lost, and the little ones marginalized by the world, but remembered by the Master. Jesus did not withdraw from the reach or recoil from the touch of sexual sinners. He affirmed their humanity, extended the grace that gives hope, and called people to follow Him.

The resurrection of Jesus forms us into a community of the Holy Spirit (John 20:22), a community that must perpetually hear the question, "Has Christ been divided?" (1 Cor 1:13). We have no authority to form theologically gated communities in exchange for living out the incredibly complex lifestyle of grace in communities of radical hospitality and openness to all who fear the Lord. We are not a self-defined community; we are a God-defined community of the resurrection. This is a dual challenge both to those who would launch out on their own to redefine Christian sexual ethics as well as to those who respond as advocates of the church's historic stance.

What does it require of us to live together with the compassion, holiness, and tenderness of Christ? A church that denies it consists of people who sin, and exists for them, implicitly rejects the grace of the gospel. As Hans Küng points out:

> The church must constantly be aware that its faith is weak, its knowledge dim, its profession of faith halting, that there is not a single sin or failing which it has not in one way or another been guilty of. And though it is true that the church must always dissociate itself from sin, it can never have any excuse for keeping any sinners at a distance. If the church remains self-righteously aloof from failures, irreligious and immoral people, it cannot enter justified into God's kingdom. But if it is constantly aware of its guilt

> and sin, it can live in joyous awareness of forgiveness. The promise has been given to it that anyone who humbles himself will be exalted."[15]

What can hold us together? Only a renewed commitment to pray, to read, and to hear the Word of God, seeking divine knowledge in asking, "Where is that written?" and divine wisdom in discovering, "Why is that written?"[16] By the Scriptural witness of creation, incarnation, and resurrection, we affirm that human identity in the image of God cannot be understood apart from our embodiment as male and female. Our life under God is recognition of dependence and an embrace of mutuality. Remembering our created origins, following our incarnate Savior, and anticipating our resurrection bodies helps us discern how to live out our sexuality in ways that please the risen Lord. We do this in the complementary vocations of marriage and singleness. We will not embody these chaste vocations perfectly. We do and will fall short of the glory of God as sexual beings. Where this is true, the Scriptures encourage us to discover forgiveness and assurance of pardon through the cross of Christ.

As we covenant together to live out our freedom in obedience to Christ, we continue our aspiration to be a "companion of all who fear Thee" while we hold to the essentials of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith handed down to the church. As we cultivate the embodied spiritual disciplines of grace that God may use to mature and discipline our sexuality, we continue to pray for the full redemption of all creation (Rom 8). Whether in chaste singleness or in marital fidelity, our sexuality can and will be remade into chaste and holy love of God and neighbor, whether now, as we mature in faith, or most fully at the coming of Christ. Martin Luther long ago reminded the Church of this tension when he said:

> This life, therefore, is not righteousness but growth in righteousness, not health but healing, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is going on. This is not the end but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in glory but all is being purified.[17]

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[15] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 507-508.

[16] See Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, and N.T. Wright, *The Last Word*, for explorations of how we read and live out Scripture. Samuel Wells explores how Christian ethics is embodied in worship in *God's Companions* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

[17] Martin Luther, "*Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*," Second Article (1521).

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* Sources listed are for further reading and discussion, and are not intended to indicate official endorsement by the ECC.