

BOARD OF THE ORDERED MINISTRY
REPORT TO THE 2007 COVENANT ANNUAL MEETING

Human Sexuality & the Marriage Ethic

Part One:

*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



THE EVANGELICAL COVENANT CHURCH

Introduction

For the Evangelical Covenant Church, the starting place for our ongoing discernment regarding all matters of faith, doctrine and practice is our foundational conviction that the Bible is the Word of God, leading us to the foundational confession, “*Jesus is Lord!*” It is our shared confidence in the love of God our Father, the life giving presence of His Son, Jesus Christ, and the liberty we experience in the Holy Spirit through the Word of God that 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). We affirm we are a biblical, formational, connectional and missional people. We are part of the Protestant Reformation and Free Church movement of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Like many Christian denominations in our time, the Evangelical Covenant Church has been studying and discussing beliefs and practices 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? Who will God join together? 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 sexually 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 sexuality¹. 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. In focusing on part two, the Board anticipates providing additional study materials focused on issues of pastoral and congregational care and by creating opportunities for reflection, discernment and guided conversations about human sexuality for both pastors and congregations.

Our hope is that this resource and any that may follow will facilitate a clearer discussion about *how we read* (Luke 10:26) 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

¹ See “A Biblical Perspective on Sexuality” by Linda L. Belleville, published by Covenant Communications, 1998.

pronouncements on these moral issues. On every side attractive and persuasive voices urge us toward conformity to the spirit of this age. There is no escaping from these pervasive influences. 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* people who learn from the incarnation to live and love graciously and mercifully in this world. This is the very 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 pastoral power of 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! Gloriously, the Song of Solomon stands in the center of the Hebrew Scriptures as an affirmation of the goodness of erotic joy within marriage. Sex is good because the God who designed sex in all its mystery is good. And God is glorified when we receive God’s gifts with thanksgiving and enjoy them the way God meant for them to be enjoyed. While there are some among us 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 more strategic and biblically affirming offense – without being unnecessarily offensive - a positive celebration and exposition of God’s generous gifts of human sexuality, lived out together in chaste biblical vocations within the community of the Church, the body and bride of Christ.

Sex, like all of life, cannot be understood wholly or practiced properly without seeing how sex relates to God. Christian identity is centered in our election as children of God; our lifestyle and behaviors are centered in the baptismal covenant relationship with the Lord, who is our Creator and Redeemer. Those who fail to worship this God miss the opportunity to see sexuality in this light as a gift we share best in God’s presence. When we remove the personal God as the foundation of our sexuality, we easily depersonalize sex into a mere activity. Depersonalized sex drains our capacity to dwell in the fragile one flesh mystery. The essence of God’s gift of sex is not just wonderful technique, but genuine Trinitarian wonder; if we suppress our spiritual sensitivity for intimacy with God we may corrupt our sensual capacity for intimacy with others (Eph. 4:19).

During the American sexual revolution the Church failed to provide adequate theological resources and rationale to equip Christ’s followers in living out the sexual vision and grace of God. This has led to further confusion, injustice, brokenness, and weakness in our common life. It has damaged our witness. As a Church we need to confess and repent of our sexual sins and be healed of our sexual wounds. We need to examine ourselves thoroughly. Has the sexual revolution increased respect between men and women? Has it strengthened the basic family unit God has placed us in for good? Has it created a more loving environment for the nurture of children? Has it relieved the ache of personal loneliness? Has it fostered safe and transformative intimacy? What has been our own experience? Clearly we see that individuals, marriages, children and generations of families have suffered as casualties of this era. Like the church in Laodicea, (Rev. 3:14ff) our prior failures to hear and discern the words of the “*Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation*” have

compromised our own witness, and left us, in spite of what we see, “*wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.*” Our hope is to call the Church to listen in prayer to the present counsel of the Lord, who is calling us to “*be earnest, and repent,*” to hear his voice, open the door, and renew our fellowship around the Table with Christ. This path of humility is the narrow road to authentic living and compelling mission, a lifestyle that embraces weakness, ambiguity and life long suffering as the necessary companions of spiritual power, faith and wholeness. There are honest questions to ask and authentic answers to discover. We are not looking for proof texts. The Word we study has to be the Word we pray so it may become the Word written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We must be prepared to do the hard and prayerful work of responsible biblical study, discernment and the pastoral care and cure of souls. Good theology will not start with human experience, but it must listen to it and speak into it redemptively, courageously, and compassionately.

In being bolder to call ourselves as Covenanters to repentance than to speak definitively to the world, 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, the incarnate image of God.

The Board of the Ordered Ministry invites the whole fellowship of the Evangelical Covenant Church to prayerfully read and discuss this first paper, and with us discern what God has said and is still saying to the Church about human sexuality and our identity in Christ. We hope that during this next year there will be time set aside for thoughtful reflection and feedback among the Covenant Executive Board, the Council of Administrators, the Council of Superintendents, Covenant missionaries and pastors gatherings, and we invite dialogue within local Covenant churches where the discernment of God is experienced through the transforming power and welcoming freedom of the Gospel.

As a Board we invite written feedback as we continue to respond to the needs of the Church and develop additional resources for teaching and conversation around the Living Word.

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

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The Lordship of Jesus Christ & Human Sexuality

Where do we best begin this discernment of God in human sexuality? The first and primary Christian confession is always “Jesus is Lord!” (Romans 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. This faith is evidenced through the vocalized confession “Jesus is Lord”, through ongoing repentance from sin, baptism into the body of Christ, and the emergence of a new lifestyle marked by holy love - the fruit of the Spirit. The daily rhythm of this 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). This is the form of true service, and a prerequisite to a proper and mature participation in knowing God. Knowing God in Christ more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality.

Applying the grand scheme of the gospel of grace begins in our bodies or it does not begin at all. The sequence Paul articulates in Romans 12 is intentional and sequential. It is first “in view of God’s mercy” that we offer our bodies as living sacrifices. *Then* we will be transformed by the renewing of the mind. In this manner we will be able to “test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will”. In order to understand truth, we must first stand under it. Truth is not comprehended in the mind without being apprehended in the body. Truth is not just data, but encounter. This caveat is critical because not all beliefs are held in the mind; many are fiercely held in the body. Therefore to love God with more than the mind we must train the body to believe through the exercise of spiritual disciplines so that we can love God and neighbor more fully in fulfillment of the Law of Christ. All *spiritual* disciplines are *embodied* practices. They are spiritual because their origin is in the power of God; they are embodied because their locus is the body where all the facets of our being reside. In Romans 1:21ff, Paul chronicles the reverse sequence outlined in Romans 12 in describing spiritual degeneracy; that by surrendering the *practices* of embodied worship, humanity fell out of their God given *capacity* to think properly about God and subsequently fell into heretical idolatry, evidenced as embodied apostasy. For Paul, the sexually impure practices of the Gentile world were not only degrading to their bodies, but pointed more severely to their insidious exchanging of the truth about God for a lie, and their subsequent embrace of idolatry. Paul’s argument in Romans, stylized towards the world of his day, does not eliminate us from the indictment that all have fallen short of the glory of God. His purpose is to bring us all before the purifying wrath and liberating righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:21ff).

It is a fair question in our time whether or not the western Church at large and the Evangelical Covenant Church in particular, has sufficient capacity to reflect Biblically and honestly about human sexuality. To what degree have our own personal practices of sexuality formed a cataract over our understanding of God’s Word, and over the impoverishment of our lives? While sexual sins are among the most common examples of human folly, they are also among the most pernicious. The Apostle Paul placed them in a unique category in terms of their invasive effect on us (1 Cor. 6:18). This is not only true at an individual level; the Body of Christ is materially affected by what we do with our bodies. Do we, victims and rebels in a sexually confused culture claim to see clearly, or confess that we are blind? Perhaps a seasonal practice of sexual fasting and prayer could be undertaken by the whole church that we may recover an awareness of both the gift intended and restraint required of all followers of Jesus. Such acts of solidarity and surrender may help us discern the true questions and earnest motives that are part of rediscovering how to genuinely please the

Lord anew in both harnessing and liberating our sexuality as a gift and trust from God, for our bodies belong to the Lord (1 Cor. 6:13). Such constraint and conformity is the evidence of grace at work *in us*.

Being observant as followers of Christ requires daily practices of surrender and mutual submission, out of reverence for Christ. This is how we fulfill the Great Commandment, *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.*⁵ *Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength* (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). 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. This includes among other things our understanding of our sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual expression. Our sexuality is intrinsic to human identity. As Stanley Grenz concludes, “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.”² God, who is the Lord and giver of every perfect gift and good pleasure, created sexuality as a compass, leading us to the intimacy with God we are created to experience. God, not sex alone, 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 Corinthians 6:18-20). The sex-embracing, morality-demanding stance of the early church was stated simply by the writer of Hebrews: “*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral*” (Hebrews 13:4). 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.

The Christian viewpoint of human nature affirms that we are created as unified beings, “ensouled bodies, and embodied souls”³. The soul vitalizes and directs the body, and the body expresses and informs the soul. Christian theology resists succumbing to a Gnostic and dualistic anthropology as the ancient Greeks did. In Christian spirituality soul and body are integral – no person is whole without both. Formed bodily from the soil, and animated by the living breath of God, we cannot follow those that claim the body can be indulged without affecting the essential person. Created as embodied persons, the sexual dimension of our identity, like every other dimension, bears on our relation to God. The creation accounts in Genesis root our sexual identity in the primal act of our creation as male-female as the image (Greek “icon”) of God. “Orthodox Christian spirituality essentially and necessarily links the formation of the soul and spirit to the givens of the body and to

² Stanley J. Grenz, *Sexual Ethics: An Evangelical Perspective* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press) 1990, 1997; p. 29.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3/4, trans. A.T. MacKay et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark) 1961, p. 358-59.

the teaching and formation of the body. Such is what it means to be created wholly – body and soul – by a good and loving Creator.”⁴ It is this understanding of embodiment that is foundational to the Christian understanding of the Incarnation, where “the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14). In Christ, God assumed a human nature that embraced sexuality as essential to his identity and central to his saving mission. A desexualized Christ would not be human and therefore not a Savior to humanity, or a guide to human sexuality.

For the Church, reflecting on human sexuality is done under the banner of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, where we discover our identity in relation to the “First Adam” and his bride and the “Last Adam” and his bride, drawing conclusions about how our living pleases or displeases the Lord. Here we will find the holy boundaries for our relationships with one another, as well as the holy orders where we live out our discipleship.

Reflections on Genesis 1, 2, 3 as the Foundation for Discerning God in Human Sexuality

The opening stories of Genesis provide the integral world view and theological foundation for a biblical reflection on human identity and within that, our sexuality. How shall we read, interpret and practice the account and intent of creation as the primal source of God’s revelation? While Christians differ in how they interpret the sequence and chronology of the creation accounts, those who hold to a high view of Scripture as the Word of God affirm the underlying affirmation of the creation as stated in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, and affirm the essentially theological and covenantal purpose of Genesis 1-11. Whether we believe the text intends to speak of a six 24 hour day creation or as an inspired theological device without intended reference to the chronology or physics of creation, we note that Jesus and the Apostles still 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 arranged thematically in a theological order that serves as a foundational apologetic and 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 Consummator, Alpha and Omega, in the divine rhythms of weekly work and Sabbath rest. The ten “words” (“*and God said...*”) structure of Genesis 1 parallels the Ten Words (commandments) of Exodus 20. Both creation and the nation of Israel are formed and sustained by the gracious Word of God. The creation story is narrated intentionally as a world view (macrocosm) that under lays and informs the history of Israel (microcosm), aligning the life of the nation and her worship in the tabernacle/temple with the sovereignty of God as Creator, Covenant maker, Redeemer and Judge.⁵ The stories are more than simple news stories; they establish the fundamental paradigm of God’s actions towards the fulfillment of history. The story of ‘beginnings’ launches history towards its’ ending – and a new beginning. In Eden both sexuality and Sabbath are gifts that emerge from the manifold wisdom of God. They appear woven into the deep structures of the created order as gifts that God mysteriously participates in with us. An eternal God keeps Sabbath time; A God who is spirit animates marital intimacy. In the 10 Commandments both gifts

⁴ Rodney Clapp, *Tortured Wonders: Christian Spirituality for People, not Angels*; (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press), 2004; p. 38.

⁵ For a more extensive treatment of the theological structure of Genesis 1-7, see Warren Austin Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology*; (Winona Lake: Carpenter Books/Eisenbrauns) 1984

receive legislative endorsement and protection. This legislation becomes necessary because of 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).

One intention of the literary structure is that it attests that 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. The story is not given as *data* for speculation, but as a *directive* for covenant love and loyalty. Here the consummation of creation finds a climax in the Divine Sabbath (Gen. 2:2-3) echoed in the consummation of the 'one flesh' union (Gen. 2:23-25) and the enduring commentary of the significance of marriage.⁶ The seven day sequence narrates in a theological order the Divine covenant of which marriage is a type and witness. Sex in marriage is more than the *union* of male and female. It is the *reunion* of humanity, the image and intimacy of God. It is a form of witness, story telling, and prayer, offered in sighs and groans too deep for words. Seen from this angle, sexual intimacy in marriage is the covenant sign and seal – a sacramental action – one that points to the climax of the Covenant relationship of God with His people in the Kingdom, the bride and body of Christ. Biblical spirituality, rooted in the rhythm of entering God's work and rest (Gen. 1), finds resonance in the creation of Biblical sexuality. Here 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. It brings dignity to humanity as a part of their sharing in the work of God. An integral metaphor throughout Scripture declares that God is a Lover. God calls male and female to become lovers within marriage, and lovers of God within the covenant relationship. These accounts are foundational for the formation of Israel's identity, theology and practices as a holy people called out of slavery in Egypt to resist and overcome the sexualized polytheistic idolatry of the Canaanite nations. They are formative for the Law and the Prophets. They are the basis of Jesus' teachings related to marriage and divorce, and the apostolic mission with Jews and Gentiles.

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 to be engaged in the joys and risks of copulation. It is to be engaged in the first great commission (Gen. 1:28) through enacting the great commandment in the bonds of marriage, family and society. Sexuality, rightly practiced, enables us to know God more deeply when the "marriage bed" (Heb. 13:4, Gk., *koite*) is not defiled; while its' corruption is a symptom of a darkened mind and deadened heart towards God (Rom. 1). The language and imagery of marital heterosexuality is the most graphic and powerful motif that the Scriptures use to frame the relationship between God and his covenant people (see Ezekiel 16) – both positively (when they are faithful) and negatively (when they are not). 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).

⁶ For a more extensive dialogue on the hermeneutical options in reading Genesis, see "*The Genesis Debate*", particularly the article by Lee Irons with Meredith G. Kline, "The Framework View"; (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux Press) 2001

Sexuality, according to both Genesis and the human sciences, flows deeper than the anatomical distinctives that separate female and male and allow for sexual coupling and procreation. Sexuality is a dimension of our being that under girds, generates, and emerges visibly in embodied sexual characteristics and procreative potential. It refers to our fundamental existence as male or female. 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.”* The tri-fold symmetry of this mysterious description is to be considered both poetic and prophetic. The gender based distinctions rooted in heterosexuality reflect the fundamental theistic notion of the Creator-creature distinction. Just as we come to see that divine unity is differentiated unity, so we see this reflected in the male/female distinctions of the human race. 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 Triune God. It equips us for prayer, training us in surrender. It is connected to all our facets of body, mind, personality and behavior and shapes both our affective and genital sexuality. In the vision of Genesis, sexuality fuels the crisis of human aloneness, our need to find one suitable as a companion, and God’s gracious provision of a “helper” suitable to deliver us from the solitariness that threatens both our creation in the image of the Triune God, and our ability to carry out God’s command to be fruitful. Sexuality is therefore the basis for affection and relationship. It is the root of sexual desire, our need to share in wholeness and intimacy through relationship with others. It is the root of libido, the longing to have and to hold, to penetrate and embrace the mystery of becoming “one flesh” with one who complements our identity as male or female. Connected to Adam’s song, *“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called ‘woman’ for she was taken out of man”* (Genesis 2:23), we see that sexuality belongs to the mystery of human identity and the impress of the image of God. It is the justification for the Creator’s gift of marriage (Genesis 2:24) and the initiative of the man to “leave” and “cleave” to his wife in the consummation and celebration of the “one flesh” relationship. This is a union marked by the making of covenant vows (cf. Gen 2:23 with 2 Sam. 5:1), the mutual openness of physical nudity and an emotional vulnerability without any feelings of shame (Gen. 2:25). “God created us with sexual passion so that there would be language to describe what it means to cleave to him in love and what it means to turn away from him to others”.⁷ 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 seeking a suitable ‘helper’ that can mirror this reflected glory. In marriage, sexual desire (Greek, *eros*) is yoked, directed, matured and fulfilled by surrendering to the Spirit’s choreography – disciplines and duties of unconditional covenant love (Greek, *agape*).

Sexuality is also justification for the Creator’s original blessing, great commandment and commission, *“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’”* (Genesis 1:28). 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, and confirmed by the doctrine of the resurrection. Because God created us as embodied creatures, God became incarnate as a male person in Jesus of Nazareth, “being made in human likeness” (Phil. 2:7). As a boy

⁷ John Piper & Justin Taylor, *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ*; (Wheaton: Crossways) 2005, p. 28

he was circumcised on the eighth day in keeping with the Law and grew sexually into a male adolescent as he related to his family and community while developing his own personal identity in relation to God (Luke 2:41-52). When he had matured to manhood, he related to others out of his identity and responsibility as a male person in Jewish society, observing the Law as a chaste man. When Jesus died and was raised he appeared to the women and men who followed him as a transformed male. None of Jesus' flesh or humanity was left behind in the tomb. None of it was deemed irrelevant to the resurrection body. All of it was raised and transformed in the triumph of God over sin and death. The five hundred who witnessed Jesus' resurrection were able to recognize him in continuity with his previous identity as a man. The Risen Lord remained the recognizable Jesus, yet bearing the marks of suffering.

The only way to be human is to be an embodied person; embodiment means life as a sexual being, as male or female. Since sexuality is significant for community on earth it has ongoing significance for community in eternity, though perhaps in forms beyond our current understanding or capacity to envision. Can we trust we will not be disappointed? The Bible begins (Gen. 1 & 2) and ends (Rev. 19:6-9) with a theological analogy of marital consummation as a metaphor of the central destiny of God's people: union with God. God, who created arousal and orgasm to be pleasurable, promises greater wonders and comforts yet to come (Psalm 16:11).

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" (*ēzer*) 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 genitally as a mate, but politically as a co-regent and economically as a co-steward to tend and tame the earth. When Adam awakes from the Divine surgery to see the handiwork of God he immediately intuitively feels a bond with her, as evidenced by his joyous and poetic response: She is "*bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*" (v. 23). This is covenant making language. The unconscious mystery of how God made one into two foreshadows the greater mystery of how two become one flesh. What we must remember is that the action of God is essential to both mysteries. The God who first "brought her" to Adam, still brings us to one another. This is why Jesus stipulated "*what God has joined together, let no one separate*" (Mark 10:9).

The creation account affirms that sexual capacity shapes the drive that moves men and women beyond themselves to opportunities to connect with others in the bonds of human fellowship. Adam's sexual solitude could not be solved by himself, by animals or even by his fellowship with God. God's antidote was not the creation of an identical twin, but the creation of a fraternal and female counterpart, whose same essence and yet essential difference expressed more fully the image of God that was incomplete in Adam alone. The void in Adam's experience was based in sexuality, and the void gave way to a sigh of relief and a sonnet of joy when he was introduced to his sexual counterpart. Only in the introduction of the woman to the man does the image of God promised in Genesis 1 actually appear in full human form as male and female stand together. The Divine "Us" of Genesis 1:26 now has a suitable reflection in Genesis 2:23. Adam's masculinity is gloriously protological – that is, a beginning; Eve's femininity is graciously eschatological – that is, a fulfillment.

They are mutually dependent on one another for meaning and purpose, identity and destiny. Woman has been born of man; now man will be born of woman (1 Cor. 11:12). The triune love in God that is the giving of *Self* to the *Other* who is equal but different will be symbolized in the marriage relationship and fully realized in the consummation between Christ and His radiant bride, the Church triumphant.

The crescendo of Genesis 2:23 intimacies are focused in the immediate application of the story to marriage (“*For this reason...*” v. 24). The “one flesh” relationship is expressive of more than the mandate to multiply. It is a further turning and restating of the earlier phrase of “*leaving*” and “*cleaving*”. This unity 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.”⁸ To ‘know’ means to engender, to create; and all vital knowledge in this sense presupposes a penetration, a linking of the innermost being of the one who knows and of the one being known. It also serves as a social cornerstone for the establishment of the broader human community of nuclear and extended family, clan, tribe, city and nation. Marriage becomes a metaphor for the broader joining together of the Church as a Building of the Holy Spirit, the Bride and Body of Christ (Eph. 2:21). A biblical concept of human sexuality must keep these thoughts in mind in seeking definition and application to theology and ethics.

It is our conviction that the Genesis 2 theological narrative sustains ongoing relevance for a contemporary understanding and practice of sexuality. While we are created by God as embodied sexual beings, we have been profoundly educated as individuals shaped by a western culture that celebrates the often narcissistic freedom of individualism. It may come as a surprise to us to realize that we are, from a biblically informed perspective, fundamentally incomplete as individuals. As Rodney Clapp observes:

*“Unlike any known culture before it, the modern West has seen individual physical bodies as the basis of the social body. The individual is real and primary, the social body a derivative fiction. The modern West has, in essence and contrary to the apostle Paul, said that individuals as “hands” or “feet” are most themselves in isolation from any social body of which they may be members. Premoderns saw matters differently. The individual, inasmuch as such a creature could be conceived, was preceded by and dependent on the social body. The whole person existed only in community. Anyone apparently beyond all community was at best quasi-human, to be greeted with an alarm similar to that evoked in our day by a severed hand or foot.”*⁹

The Genesis narratives teach us that God created us as sexual beings for a holy purpose, that we may know Him and participate in His will. Holiness – being *set apart* as a kingdom of priests – is the theological context and motivation for the teachings of the Mosaic Law about sexual identity and

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Earth and Altar*, (Downer’s Grove: IVP) 1985, p. 81-82

⁹ Clapp, p. 72

behavior. To inquire about the nature of sexuality, we must also inquire about the nature of holiness.¹⁰

The impact of sin and fallenness 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 has become vulnerable - a primary victim of idolatry and the brokenness it spawns. How has that perfect expression been damaged by the human rejection of God at the fall? Idolatry shows itself first and perhaps most revealingly, in symptoms related to our sexuality. Polytheism historically leads to poly-sexuality. It inevitably deconstructs the mono-sexuality of marriage that derives from monotheism. It rejects the created order that is rooted in the holy perfection of God. Professing to be wise, it embodies foolishness (Rom.1:22). 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. It is no longer safe to be physically nude or emotionally naked together; innocence has been overcome by shame, denial, and hiding from one another. While mutual desire is still present, it becomes furtive and desperate; it now works in an inverted relationship of male rulership, not mutual servanthood. The marital bed, a place of Sabbath rest, has become a battleground, a place of restlessness. Sin brings a sadistic potential into human sexuality; it is the root of domestic violence, warfare and injustice for the poor. Here we see that sin is more than an act of disobedience; it is a disposition towards rationalized rebellion against God.

In Genesis 3, the story of the deception and fall of humanity into sin is described by a *corruption of desire* (you will be 'like God'), a *confusion of thought* ('did God really say?'), a *collusion of action* ("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"). Action leads to deep knowledge more swiftly than information alone. As is often the case in Scripture, the curse is the embodiment of ironic consequences that emerge from the sinful choices already made. Sin is its own punishing reward. It often contains a boomerang effect (Proverbs 6:27). The humans, seeking to become like God, became alienated from God. Rather than entering into a new freedom in *maturing* dependency upon God, they each assumed a *degrading* dependency on the primal element of their origin. No longer trusting, loving and embracing one another in mutuality, they deny their personal and communal responsibility, and pitifully seek to hide their location from God and, with fig leaves, their sexual identity from one another.

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. What we do in our bodies can not be ignored, or easily reversed. Corrupted by sin, the oppressed conscience arbitrarily excuses and condemns in a continuous cycle of rationalization and self-deception. In the fog of sin, wisdom and folly are difficult to discern. The desires of the body, though God designed, 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. Adam, created from the soil, becomes *subject to the ground* from which he was formed, and eventually it would reclaim him in the dust of death. Eve, formed from the man as his partner and rescuer, became *subject to the man* in a similarly degrading dependency. Both of them would suffer from the ongoing pain of being subject to an environment that was also alienated from

¹⁰ See David Peterson (Ed), *Holiness & Sexuality*; (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster) 2004 for a more complete exploration of these connections.

the Creator, being *subject to futility and groaning* (Rom. 8:22). Only in Christ will a path out of the corruption and into the freedom of the divine nature be reestablished (2 Peter 1:3-4).

It is painful but important to remember and confess the *subverting* power of sin. The very nature of sin for all of Adam and Eve's descendents is that it is *not* freely chosen. The Bible affirms that sin is not only increasingly compulsive, but essentially an expression of idolatry, a discounting, minimizing and 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. It becomes the idol named *Desire*, eventually rejecting God, the *Object* of our deepest created yearnings. Ironically, to be allowed to do as we wish is God's punishment. "Therefore those who lived unrighteously, in a life of folly, [God] tormented through their own abominations" (Wisdom of Solomon 12:23). The chief result of the fall is that we now determine for ourselves what is wrong and what is right. But in this "freedom" we are far less free and independent than the serpent's lie convinces us we are. We are in denial. In this way humanity worships the creation instead of the Creator, violating the first commandment (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:7), as the Apostle Paul also confirms (Romans 1:25).

Because the curse and consequences (Gen. 3) of bondage to a fallen creation are undermining results of sin and not divinely desired dimensions of human identity, these confusions are to be defeated in the coming of the Kingdom. 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 Peter 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*. The corruption of loving headship into an unloving rulership of Adam over Eve is viewed as sinful in origin, no less than death itself. 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) and the mutuality of submission to love without shame, blame or hiding (Eph. 5:21).¹¹

With the birth of the Savior (Gal. 4:4), the curse of the fall can be addressed. This release includes deliverance from gender based hierarchy as the way in which the sexes relate. 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). This redeemed pattern for the arrangement of male-female community as a whole shapes the foundation both for the church and for the community formed in marriage. 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 of Christ to the unconditional love and eternal care of His Father becomes the model for wives. Lived out together they depict the covenantal marriage as an analogy of Christ and the Church. Because humanity is created in the image of God and our creation includes being shaped as sexual beings, the sexual dimension of our existence should in some ways reflect the divine nature. As a result, human sexuality offers us insight into the nature, rhythms, and passionate love of the Creator.

¹¹ For an exploration of this broader issue, see Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downer's Grove: IVP) 2003

As the Genesis narrative unfolds, the cancerous power of sin to confuse and confound human identity and behavior expands. Disappointment in worship leads to envy and murder (Gen. 4:10). Polygamy corrupts monogamy and the quenchless thirst for boundless revenge is celebrated in grisly song (Gen. 4:19-24) – a standard of revenge that Jesus inverts in his ministry (Matt. 18:22). Wickedness grows in epidemic proportion, displaying the dominion of subverting sin as the consequence for Eve and Adam’s foolish choice. Subversion leads to perversion. The description of earthly wickedness includes sexual deviancy (Gen. 6:1-5) leading God to a remarkably frank regret for creating humanity. This leads to the deliverance of righteous Noah, the judgment of wickedness and the renewal of creation through a cataclysmic flood (Gen. 6-9).

In spite of God’s dramatic deliverance through the flood, the sinful mutations of a fallen creation continue to unfold in Noah’s own family. This account is literarily stylized to reflect the theological motif of Genesis 2-3. Noah is described like Adam as “a man of the *soil*”; the *fruit* of the vine is the source of stumbling; and Noah’s vulnerable *nakedness* becomes the foil for Ham’s illegitimate path to personal and probably sexual *knowledge* of his father¹². The sin of Ham, like the sins of Eve, Adam and Cain, was a lust for *power* at the expense of covenant loyalty. Evidently the sexual practices God sought to destroy in the flood had inadvertently been preserved on the ark. They will continue to strike at the heel of Israel for generations (Deut. 32:30-33), rejecting God and provoking His wrath. The dishonoring of Noah by Ham describes this inevitable tumbling back into sin, and provides an intentional backdrop and theological commentary for discerning the root of the perverted sexuality of the Canaanites. Sex based roles, given by God to enable intimacy, procreation and the nurturing of the creation, are now twisted and bruised expressions of God’s good and perfect designs. Now they are not free to serve God; they are enslaved to the power of sin. As the Mishnah observes, “At first, sin is like an occasional visitor, then like a guest who stays for a while, and finally like the master of the house.”¹³

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. In reality, we fall short of God’s purpose. Our spiritual orientation has shifted away from God and his excellent plans for human living within the created order. Preferring their own order, Adam and Eve fell into disordered living. What once was straight and true has become crooked and confused. The frustration between being created in the image of God and being desecrated by sin marks every dimension of human existence and affects the entire ecosystem of planet earth. With the Apostle Paul we say, “What a wretch I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom.7:24-25).

A truly Biblical grasp of sexuality must take seriously this foundational aspect of all human experience. We cannot reason directly back from our current situation to God’s created intent. *Nature*, as God created it, has become *unnatural*, including human nature. The pollution brought into the garden by sin demanded that the offenders be banished to protect the pristine environment

¹² 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. Noah’s outrage was due to what Ham had “done to him”.

¹³ *Mishnah*, Rabbi Yitzhak, Genesis Rabbah 22:6

of Eden. Adam and Eve are driven into an unnatural environment to live their now unnatural life, marked by the dynamics of sin, the curse and the consequences they produce. The path back to Eden is still barred by the flaming guardians' sword. All attempts to force our way back die in the flames of futility. Like every other part of present human experience, our sexuality, our experience as sexual beings, must be considered under the dual perspective of creation and fall. The Biblical doctrine of sin acknowledges that because of the fall sin extends to every dimension of human life. The Reformation emphasis of John Calvin on "total depravity" reemphasized the radical effects of the fall. There is no aspect of humanity that is exempt.

Because this is sadly true, human sexuality is in bondage to the confusing power of sin. Sin, which reveals itself in thoughts, words and deeds emerges quite easily through human sexuality in all three of these dimensions. This understanding of sin is in distinct contrast to the majority of contemporary secular thought, which thinks of humanity as basically good and therefore thinks of "sin" as what is by and large, "unnatural". While the Bible describes most sins as natural and pleasurable for a season, they are self-reinforcing sometimes to the point of compulsion and on to addiction. Actions deemed culturally "private and personal" fall into this category, even if they do not immediately harm someone else; a biblical understanding of sin includes the reality of self-harm that violates the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Deut. 5:7). Sin is theologically defined as an assault upon God, his authority and purpose. Sin is therefore destructive to our relationship with God and harmful to us. It is the contradiction of God and the embrace of death (Gen. 2:17) and barrenness. "Theologically, the chief danger is that the sinfulness of sin begins to be located in the hurt it inflicts rather than in the defiance of God's holy authority and the rejection of his loving purpose which it expresses."¹⁴

Ever since the Enlightenment, western culture has continued to drift away from the roots of Biblical instruction on human sexuality, while shedding some unhealthy angst and unbiblical repression. In place of the Biblical framework of "created, yet fallen" the contemporary view of sexuality is a romanticized ideal of individual freedom, fulfillment, and personal rights. Sex is depicted as a place of refuge, an escape from the corrupt into the ecstatic and pure essence of love. But such portrayals do not ring true in experience or Scripture. Rather than being a final oasis of tender innocence in an otherwise dark metropolis, sex is an area of great vulnerability for all persons. Given the significance of human sexuality in the Creator's good purpose, sexuality is easily and often twisted into serpentine and degrading practices in the name of freedom, liberation, and self-fulfillment. From Paul's vantage point this demonstrates an exchange of *the Truth* about God for *the Lie* (Rom. 1:25).

In Old and New Testaments, many accounts illustrate how self-reinforcing sin is, leading to an ever deeper entanglement. Sin is identified as a "snare", a source of entrapment as well as genuine pleasure, so that sin itself prevents resistance to the increasing bondage: "*The evil deeds of the wicked ensnare them; the cords of their sins hold them fast. For lack of discipline they will die, led astray by their own great folly*" (Prov. 5:22-23). Studies of the psychology of compulsions reveal the powerful dynamics of denial that subvert any potential for regret and change. The Apostle Paul expresses the tortured dilemma of all humanity when he confesses in Romans 7:14-24: *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*

¹⁴ David Fields, "Radical Disorientation: Fallen Sexuality and the Christian Doctrine of Sin (I) p. 65 in Peterson (Ed.), *Holiness & Sexuality*.

Since the fundamental fallenness of the creation is not in keeping with God's intent, it is related to the concept of sin; yet it cannot be reduced simplistically today to simple or direct cause and effect (Ex. 20:4-6). What is clear in Scripture is that at the coming of Christ both fallenness and sin will be addressed by divine judgment and mercy. Fallenness will be transformed at the coming of Christ, thus coming under divine judgment. Condemnation comes in censuring what we do (Rom. 2:3; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:12). In summary, our fallenness will be made whole at the final judgment, but our sinful actions will be condemned. Where we encounter fallenness in our sexual disposition this does not mean that the disposition itself is cause for condemnation of the person. The condemnation of God rests not on fallen dispositions but on the actions that flow from them that are contrary to God's intention. We may have only limited control over our disposition. 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."*¹⁵

God alone conceives of a Savior to heal and deliver us

Because the natural world is truly fallen, the Scriptures foretell the defeat of sin as requiring the engagement of one whose identity and nature are not entirely rooted in the natural world: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right."* (Isa. 7:14-15).

According to the Gospel, redemption is conceivable only because of divine intervention (Matt. 1:20-23). It is through the agency of the Holy Spirit and the embodiment of Christ in human flesh that God overcomes the embodiment of sin. It is in the Word made flesh we see the example of Christ who consistently refrained from what might be natural to do what was right in the eyes of his Father (Luke 2:49; 22:42). His virtuous life and vicarious death make possible the path of redemption for those who exercise faith in him (John 1:12-13). This faith will include the recognition that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19-20), the locus of our salvation.

Because the nature of salvation sets its course 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. In this humbling process of trusting God with the surrender of our bodies to Him as daily acts of embodied worship, we must repent of the sinful pride that led to the fall itself by establishing our own independent and natural standards of perfection (Gen. 3:4-5). None of us is sexually perfect. We are all sexually broken, inverted by sin. The subtleties of self centeredness and lust turn us in on ourselves, tempting us to use others, under the guise of admiring the beauty of creation, to slake our own thirst in unholy solitude. Through inherent nature, dynamics of nurture, and personal choices, the grip of sin strangles every person, whether repressed like the Pharisee or confessed like the publican in Jesus' parable (Luke 18:9-14). With St. Augustine we may find it helpful to confess:

"I was sure that it was better to give myself up to your love than to give in to my own [disordered] desires. However, although the one way appealed to me and was gaining mastery, the other still afforded me

¹⁵ Lauren Winner, *Real Sex: The Naked Truth about Chastity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos) 2005; p.38

*pleasure and kept me victim.”*¹⁶ . . . *As I prayed to you for the gift of chastity I had even pleaded, ‘Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet.’ I was afraid that you might hear me immediately and heal me forthwith of the morbid lust which I was more anxious to satisfy than to snuff out.”*¹⁷

It is to people living in the midst of the tension and terror between creation and fall that the good news of the Gospel comes. The gospel announces that in spite of sin and fallenness God’s grace remains evident. Dismissed from the Garden of Eden, God continues to offer guidance for the proper regulation of human sexuality. In due time the provision of clothing and ark, manna and miracles, Law and tabernacle, Promised land and temple, exile and prophets, will provide divine protection and essential boundaries for the recovery of human identity and sexuality in God’s image. These tutor Israel in hope as the people of God await the coming of the Messiah.

The Witness of the Law and the Prophets: *Hear O Israel...*

From Genesis onward, the Scriptures elevate a specific sex ethic as the ideal for humankind, though because of sin it presents the ideal in a realistic fashion. Repeatedly the biblical authors either explicitly enjoin 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 Genesis 2 this ideal was part of the original intent of the Creator. Jesus radically reaffirmed this ideal in his own teaching ministry (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). This model for the divine-human community is the sole sexual analogy incorporated into the ultimate vision of the final renewal and consummation of redemption (Rev. 21:2, 9-10).

Despite the revelation of the divine ideal of a permanent, monogamous marriage, 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 Hebrew 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 and prostitution into the culture. Polygamy is acknowledged as early as in the account of Lamech (Gen. 4:19) and more notably in Jacob, where his marriage to Leah and Rachel produces jealousy and rivalry for his affection and sexual favors. Bigamy and polygamy are a distortion of the “one flesh” reunion of creation. It violates the fidelity bond of the first marriage covenant. Polygamy subverts the equality of male and female in marriage, instituting a potential for anxious rivalry in lieu of the security of mutuality.

As with polygamy, the tolerance of prostitution emerges early for pagan cultic use and economic necessity as indicated in the story of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38). Although polygamy grew in tolerance among the rich and the royals, prostitution never came to be an accepted dimension of the community. It existed only in the dark corners of Hebrew society and became an object for legal restriction (Lev. 19:29). Despite their presence in the narratives of Biblical history, neither of these behaviors was viewed as a positive or liberating development for human sexuality. Viewed from the lenses of the New Testament in particular, these practices expressed the incomplete commitment of the Israelites to the divine pattern of monogamy.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.5

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* 8.17

A second concession to the brokenness of humanity came in the form of divorce.¹⁸ The presence of this practice compromises the ideal of the permanence of marriage. According to the narrative of Genesis 2, the Creator intended that marriage be an inviolate bond. This is confirmed in the Christian tradition by the teaching of 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 was codified and institutionalized in the regulations concerning divorce found in the Law. These concessions emerged in response to the sinful tragedies of life, not as an expression of the divine intent. The Mosaic concessions were an attempt to regulate with some justice an unregulated practice already present in Hebrew society. The focus of the Mosaic regulation is 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 (Mal. 2:14-16), drawing a connection between faithlessness to the marriage covenant and faithlessness to the covenant with God (Mal. 2:10-12). One reflects and symbolizes the other.

Polygamy, prostitution and divorce indicate unwelcome exceptions to the marital ideal that arose among the ancient Hebrews. These historic developments do not serve to deny that a strong marriage ethic did indeed provide the basis for life in the Old and New Testament communities. On the contrary, these violations of the norm and concessions to sin highlight the commitments of the biblical authors to the ideal of the permanent, monogamous relationship between male and female as the foundational context for the expression of human sexual intimacy.

In the hostile environment of a fallen world, God's covenant intervention provides guidance and protection for human sexuality while the generations unfold toward the coming of the promised Redeemer. This is addressed primarily through the formation and upholding of the nuclear and extended family and the sanctity of marriage. The establishment of heterosexual monogamy as the natural and normative state for sexual activity within Israel is established in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2. While this relationship is strained in the fall, it continues to bear the promise of being the vehicle through which God will one day bring a redeemer to overthrow the tyranny of the serpent and sin (Gen. 3:15-17). The relationship of husband and wife that was established in creation is codified and bound by the Law (Ex. 20:12, 14, 17), celebrated in the Writings (Prov. 18:22, Ecc. 9:9; Song of Songs), and confirmed and extended metaphorically as a model for Israel's relationship with Yahweh in the Prophets (Mal. 2:14). Because marriage is a covenant, it becomes a fertile motif to reference God's love and faithfulness for his people Israel (Prov. 2:16-17; Ezek. 16; 1 Samuel 18-20).

The Pentateuch affirms and codifies the centrality of marriage, affirming it as the singular relationship for the blessing of erotic sexual expression. The seventh and tenth commandments (Ex. 20:14, 17) against adultery and coveting strengthen the bond of marriage that underlies these commands. Additional laws referring to sexual practices arise to protect the norm and sanctity of marriage. In particular, the Levitical sanctions in the "Holiness Code" are intended to articulate the boundaries of what is holy for Israel in distinction from various immoral sexual practices of Egypt and Canaan (Lev. 18:1-5, 24-30). These commandments appear rooted in the identity of Yahweh, "I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 18:2, 5, 6, 21, 30). Here prohibitions and regulations are given concerning the boundaries of incest (18:6-17). The polygamous arrangement that befell Jacob is now

¹⁸ 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) p. 347-378

outlawed (18:18). Same sex relations are “detestable” (*tow'ebah*, abomination) (18:22) as is bestiality for male and female in the passive or active sexual role (18:23), which is a “perversion” (*tebel*). These practices are defined as the source of moral and cultic defilement, not just of the people who practiced them, but of the land itself, which appears to have a personified moral constitution that causes the land itself to “vomit out its inhabitants”¹⁹. We never act in total privacy or isolation. Sin pollutes the creation. Built into the nature of sin then is a recoil mechanism that springs back on the offender (Ps. 7:14-16). The land would be no respecter of Israel over the Canaanites. The land retains its created constitution of holiness, and will participate in the blessing or cursing of Israel as it did the nations before her occupancy based on their fidelity.

The Holiness Code: *What's holiness got to do with it?*

In Genesis, holiness derives from the Creator's acts of bringing distinction out of chaos. 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’ (*badel*) and to make ‘holy’ (*kadosh*) 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 His people must be holy. In both Old and New Testaments holiness is both a conferred status of graciously *receiving* the divine nature (John 1:12; 1 Peter 1:15, 2:9-10) and a growing experience of *participating* in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:3-11). Holiness is a gift we must grow into if we are to fully realize its' benefits. A failure to grow in holiness is an ominous sign of forgotten grace and short-sightedness about the holy future of God's priestly people (2 Peter 1:9).

In creation the Word of God (*and God said...*) sanctifies the cosmos by separating and naming the elements as recognizably different. God is distinguishing and declaring holy what He makes by assigning each element in the creation its place in relation to His glory. He is a God of order, not of confusion. Having a place for everything and everything in its place is the essence of both holiness and beauty. In redemption the separation and naming of the bride of Christ by the Word of God (*“the washing with water through the word . . .”*) as being recognizably different constitutes the sanctification of the Church (Eph. 5:25-28).

The holiness code of Leviticus 18-20 is both profound and problematic for readers of Scripture. The breadth of topics and the severity of penalties (i.e., capital punishment) raise genuine concerns for a proper reading and interpretation. Leviticus 19 centers the sexual boundaries of chapters 18 and 20 with a broad variety of injunctions rooted in remembering the identity of Yahweh as holy and the covenant identity of Israel as holy: *“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy”* (19:2). The holiness of Yahweh 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), which Jesus highlights as belonging to the highest order of the commandments (19:8 with Matt. 22:39). Here the

¹⁹ This is similar to the personification of the land (Gen. 4:10-12) being forced to “open her mouth” to drink the blood of Abel and thenceforth refusing to produce crops for Cain. Human immorality and violence is a source of ecological desecration.

characteristics of the Triune God represented in the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 reemerge and are applied to the broader life of the community. It includes deep concerns for what expresses divine supplement (19:3), divine mutuality (19:15), the complementary character of Yahweh (19:19), and what expresses the divine generativity (19:23-25). To be holy in body is to use the body in the correct way, in the correct relationship, at the correct time. What appears evident throughout these texts is that these injunctions do not arise in an abstract environment, but as 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). There polytheism produced poly-sexuality. Additionally, worshipping Molech through the sacrifice of children, practicing divination, withholding the wages of the laborer, perverting justice, showing disrespect for the elderly and mistreating foreigners were to be equally avoided as a protection of healthy sexuality and human dignity. 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. Loving our neighbors as ourselves then demands that we continue to maintain the sexual distinctions God has established.

The rejection of sexual acts outside the context of marriage arises from the monotheistic revelation of the permanent monogamous marital relationship as the proper context for sexual intimacy. 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 and wisdom in establishing the covenant of marriage for the good of humankind, and as reflective of the image of God. Throughout the Scriptures, the context of the sex act (holy or unholy) is determinative of its meaning and ethical nature, not the intent of the participants alone. Neither secular law nor personal consent is sufficient to sanctify a sexual union – only the declaration of God can suffice (Matt. 19:6). This is why the Biblical witness and the ministry of the Church throughout history have not sanctioned sexualized behaviors outside marriage. The body is for the Lord (1 Cor. 6:13). Just as the temple was holy to the Lord, so is the Church and each believer (2 Cor. 6:16-18). Maintaining a unique identity as the people of God requires a particular spirituality and a distinctive sexuality in the world. This is how, as the Apostle Paul says in reflecting on Leviticus 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).

Solomon's Song of Songs: *Let him kiss me . . .*

Within the canon of Scripture, the Song of Solomon is one of the smallest, most controversial, and yet popular books. Its 117 verses have inspired many scholars, preachers and lovers. It serves as a witness within Judaism and Christianity to the goodness and beauty of sexuality as a gift created by God. The Song is therefore 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*". The Song is the most extensive celebration in Scripture of sexuality as a central dimension of our createdness in God's image, but does so with dignity, purity and fidelity. In this way the Song functions as a moral compass and teaching guide for the God given standards of marriage. Through unabashedly erotic imagery and language, the virtues of simplicity, faithfulness, purity and virginity are extolled: scheming, carelessness, flirtation, and promiscuity are rejected. "The Song, with Solomon himself as a miserable case in point, not as a villain, was given to teach a sex saturated populace who had forgotten the Way (= Law, = Wisdom) of the Lord the meaning of faithfulness again and to capture the hearts of frustrated men and women by the telling of beauty, joy and freshness of human love

that honored the Law of the Lord. When the fear of the Lord ruled their man-woman love relationships again, the fact that Yahweh was the jealous lover of Israel would not be so foreign to their consciousness.”²⁰ The Songs’ celebration of sexual anticipation and arousal is contained within an affirmation of the marriage covenant where commitment, contentment and communion are received as gifts of God strengthened by the repeated consummation of sexual union.

Throughout the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures, when sexual intercourse is mutually enjoyed within the context of a biblical marriage it carries its divinely embedded meaning. It constitutes a reaffirmation of the vow and covenant the husband and wife entered into on the wedding day. It continues to serve as a beautiful celebration of the marriage relationship as well as the openness to the new life that may arise from this union.

Sexual Behaviors that are fallen from the Creation

What then does the Word of God say and mean about sexual activity outside of the marriage covenant? What sexual practices has the Lord not “joined together” (Mark 10:9) and so constitute the Old and New Testament concept of *porneia* (immorality), and what constitutes a pastoral Christian response to such persons as they encounter the Gospel?²¹ In both Old and New Testaments, all sexual activity is understood in relation to its participation in or rejection of the covenant of marriage as described in Genesis 1 and 2. Outside of marriage the meaning of sexual activity is significantly altered. In whatever forms it appears, sexual sin and the perversion of sexuality is a *symptom* and *signal* of a deeper war for the heart’s loyalty and primary love of God (Eph. 4:17-19, Rom. 1:24-31).

Fornication or “immorality” (*porneia* - consensual sex before or in lieu of marriage) falls short of the covenant of marriage. It is probable that various forms of sexual activity that involve sexual stimulation without vaginal penetration would be included in this term. Incest falls under this broad category (Lev. 18:6ff) as does same sex practice (Lev. 18:22). Fornication, a form of sexual thievery, is a nearsighted act of contempt for future marriage. It complicates the future potential and capacity of persons to establish a healthy, holy and permanent union. Merely practicing “safe sex” in terms of disease and pregnancy prevention does not address the core risks of such covenantless intimacy. This prevalent cultural practice constitutes a primary pastoral challenge and compassionate mission for the Church in our times. On a percentage basis, it is far more extensive in prevalence and ignored in pastoral care and discipline than the practices described below.

Adultery is the violation of sexual fidelity within marriage by either partner. Its sinfulness is codified as the seventh of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:14). An adulterous sexual liaison cannot convey the nature of God in human sexuality. It cannot symbolize the marriage covenant or serve as a reaffirmation of the marriage vow since no such covenant unites an adulterous relationship. It cannot celebrate the publicly recognized union between two persons, for no such union has been established by vows of commitment to each other. On the contrary, such a commitment was made by at least one of the two persons engaged in this affair to another person who is now physically absent. Adultery has no genuine equivalency to the marriage relationship. The meaning embodied in an

²⁰ C. Seerveld, *The Greatest Song* (Trinity Pennyasheet Press, 1967) p. 67, as quoted by G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: An Introduction & Commentary* (IVP: Leicester, UK) p. 51

²¹ 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.

adulterous relationship is a declaration of intent to violate the marriage bond by a repudiation of the marital vows. Through it the unfaithful partner is articulating their intent to violate the marriage covenant made previously. It symbolizes a personal disregard for the commitment made to the marriage and to one's spouse. Adultery is an act of contempt for the marriage, and a rejection of the personhood of the married person's spouse, to whom the pledge to form a monogamous community of male and female was made.

Pornography has emerged as a new and alarming 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 newer 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. It contorts mutuality into subservience and self surrender into rape. The prevalence and growth of the child pornography industry and related abuse is an alarming example of the increasingly degraded sexual desperation and confusion of our world.

Incest is the violation of familial honor, sexual boundaries and generational respect 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) as a perversion of the created order, a foundation underlined in the oft repeated reminder, "*I am the LORD*". For some forms of incest, the death penalty is prescribed. Incest includes both blood and family kinship. The daughters of Lot conceive through an incestuous ploy (Gen. 19:30-38). David's son Amnon forces himself upon his half sister Tamar, despising his family in the name of "love" (2 Sam. 13). These are examples of rape. But all incestuous relationships, even when consensual and among adults, violate the divine plan for families. The Apostle Paul denounces even consensual incest as incompatible with the Law, the Gospel and the Kingdom (1 Cor. 5:1-5), requiring public discipline and censure. They pervert the primary family relationships, and are therefore described in Scripture as extreme instances of sexual immorality, even when they are intended as permanent monogamous relationships. John the Baptist was beheaded for upholding this Levitical sanction in his prophetic ministry to Israel (Matthew 14). Incest removes the boundaries of familial love and protection, honor and respect required to sustain the health of the family unit. The loving intimacy and fidelity of family relationships must not be confused or confounded for the purposes of individual sexual gratification.

What is intrinsically fallen about each of these diversions? Each of these 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 esoteric, the ecstatic and the erotic. Removed from divine boundaries, sex becomes our identity, our right, our fulfillment, our need. We trade the exquisite adoration of God for self-absorption and obsession. Some end up degrading sex as a mere urge that must find an outlet, no more than our bladders and bowels demand emptying. Whether exalted or degraded, sex as an *End* ends up disappointing, destructive to both self and others. 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 the Apostle 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

The reference in Genesis 9 of the typologically second “fall” of humanity into sin, resulting in a further and focused curse may bring us to the first example in Scripture of a reference to same sex practices, while many will focus first on the Genesis 19 account of Sodom and Gomorrah. Since this post-flood account up to the mid 20th century, engaging in same sex acts has generally carried broad social condemnation, particularly where Judeo-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 psychology and psychiatry. Here the concept of individual *sexual orientation* has emerged, along with a perspective that a homosexual orientation may be “normal” – 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. It should be noted that social norms continue to play a central role in how all psychiatric disorders are defined. There is now movement in some professional medical associations to identify opposition to homosexual practice as a treatable psychiatric disorder.

Growing in intensity since 1969, a new social movement of gay and lesbian support has emerged. This has come with increasing political and social influence in advocacy of homosexuality as a matter of civil rights and liberties. This now forms the social context for the ethical deliberation of this newly defined and defended sexual orientation. From a focus on religious holiness the culture has shifted the debate to one of social justice. The voices calling for this profound change in social consciousness have moved beyond the more radical fringes. They include a growing diversity of persons within the church and include noted Christian theologians, church leaders, pastors and ethicists in both main line and more conservative traditions. The legislative movements towards or against gay marriage or civil unions highlight this redefinition. This struggle has transcended a simple request for the right to privacy. It has become an initiative for social reengineering and a reshaping of a broad world view.

This 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 ongoing development of a Christian sexual ethic. In the Evangelical Covenant Church, a high view of Scripture as the Word of God and a high calling to courageous mission are embodied in pietistic holiness. Joined with openness to all God’s people, this must form the context for our own study and discernment of these urgently pastoral matters. We are called to love people who sin more than they love their sin. How are we engaged in doing this? And 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? What influences shape our attraction and stimulate our arousal? For males, it seems that arousal is orientation. For females, attraction and arousal seem more complex. 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? What is their origin, and what is their end? While we are fearfully and wonderfully made we are also tragically and profoundly fallen.

Within the growing secular concept that sexual behavior is best viewed primarily as emerging from a fixed sexual orientation, the modern disciplines of biology and psychology continue to explore an understanding of the sources of orientation in heredity and environment (nature and nurture). For much of the 20th century, the predominant focus was on environmental factors, particularly related to upbringing. In recent years, the scientific focus has shifted towards exploring a biological basis for sexual orientation. This debate forms a cultural context for the theological questions regarding human sexuality and the Divine intent. At this juncture, the biblical documentation enters into an often fitful rather than fruitful discussion with modern human sciences.²²

Informed by a perspective of our sexuality as an orientation that emerges through factors beyond the control of the individual in heredity, gestation, or the environment of early childhood and adolescent development, 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. While fallenness and sinfulness have a common origin, they are not the same thing.

For Christian ethicists questions of the naturalness of homosexuality seek justification in biblical exegesis. The passages at stake may include the story of Noah and Ham (Gen. 9), the central narrative account of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:4-11 plus other references to the sin of Sodom), and the tragedy in Gibeah (Judg. 19). Most significant for this debate are the proscriptive regulations of the Holiness Code (Lev. 18:22 and 20:13). There is also the Pauline and Petrine condemnations of sinful sexual practices (Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 5; 1 Tim. 1:10; 1 Peter 4; 2 Peter 2). Out of this lifestyle some were led to faith and discipleship in the early church (1 Cor. 6:9).

For Israel, holiness was a *status conferred* by divine promise and divine redemption. It was also a *calling* to be lived out in obedience to God's voice and in keeping the covenant he had made with them (Ex. 19:5-6). The Mosaic Law was given to reflect the created order as described in Genesis 2 and to prevent violations of it. In Leviticus 18, Israel is warned seven times not to behave like the nations who occupied Canaan before them, because "*I am the LORD*". Same sex behavior in Israel, along with cursing of parents, adultery, incest, and bestiality are cause for the most serious of consequences, punished far more severely than elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In the Scriptures homosexuality is not addressed as a solely biological issue, but as emerging from and associated with a particular kind of pagan religious commitment found in the surrounding cultures. Advocates of openness to homosexuality claim that in spite of these texts homosexuality as a natural, lifelong orientation was not what these biblical prohibitions had in view. This is at the heart of the contemporary debate where our discernment needs to be informed and prayerful as we bring the Gospel to the world, embodied in the love, holiness and compassion of Christ.

Many thoroughly detailed studies have been published in recent years seeking a better understanding of the biblical texts and contexts. These seek to enlighten our understanding of the original intent

²² For a more expansive exploration of this issue within the Anglican/Episcopal Church, see "True Union in the Body?" A paper commissioned by the Most Rev. Drexel Wellington Gomez, Archbishop of the West Indies, available at www.anglicancommunioninstitute.org/articles/trueunionhome.htm

and meaning of Scripture for the contemporary discussion of the church.²³ The work done by scholars with varying viewpoints on these issues has helped identify thoughtless presuppositions, unhelpful prejudices, and unsubstantiated claims that cloud the issues and damage the witness of the church as a holy, just, welcoming and transforming community before the world. Much good can come as congregations confess their failure and begin to dialogue with and support individuals and families where a member experiences homosexual or lesbian attraction and desire. Conversations with such individuals based on honesty and accurate information will guide the church into being more redemptive and helpful.

Discussion within the sphere of biology, psychology and sociology regarding the existence and formation of sexual orientation creates a challenge to the church to broaden the discussion of human sexuality beyond the arena of the morality of various behaviors to include theologically informed discussion of the dynamics that form individual sexual preference, or desire. A failure to understand the societal locus of debate on this issue in our culture as a matter of advocacy for the oppressed, for civil rights for marginalized persons, and in defense of personal freedom and expression dooms the church to perpetual misunderstanding and mockery.²⁴ 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 Jesus Christ.²⁵

The contemporary challenges regarding the “naturalness” of alternative human sexual orientations from the historic social norm of heterosexuality needs to be addressed respectfully. The Apostle Paul assumes the innate biological fallenness of human nature (Rom. 6-7). Scripturally, ethics is never reduced to a mere condoning of what comes naturally, regardless of the rationale used to prove the hypothesis. Even if the Church, by its understanding of the truth of Scripture and science were to come to embrace the concept of sexual orientation as predetermined this would not solve the ethical dilemma. Christian ethics focuses on what *should* be normative in the context of creation and consummation, not what *appears* normal in the context of a fallen and “groaning” creation. No ethical system holds that all inborn traits are inherently good and desirable. What differs is the philosophical or religious basis by which one seeks to apply the wisdom of one’s perspective. Any decision by the Church to sanction a way of life cannot be authorized solely by scientific findings. Intimate human sexual relationships are called to signify the reconciliation and redemption accomplished by Christ and must be authorized by the Biblical witness to that gospel. Uniformly in Scripture the only sexual analogy used to signify God’s intent as a Loving Creator, Covenant maker, and Consummator is the heterosexual marriage relationship. The promise of two distinct and different persons becoming one as described in the union/reunion of male and female in marriage is also the essential metaphor used in the promise of redemption (Eph. 2:14-15; 5:31-32).

²³ For a comparison and dialogue between the affirming and non-affirming views within a Christian ethical context, see the brief volume *Homosexuality and the Bible: Two Views*, by Dan O. Via and Robert A. J. Gagnon (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003). 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*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1980.

²⁴ See Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003 p. 176ff.

²⁵ See John Piper & Justin Taylor, especially chapters 1 & 2.

The Hermeneutics of Desire

Informed by a liberal philosophy of individualism in the modern secular arena “natural” desire is no longer questioned by its’ end or object but is affirmed generically as good. Seen individually, desire becomes *Desire* and is self-justifying. It begins with a look in the mirror. It is understood with an essentially positive perspective as the path to self actualization and fulfillment. Yet in Christian theology, desire is never examined independently of its object. Desire is viewed from an ethical perspective by reference to God and *God’s* revealed purposes for creation. To be good, desire must show itself in subordination to serve the Creator, not the fallen and alienated creature. In life there are ultimately only two alternatives: either we conform our desires to the truth or we contort truth to fit our desires. Contorting truth to fit desire always twists us into some form of bondage. Conforming desire to the truth is what sets us free. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a basis for granting sexual desire, or any other desire, a life of its’ own. If we allow ourselves to justify sexual actions based on what some consider to be natural and normal in our fallen biological state, regardless of what our desires are, do we not condemn all ethics to futility? Observing this broader trend in the Church, Eugene H. Peterson observes:

*“A new twist on non-Trinitarian ways of reading the Bible has emerged in our times. It has reached the scale of an epidemic and requires special attention. It can be understood best, I think, as a replacement Trinity. . . . Here’s how it works. It is important to observe that in the formulation of this new Trinity that defines the self as the sovereign text for living, the Bible is neither ignored nor banned; it holds, in fact, an honored place. But the three-personal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is replaced by a very individualized personal Trinity of my Holy Wants, my Holy Needs, and my Holy Feelings.”*²⁶

While sex is a mystery, in a fallen world it is a potentially hazardous and painful mystery. In spite of the unquestioned individualism and penchant for privacy in western culture, the discernment of sexual holiness is something we should not try to handle all by ourselves, as disconnected individuals. The ‘law of Christ’ pushes us to ask how our sexual desires and behaviors will affect others, whether or not they will build up or tear down the community. Consequently, Christian marriages are public, not private, relationships. We might in our arrogance try to experiment with sex apart from God’s wise designs for it. Regrettably and painfully, in our fumbling with autonomy and self-fulfillment, libido does not always surrender to our conscious will. It remains without apology a mystery, and like all mysteries it deserves caution and due respect.

In their fallen state, human desires, while rooted in the image of God, are also now unconsciously subject to the disorders of the fall. Death is at work in us battling against the power of life. Sadly, our sexual desires are not exempt from this disorientation (Rom. 1:24), but are subject to confusion that, when acted upon outside of the created order may only intensify (Rom. 1:26-27). In a world darkened by the fall, desire can as easily enmesh us in sin as lead us to righteousness. Since desire can inflame idolatry as well as inspire holiness it cannot be viewed independently of the object of desire, but only in concert with it.

Christians are called to be discerning about all desires, enslaved to none but submitting them entirely to the clarifying Lordship of Christ (Phil. 3:19). In a fallen world, desire is not merely a clue to self-fulfillment, but can be a beguiling source of stumbling into self-destruction (James 4:1-3). The felt

²⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book, A Conversation in the art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 2005 p. 31

naturalness of our sexual preferences does not set aside the biblical ethic which limits genital sexual expression to the context of monogamous heterosexual marriage. Even though genetic inheritance, gestational stressors or external factors may predispose a person to one sexual orientation (and this is by no means agreed upon by all sides, both theological and scientific), the element of personal choice is always present in decisions to act on the basis of our desires. These decisions can serve to reinforce the development of our sexuality, particularly in the formative adolescent and young adult years. Sexual expressions toward others generally form lasting sexual impressions upon our own psyche.

The Incarnate Way of Jesus and the Call to Recover Sexual Holiness

The significance of human sexuality in relationship to the image of God is enhanced by reflecting on the reality and doctrine of the incarnation. In Christ, God has taken into the Godhead the full range of human experience, including sexuality. This indwelling of God (John 1:14) affirms the nature of the spiritual life as an embodied existence. In the natural state of a circumcised Jew (Phil. 2:6-8), Jesus learned obedience through what he endured (Heb. 5:8), facing temptations (Matt. 4), physical limitations (John 4:6), discouragement (Luke 13:34), and betrayal (Matt. 26:46). He was a man of sorrows, fully acquainted with grief (Isa. 53 and Luke 18:31-33). By choosing to live within Israel in singleness and celibacy, Jesus has not avoided human sexuality, but has embraced it and affirmed singleness as a viable and blessed alternative to marriage, a chaste expression of openness and inclusiveness to others. This serves as 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 wife 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.

As a righteous and observant Jew, Jesus not only lives out of response to *Torah*, the Word, but affirms, intensifies, and fulfills it. Jesus' understanding of his vocation is rooted in the jubilee vision of Isaiah of divine deliverance (Isa. 61:1, 2, with Luke 4:18ff), a vision that embraces the transformation and redemption of persons and community in every dimension of human identity. Jesus' vision of the Law as rooted in the ethic of love for God and neighbor (Mark 12:28-34) radically reshapes the ethical response of his community towards persons sickened by their fallenness, sin, and alienation from the community because of ritual impurity. It is to these kinds of situations and people Jesus understands his ministry to be focused upon (Matt. 9:12). Jesus' teachings about sexuality and his actions towards sexually broken persons must inform our response to people.

Feeling the strain of controversy with the Jewish leaders, Jesus' unapologetic call and invitation to "follow me" becomes the new center of identity and ethic for his apprentices, both men and women. Family ties, personal wealth, lucrative careers, and concern for self preservation become idolatrous if they are exalted against or alongside of Jesus. In this context Jesus becomes "Lord" both "for" and "over" every dimension of the disciples' identity and experience. This requires the denial of the "Self", and the taking up of the cross (Mark 8:34ff). Conversion is experienced through an increasing union with Christ, progressively transforming through the ongoing repentance of turning from all that is not compatible with this union with Christ and turning towards all that is compatible with Him. This transformation is the result of abiding in Christ (John 15) and His Word (teachings) abiding in the disciples. Love of God is confirmed through love of neighbor and obedience to God's commands (1 John 5:1-4) which fulfill the Law of Moses (Matt.5:17-20). Love cannot exist without obedience and obedience requires a heart of love, or it is merely outward compliance, and a dead work.

Cross Bearing & the Call to Sexual Holiness

For those who follow Jesus, cross bearing and self denial are essential metaphors of disciple making that address human sexuality along with every other dimension of individual and communal identity. In lieu of self justification, Jesus' disciples are justified by faith through grace. In the paradox of the Kingdom, those who love their life will lose it, while those who renounce their life for Jesus' sake will keep it for eternity (Matt. 10:39).

The human rebellion, brokenness and unrighteousness chronicled in Genesis 3, including the promise of a Redeemer to come to defeat the serpent and restore the human race, outline the crisis and context for the story of Jesus' death on the cross. "*God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us*" (Rom. 5:8). The human unrighteousness detailed in Romans 1 is answered eloquently by the righteousness of God, as Jesus comes forth to die for the unrighteous (Rom. 3:23-25), making it possible for them to begin to walk in new life (Rom. 8:3-4).

As Paul understands it, the righteous wrath of God, expressed in God's reluctant choice to give the human race enough rope to hang itself in following their own foolish desires and degrading passions is not the final act of God. The message of the cross announces that God loves us even while we are in outright rebellion. It is the sacrificial death of Christ that seeks to plumb the depth of God's love. Both those who are engaged in the dishonoring of God with their bodies as well as those who self-righteously judge them as 'sinners' in denial of their own sin and brokenness are the recipients of God's profoundly sacrificial love and mercy. This is the Gospel Paul is not ashamed to preach, where love for sinners and wrath for sin are manifest (Rom. 1:16-17).

The cross also identifies the end of an old life lived under the tyranny of sin (Rom. 6:1-4) and the beginning of a new creation where righteousness has begun to reign. The gospel, which embodies the power, not just the news of salvation, announces that in Christ no one is locked into the degrading cycles of the past that have marked their thinking, feeling, and behaving. This is where Jesus' own ministry with the sexually broken and fallen stirred such controversy – he held out hope for people to experience change and invited them into the freedom of following him (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:37; John 4, 8, 12:1-8;). Not merely the penalty but also the power of sin has been overcome in the cross (Rom. 6:12-14). This includes the power of sexual brokenness. We are now free to enter into the disciplines of the Spirit that can progressively enable us to serve God in righteousness, peace, and joy which are the essence of the Kingdom at work in those who believe (Rom. 14:17). While this deliverance may not be experienced completely until the second coming of Christ, we have been given the resources of friendship, prayer, and patience to endure the tension between "already" and "not yet". Both the power of grace in victory and the victory of grace in weakness are emblems of the already initiated reign of God. The church is ordered to walk by faith, not by sight even while we share together in the groaning of all creation, which includes the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23). The reality of a new creation does not eliminate the reality of struggle in the present time, but interprets it by the hopeful metaphor of birth pangs, leading to a new form of embodiment at the resurrection of the saints.

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

Within the Divine plan for human community there are alternative forms of human sexuality; the union of male and female within the marriage bond and singleness within the fellowship of the people of God. The union of Adam and Eve described in Genesis 1 and 2 serve as the norm for the marriage relationship. The union of Christ and the Church described in the Gospels and Epistles serve as the norm for the single relationship in fellowship with God's people. Both are viable and suitable forms of Christian discipleship.

Marriage: *Leaving and Cleaving in the Body of Christ*

First, how do we articulate and live out of a biblical and Christian understanding of marriage, sexual activity within marriage, and the boundaries for the celebration of our sexuality in this relationship? 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 Matthew 19 Jesus interprets the Genesis accounts of the creation of male and female as underlying the purpose of God in instituting marriage as the monogamous 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). The chaste marital relationship is a sign depicting God's intent to enter into covenantal fellowship from the heart with human beings (see the witness of Hosea). Marriage serves then as a type of this promise that will find complete fulfillment in the consummation of the Kingdom at the return of Christ.

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). 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?

Although the marriage relationship takes a secondary position in the establishment of the Kingdom community in the New Testament era, marriage is still to be honored by all (Heb. 13:4). Within the inclusive mission of the Church in the world, marriage serves that broader mission within the local church community. Marriage becomes a vehicle for disciples to carry out the great commission mandate of the Church within the marital community through the witness of a believer in the home (1 Peter 3:1-6; 1 Cor. 7:12-16). This is also conveyed 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 New Testament also witnesses to the suitability of the marriage relationship as a means for the missional outreach of the church in society through the example of godly family life to the broader culture. In the Jewish and Gentile mission the homes of believers were missional centers for the gathering and sending of the church. Priscilla and Aquila serve as 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 unit.

For the apostolic community, marriage served as a primary metaphor that spoke of the New Covenant between Christ and the Church, comprising Jews and Gentiles. This is seen in Paul's use of the metaphor in Eph. 5, where Paul brings forth insights into the activity of God related to the church, and also to establish patterns of relationship between husbands and their wives. The essential ethic of the entire community arises from the sacred nature of the marital ideal, and that is: *"submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"* (Eph. 5:21). By applying the marital metaphor to the entire community because of its origin in the Triune God, Paul sets the order of marriage within the context of God's saving acts in history.

At the apex of the Revelation this theme is profoundly reintroduced. Jesus, as in the gospels (John 3:29), is referenced as the bridegroom (19:7). Later, the bride is introduced, "the wife of the lamb" (21:9), "the Holy City, Jerusalem" (21:10). The bride of the lamb is the transformed new human community, the spotless bride who is the labor of love of the crucified yet risen Christ. Seen through this inspired and imaginative perspective, 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

Secondly, within the fellowship of God's people, the union of Christ and the Church described in the Gospels and Epistles serves as the norm for the lifestyle of singleness. Biblically understood, chaste singleness serves as a viable and blessed expression of God's will. It has the capacity to serve as a means of grace for the realization of the human race as the complementary community of male and female as a reflection of the divine image.

At the beginning of the 21st century in the West, the majority of living adults are not married. For the first time in western history, marriage has become the minority lifestyle in many, especially urban communities. Increasing proportions of the population are postponing marriage or never marrying. Consequently, singleness, whether chaste or not, is becoming increasingly accepted as a lifestyle of the mainstream. The ranks of the never married singles are joined by the formerly married as divorce continues to proliferate. In a culture with such an increase in the numbers of single persons across the spectrum of age and stage of life the pastoral question concerning the design and sanction of God emerges with greater force.

For some, singleness is a personal decision to remain unmarried. For other singles, they aspire to find a suitable partner to marry, but the search is difficult. Lack of opportunity or lack of a suitable marriage partner may preclude persons from marrying during the prime years of cultural eligibility. For some, further education, personal goals, or responsibilities to parents are a source of preoccupation. Such persons have not given up the desire to be married, but may have deferred the hope of finding a suitable partner in the foreseeable future. Others may, over time, come to affirm their singleness, welcoming this lifestyle for what it affords. This option has apostolic support (1 Cor. 7:7-8, 27), but is not easy for all singles to embrace. Singleness also includes those who revert to a single lifestyle following the end of a marriage, whether from divorce or death, and is generally entered into involuntarily or as a consequence of the fragility of life.

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.

Beginning with Jesus, a significant shift in the place of the single person and the potential goodness of lifelong singleness as a calling began to emerge (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. Along with the example of Jesus stood the examples of John the Baptist, and the Apostle Paul. It is also evident that some of the women close to Jesus in the Gospels were single or widowed and followed him apart from marriage (Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha). Their devotion to Jesus provided a financial base that sustained his ministry. Each of these persons fulfilled a God given mission. Their lifestyle gave witness that singleness is no barrier to serving God's purposes. The Apostle Paul declared that the single life may be preferable and advantageous for some of God's workers in certain times and places (1 Cor. 7:32-35). Paul's counsel does not present singleness as a higher manner of spirituality as some in Corinth were clearly teaching. Paul's argument was pragmatic and rooted in the "present crisis" (7:26). In the New Testament, single persons were welcomed as equal members in the service of the Gospel.

In a theological context, single persons, whether chaste in temporal abstinence or lifelong celibacy, are sexual persons. 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. Seen another way, chaste singleness, whether temporal or permanent in nature, actually comprises an embodied way of expressing human sexuality in a chaste form. Chaste singleness is a form of sexual activity that disciplines the believer in an alternative form of establishing intimacy with others than would marriage.

Seen from the perspective of the Genesis texts, human sexuality clearly serves as a witness to the Triune God. It equips us for community with God and human society where our complementary relationships are framed in intimacy, mutuality, and fidelity. Sexuality is a good gift of a good God; but it is now experienced only in a fallen world by injured creatures. Though we see through a glass darkly as we view ourselves and God's Word, we trust the light of divine revelation spoken and heard in Scripture to be sufficient to guide us in our understanding. Only in humility and trembling fear-of-the-Lord can we affirm and confirm our discernment of what truth is and what error is as we covenant together to engage in Christ's mission in the world.

In the context of history, and particularly in the contemporary environment in which this discussion is conducted, it is all too easy to find ourselves steered or driven off course. It is tempting to reduce the mystery of human life and Christian Faith into something we can analyze, dissect and control. The novel way is still broad and popular that leads to destruction, while the ancient way that leads to salvation is narrow and unpopular. A perpetual task of theology is to help us in our obedience to both affirm what is true and unmask what is false so that we may live truly and freely in the Kingdom, which is centered in righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

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

First, we affirm the Bible is the Word of God. 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. In the body we experience the degeneracy of sin, hear the Gospel,

and begin to experience the regeneracy of salvation in the power of the Holy Spirit. What we do in and with our bodies matters because our bodies are the locus of creation, temptation, sin, fallenness, salvation, sanctification, resurrection and judgment. The divine mysteries of our creation in the image of God and the incarnation of God in Christ affirm the holistic understanding of all persons comprising a unity in diversity of body, soul and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23). 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, in whole and in parts, 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). We affirm that the death and resurrection of Jesus as the "Chief Cornerstone" provides a singular and sufficient foundation and design for the reformation of persons in the likeness of Christ. This includes the reformation and healing of our sexual identity and the practice of self control. This can be the fruit of the Spirit, not the work of unhealthy suppression. It is through the death and resurrection of Christ that we are reconciled to God, ourselves, and one another. Because this is true, we warn against the common reliance on legalism as a substitute for the Gospel of grace we encounter in Jesus. The Church has no mandate to construct and communicate a way of life to the world that works off a base of human ability focused essentially on self controlling behavior. This would be a return to the tyranny of the Law. The Law points to our salvation and outlines its' beauty, but cannot secure it. We must live by the new way of the Spirit (Rom. 8:2). Proclaiming Jesus as "Lord" calls the world to surrender to the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ; to do otherwise assumes that strength exists in a world of weakness (Rom. 7:18).

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.

Third, we affirm that the resurrection of Christ still forms the basis for the boundaries of our denominational identity and mission. In a world where the borders and boundaries continue to blur and the foundations crumble, the crucified and risen Christ continues to form and direct our life together as an expression of His Church and mission. We continue to hear the call to be "*a companion of all those who fear thee*" (Psa. 119:63), while we affirm that the call of Christ requires both spiritual unity and sexual purity (Eph. 4:3 and 5:3). We warn against the growing potential for sectarianism that appears willing to divide the Church in matters of doctrine and conduct without consideration for the stability of the Church in such purity of life and unity of mission. The resurrection of Jesus forms us into such 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? For "we discover at the heart of the Gospel a Jesus who is not simply one who extends welcome, but is also the one who dies, is raised and breathes his Spirit on us. Paul in Romans can expound the gospel of God's grace in terms which are similar . . . it is simultaneously forgiving (Rom. 3-5), costly (Rom. 6-7), transforming (Rom. 8), and welcoming (Rom. 15). This is the pastoral shape of the Gospel."²⁷ A church, whether a local congregation or an entire denomination that denies it consists of people who sin, and exists for them, implicitly rejects the grace of the gospel. As Hans Kung points out, where such a church exists:

*"It deserves neither God's mercy nor men's trust. 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."*²⁸

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?" (1 Cor. 10:11)²⁹. Only a thoroughly Biblical world view gives us the essential hope, perspective and resolve to hear, believe and trust the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a better way to discern together a sexual ethic for those who are inheriting God's Kingdom by grace through faith. 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. In the mystery of God, our gender is an eternal dimension of our identity; therefore, it is destined for redemption from sin and deliverance from brokenness. 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 divinely blessed and sin oppressed 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. Gnosticism, Moralism, and Sectarianism deny the supremacy and wisdom of grace and truth embodied in the incarnate One we confess to follow when we say, "Jesus is Lord!"

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

²⁷ "True Union in the Body", p. 38

²⁸ Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday) 1976, pp. 507-508.

²⁹ The recently published volumes by Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book* and N.T. Wright, *The Last Word*, may be helpful to stimulate and direct this dialogue on how we read Scripture.

apostolic Faith delivered once 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 fullness of salvation to come to all creation, where our groaning, sighing and weeping articulate prayers for the world in tones decipherable only by God's Spirit. Whether by containment in celibacy or by expression 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 only 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.*³⁰

³⁰ Martin Luther, "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," Second Article (1521).

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