

*A Pastoral Essay on Homosexual Practice and the Bible*

We live in confusing times. The uncertainties and conflicts of this era impact every person in our nation. As Christians, we feel some unique tensions. We are called to claim our citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20) and yet somehow still live as citizens on earth. We are called to be peacemakers (Matt. 5:9) who know that we live in a spiritual warzone (Eph. 6:12). We are called to offer the gentle yoke of Jesus (Matt. 11:28-30) and yet stand for truth and God's moral order. We feel these tensions keenly during June, a month that is now dominated by the national celebration of LGBTQ+ Pride. Our President has clearly communicated that the full resources of the federal government should be deployed to support LGBTQ+ causes. Moreover, the culture makers of Hollywood, elite media organizations, and academia agree that society must abandon any type of bigotry toward "sexual minorities." And then we look at the church. Recently, the Church of England approved the use of set prayers and liturgies to bless same-sex civil unions. This same body has also explored baptismal celebrations for those who transition gender identities and choose new names. In the US, we can observe substantial conflicts taking place in the United Methodist Church and the Christian Reformed Church. In both cases, some voices call for "full inclusion," some voices call for "biblical fidelity," and some voices don't know what to think and simply wish the conflict would go away.

First Presbyterian Church is a member of the *Evangelical Presbyterian Church*. We believe that the Christian sexual ethic can be stated in simple words. God intends sexual behavior to be restricted to a husband and a wife joined together in a monogamous, life-long marriage. When someone does not live within such a union, God calls this person to live in chastity, refraining from sexual behaviors with another person. Moreover, both married and single Christians are challenged to cultivate a pure mind in which sexual desire is ordered and bounded and lust is subjected to self-control. These are traditional teachings of the Christian church as a whole and are the *official positions* of our congregation. No one who serves in office in our church should hold another perspective. Of course, we also accept that things in this world do not live up to the ideal. We wrestle with divorce, remarriage, sexual sin of various sorts, and questions concerning mental health and sexual and gender identity. We lean heavily on the grace and mercy of Jesus in the complexities of life. Because there is so much confusion on these topics, I think it is helpful for Christians to have access to basic resources that help in articulating what we believe. In that spirit, the following thoughts are a simple guide to our commitment to biblically

grounded, traditional views of marriage and sexuality. I will set out a brief whole Bible case for our commitment to man-woman marriage. Then, I will work through four questions concerning our ethical commitments.

### *A Whole Bible Case for Traditional Marriage*

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). Notice that this is a complementary pair. There is differentiation, and yet the two combined speak of totality. Other pairs follow in the Genesis account - light and darkness, sea and dry land, and, at the pinnacle of God's creation, men and women (Gen. 1:27). Each of these complementary pairs ultimately points to a greater union - the union of God and his creation. God is not his creation. The creation is not God. There is differentiation and yet there is union. The creation account also gives us the foundational picture of marriage - a man and a woman cleaving to one another in a one-flesh union (Gen. 2:23-25). If we flip to the end of the Bible, we find several interesting statements. We are told that God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth, a renewed complementary pair (Rev. 21:1). We read about another marriage: the marriage supper of the lamb (Rev. 19:6-9). The vision of the eschaton is the vision of God and his creation in a renewed relationship (Rev. 21:3). Genesis and Revelation form the bookends of the Bible. All of history tells a story of union between those entities which are differentiated: God and creation, and Christ and his church. The purpose of marriage will one day be fulfilled in the bliss of the resurrection (Mk. 12:25).

It is in this context that we come to understand that homosexuality is not part of God's moral intention for his world. In the Old Testament, homosexual sexual practice was forbidden for the Jewish people (Lev. 18:22). In the New Testament, Paul lists homosexual practice as a sin from which Christians have been redeemed (1 Cor. 6:9-11).<sup>1</sup> The references to homosexuality in the first chapter of Romans are

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<sup>1</sup> Some people argue that the word *homosexuality* and its derivatives that are used in some modern translations of 1 Cor. 6 only appeared in the twentieth century and were inappropriately applied to the biblical accounts. In this argument, the modern practice of homosexuality is treated as completely different from what was practiced in the ancient world and what was written about in the Bible. Such folks argue that older translations do not use the word *homosexuality* and, therefore, we should not use 1 Cor. 6 to argue against homosexuality. This is a very weak argument. Whatever modern word we use, we use it to describe a practice that is communicated clearly in the Greek text. It is not the English word that matters but the behavior that the Greek words are trying to express. Even though pre-twentieth-century translations used different terms, the Christians who translated the verses still knew exactly what they were talking about. Those who try to make the above argument would almost have us assume that we could take a time machine back to 1842 or 1237 and find that there were either no homosexuals in the modern use

particularly instructive. There we find that inappropriate sexual relationships (Rom. 1:26-27) are the consequence of a primal idolatry: people fall into these sins because they have exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped creatures rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). Remember the teaching of Genesis. Homosexuality is a confusion of the narrative of the coming together of God and creation; hence it thrives in a culture dominated by idolatry. Just as idolatry is one creature worshipping another, so homosexual sexual practice is one sexual partner joining together with a different sexual partner in a relationship of sameness, not differentiation.

What about Jesus? Though many people assert that Jesus did not address the issue of homosexuality, his teaching clearly excludes homosexual marriage or homosexual practice from Christian morality. First, Jesus taught about the danger of fornication (Mk 7:21). Fornication was a category of sexual sins that involved various deviations from the ideal sexual standard. Same-sex sexual practice, which was common in the Greco-Roman world, was included in this category. No one could reasonably conclude from Christ's position on sexual immorality, that he would have accepted same-sex relationships, as there is no evidence that his use of the word fornication deviated from standard first-century Jewish uses of the term. If anything, Jesus found the teaching of many in his context to be too lax (Matt. 5:27-30). Second, Jesus clearly affirms the vision of marriage taught in Genesis 2 (Matt. 19:4-6). Jesus affirmed the Genesis ideal, and the early church followed Christ in affirming the teaching of Genesis. For example, they held that elders serving in the church should be faithful in marriage to one woman (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). So, where does this leave us? The narrative of the whole bible affirms the traditional vision of marriage as a covenant union between one man and one woman. It was taught in Genesis. It was codified in the Torah. It was affirmed by Jesus. It was advanced by the early Christians. It was appealed to in Revelation. Now, we may take up four questions concerning our traditional views of marriage and sexuality.

*Things change between the Old Testament and the New Testament. How can Christians eat shellfish yet continue to forbid homosexual behavior?*

It is true that many behaviors were restricted in the Old Testament, and yet many of those restrictions are no longer binding upon Christians. The food codes of the Israelites fall within this category. It is true that the ancient Israelites were not

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of the word (people with sexual attraction to others of the same sex) or that homosexual practice was widely practiced by Christians of those eras. Either conclusion, of course, is ridiculous. People have struggled with this temptation in all periods of history and the church has always regarded homosexual practice as sinful. The argument from mistranslation, therefore, is unpersuasive.

permitted to eat shellfish (Lev. 11:10). Yet Christians do not have to follow this prohibition. What changed? Jesus explicitly told his followers that all foods were clean (Mk. 7:19). Moreover, the church in Acts determined that Gentile Christians were not required to follow the food codes (Acts 15:23-29). This trajectory reveals an important principle for biblical interpretation: *Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture*. New Testament believers are permitted to do things forbidden to Old Testament Jewish believers when the progress of revelation recorded in the Bible makes it clear that such a change is authorized. No such change is authorized concerning sexual immorality. Notice specifically what the early church leaders gathered in Jerusalem wrote to Gentile followers of Jesus: "...that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from *sexual immorality*. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15:29). No to the food codes. Yes to traditional sexual morality. In making this decision, the Christians were simply echoing Jesus who declared all foods clean, and who also affirmed the Genesis picture of male-female marriage as the ideal of sexual practice.

*I see examples of polygamy and prostitution in the Bible. Does the Bible present a consistent vision of sexuality and marriage for us to follow?*

It is true that various deviations from the ideal occur in the Bible. Polygamy is frequently practiced in the Old Testament. We also read of men visiting prostitutes (Judg. 16:1) and daughters having sex with their father (Gen. 19:30-38). Some defenses of same-sex marriage in the church suggest that either the Bible does not advance a consistent sexual ethic or that changing attitudes about practices such as polygamy show us how attitudes might change about homosexual practice. In the case of polygamy, we see a move from acceptance to rejection. In the case of homosexual practice, so the argument goes, we see a move from rejection to acceptance. There are two key principles of interpretation that are relevant to the question. First, there is a difference between what is *prescribed* and what is *described* in the Bible. Some passages tell a story without commending the behaviors. David's actions regarding Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) are part of the narrative. The inclusion of the story in no way suggests that Christians should normalize adultery and murder. Second, there is a difference between *the ideal* and a *temporary permission* to deviate from the ideal. This comes out clearly in Jesus's response to the Pharisees concerning divorce. They argued for a lax view of divorce. Jesus asserted that this was not the ideal. Men could not pull apart what God had joined (Matt. 19:6). They then asked why Moses allowed a certificate of divorce (Deut. 24:1-4). Here is Jesus's reply: "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you:

whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery” (Matt. 19:8-9). According to Jesus, the Mosaic teaching was not about the ideal but a regulation designed to produce temporary justice in a specific context in which the ideal was out of reach for spiritual reasons. This is like how the Bible treats slavery. Slavery is regulated in Scripture without being forthrightly condemned, and yet the message of the whole Bible works to undo oppressive slave systems. How does this all apply to homosexual behavior? First, the Bible excludes homosexual behavior from the moral ideal. Second, the Bible never attempts to permit and regulate homosexual behavior. It is always disallowed, and there is no text that suggests that it can be engaged in appropriate ways under certain contexts.

*Christians disagree about all sorts of things. Why can't we just accept that Christians disagree about these issues and find some way to get along?*

Christians disagree about eschatology, the sacraments, church government and a host of other issues. Given all the disagreements, shouldn't Christians simply accept disagreements concerning sexuality? There are two reasons why we cannot do this. First, the Bible is clear on this issue, far clearer than it is on an issue like eschatology. Even when biblically oriented Christians disagree on an issue, they do so based on the text of the Bible. There is an appeal to God's Word. To dispute the biblical view of sexuality is to appeal to sources outside of and opposed to the truth of revelation. It isn't a debate about what the Bible teaches. Second, Christians have never disagreed on the basic shape of Christian sexual morality. We have debated many things. But most Christians (the vast majority) throughout history and living in the world today do not debate these issues. It is true that we sometimes disagree on peripheral issues of sexual morality. For example, Catholic Christians teach that priests are normally not permitted to marry, and some fundamentalists teach that re-marriage is not possible after divorce. But in both these cases, there is no question that the basic shape of sexual morality is left intact. No sex outside of a male-female marriage. The subjection of our desires to God's will. The forbidding of fornication. In fact, the peripheral disagreements on sexual ethics work to highlight the central core agreements that exclude homosexual practice.

*Christians are supposed to believe in grace and forgiveness. Isn't it unloving to limit LGBTQ+ inclusion in the church or to call homosexual behavior sin?*

I must express appreciation for the heart behind this question. Of course, Christians are called to stand for gracious welcome. After all, Jesus died for us when we were enemies (Rom. 5:10), and Christ came to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance (Lk. 5:32). Jesus came to seek and save the lost (Lk. 19:10). All

Christians, apart from the gracious love of Jesus, are lost sinners who stand in enmity against God. If it were not for the redemptive purpose of God, we would all be lost. We must never abandon the teaching of the radical gospel of Jesus's death and resurrection. But notice that this gracious welcome hinges on the fact that we stand demerited before God because of our sin. God would not need to give us mercy through Jesus if we were not lost sinners. The above question is guilty of a fundamental confusion of categories. It confuses *what God forgives* with *what God morally permits*. God forgives things that he does not morally permit. If this were not true, then I would be lost forever. If LGBTQ+ people are to receive gracious welcome and hospitality in the church, then they must do so in the same manner that all people find welcome and hospitality in the church. They must come acknowledging the reality of sin and the need for forgiveness. The danger of this category confusion is that we would ultimately fail to offer people grace and mercy, instead choosing to say that the Bible's moral commands are not binding. If the moral instruction that convicts us of sin is not binding, why would we ever come to God to receive forgiveness?

### *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have sought to demonstrate that the whole Bible teaches a sexual ethic that holds monogamous, life-long male-female marriage as the ideal for sexual behavior. Moreover, the traditional sexual ethic also teaches that our desires must be properly ordered, and our lusts restrained. The church has taught this vision of sexuality for the entirety of its history. Most Christians in the world today also affirm this basic biblical sex ethic. This traditional view of marriage and sexuality is the official position of our local congregation, and it should be the view of our leaders. In closing, I would like to frankly acknowledge two things. First, we do fall short of the ideals of God's moral instruction. We sin. We experience traumatic and unwanted things. The answer is not to abandon the ideal but to cultivate a loving, Christ-centered community in which people receive discipline, instruction, mercy, support, and meaningful relationships. Second, God's grace is big enough and strong enough to help us in our distress. God's grace can change those who experience unwanted sexual attractions. God's grace can heal hurting marriages. God's grace can bless those who know the pain of divorce. The gospel is good news for all sinners, including for those who identify as LGBTQ+. We must never abandon the truth of God's Word or try to overthrow God's authority. But we must also never abandon God's love and the hope that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to all people who come to him just as they are.