

A Biblical View of Human Sexuality

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*

(Gen. 1:27)

Sexuality and Creation

The Bible begins its discussion of human sexuality in the book of Genesis with the account of Creation. Jesus himself rooted his teaching on marriage and divorce in Genesis 2, citing the creation account as both authoritative and forever binding (Matt. 19:4-6; Mk. 10:6-9). The Apostle Paul reasoned likewise, anchoring his exhortations concerning Christian marriage in the specific language of Genesis 2:24 (Eph. 5:31).

In Genesis 1-2 sexuality figures prominently in a larger conversation concerning God's original intention for humankind--his crowning creative achievement. God, we are told, created human beings "male and female," indicating that gender distinctions are part of the created order itself, not mere culturally conditioned artifacts. Gender supplies, then, an important component of what it means to be human.

Furthermore, gender distinctions prove essential for the fulfillment of God's purposes for humanity. Indeed, the fulfillment of God's initial mandate requires humankind to be both male and female. We read in Genesis 1:28: "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it.'" Obedience to this original divine directive would be impossible without God creating and blessing innate gender distinctions.

Gender enables the wonderful mix of likeness and difference that makes sexual intimacy and procreation possible. Gender and sex are both divine gifts, part of a finished creation that God pronounced "very good" (Gen. 1:31). However puzzling and problematic human sexuality may have become--especially in our day--God did not intend it to be this way.

Sexuality is a divine blessing. God created human beings, not only for spiritual intimacy with himself, but also for an extraordinarily rich intimacy within marriage. We read in Genesis 2:24: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). This same truth we find underscored in the New Testament (Matt. 19:4-6; Eph. 5:31).

The creation account lays the foundation for a consistent and comprehensive theology of sexuality that will be developed throughout the rest of sacred Scripture. We may summarize the biblical understanding in brief: *Human sexuality is a divine gift, by which human beings, created male and female, may experience within marriage a deep and multi-faceted union--one that is physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual--and fulfills the divine mandate to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Gen. 1:28).*

Before we conclude this overview of sexuality and creation, however, we should interject one important observation: while the Bible consistently celebrates the gift of marriage (Gen. 2:18; Gen. 2:24; Pr. 18:22;

Pr. 19:14; 1 Cor. 7:2; Heb. 13:4), it also celebrates the gift of celibacy (Matt. 19:10-12; 1 Cor. 7:25-38). Both are divine blessings. Both provide a context for human flourishing.

Sexuality and the Fall

God's initial created order was, indeed, "very good" (Gen. 1:31), but the Fall changed everything. It disrupted, first of all, the spiritual intimacy that God intended human beings to enjoy with Him. It disrupted, secondly, the intimacy that God intended us to enjoy within marriage, including its sexual dimension. In a word, since the Fall, our sexuality is broken. The Fall left no aspect of human nature or human experience uncorrupted. Human nature fell; and human sexuality fell with it.

It should come as no surprise, then, that we find such sexual disorder in the world. God's original design for sex--that it thrive within the context of a marriage between one man and one woman--has been thwarted in countless ways. Pre-marital sex, co-habitation without marriage, adultery, pornography, and various forms of sexual abuse are rife in contemporary culture.

Sadly, we witness these disorders even in the church. On rare occasions, even some pastors have succumbed to sexual immorality. Sexual abuse perpetrated by members of the clergy is but one of the more egregious signs of the depth and pervasiveness of human sin.

Disordered sexuality is not a uniquely contemporary problem. It was a plight in the biblical world as well. Many biblical passages clearly forbid particular sexual practices (Ex. 20:14; Ex. 22:19; Lev. 18; Lev. 20:10-21; Deut. 22:13-30; Deut. 23:17-18; Matt. 5:27-30; Mk. 7:21-23; Jn. 7:53-8:11; Acts 15:20; Acts 15:19-20; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:11; 1 Cor. 6:13; 1 Cor. 6:18; 1 Cor. 10:8; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5-6; 1 Thess. 4:3-5; Rev. 2:20). Other texts catalogue the egregious consequences of disordered sexuality (Gen. 19:1-29; Gen. 19:30-38; Num. 25; 2 Sam. 11-12; 2 Sam. 13; 1 Ki. 11; Pr. 2:16-19; Pr. 6:30-35).

From almost the beginning of the human story, God's gift of sexuality--which He intended for our good--has been misused by us to our own detriment. Even the most illustrious Old Testament heroes--Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Solomon--practiced polygamy, though God originally intended marriage for one woman and one man. David himself was an adulterer. Biblical spirituality, in both its Old and New Testament manifestations, has been threatened with destruction by disordered sexual desire in its myriad forms.

We should not think, then, that our contemporary sexual chaos and confusion are somehow unique. They are evidence of the fallen human condition. Disordered sexuality is a problem both for believers and unbelievers. It is a problem for both men and women. It is a problem for those with both different-sex and same-sex attraction. Clearly disordered sexuality is a universal human problem.

But we currently find ourselves at a cultural crossroads. Two particular expressions of sexual disorder have come to occupy center stage in the contemporary debate on human sexuality, namely homosexuality and transgenderism. These have always been part of the fallen human condition, but the widespread clamor for their acceptance as morally appropriate lifestyle choices is unprecedented. It is incumbent upon the church, then, to think about such disorders--and those who wrestle with them--as deeply, biblically, and compassionately as possible.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality has become a hotly-contested topic in recent years. Matters of great import hinge on this debate, including the nature of human sexuality and the nature of biblical authority. So we must think deeply and speak clearly to the issue. We are, however, called as Christians to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). That requires us to carefully navigate the narrow space between two different errors.

On the one hand, we cannot accept the growing cultural consensus regarding homosexuality. More and more people accept homosexual behavior as a valid personal choice, exempt from any kind of moral censure. Same-sex marriage is becoming commonplace. Increasingly, objection to homosexual practice--no matter how charitably expressed--is characterized as hateful and "homophobic." We cannot simply adjust our theology to accommodate the changing moral climate. We must not exchange conventional "wisdom" for the truth of God's Word.

On the other hand, we must not overreact. We cannot single out homosexual practice, as if it were uniquely subject to divine denunciation. Indeed, the Scriptures clearly indicate God's disapproval of homosexual behavior (Gen. 19:1-22; Judges 19:1-21; Lev. 18:22; Lev. 20:13; Rom. 1:24-28; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; 1 Tim. 1:10). But the Scriptures are equally clear about God's disapproval of heterosexual immorality. (See previously cited Scriptures.) Sexual immorality of all kinds contradicts clear biblical teaching, distorts the divine gift of sexuality, and stands under the righteous judgment of a holy God. The Scriptures warn us: "Flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18), in whatever form that immorality may take.

While we find ourselves in the midst of a cultural debate on homosexual *practice*, we also find ourselves debating sexual orientation itself. Some see sexual orientation as a matter of biological determinism. People are prone to same-sex attraction because of genetics, they say. Others think that it is conditioned by initial sexual experiences. Still others think that same-sex attraction is purely voluntary.

At this point, thoughtful Christians may have more questions than answers. Human sexuality is a remarkably complex phenomenon with biological, psychological, emotional, and spiritual components. To explain same-sex attraction over-simplistically--as merely nature, merely nurture, or merely an act of the will--fails to do justice to sexuality's complexity.

But we do know this: we live in a fallen world in which much is not as it was supposed to be. Disaster, disease, death--none of these accord with God's original intent. They are part and parcel of a creation in "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). In a fallen, disordered creation, it should come as no surprise that human desires become disordered, that sexual desire--which was designed to blissfully propel us toward sexual intimacy and procreation within marriage--gets bent out of shape. Some people, through no fault of their own, find themselves struggling with same-sex attraction. This fits with what we know about our fallen world and our fallenness within it. Creation is broken, waiting to be restored. We are still waiting for Jesus to make "all things new" (Rev. 21:5).

Nonetheless, we do not need to fully understand the origins of same-sex attraction to insist that God both demands and divinely enables obedience to his commands. The Bible clearly prohibits sex beyond the bounds of heterosexual marriage. So even if the Bible has little to say *directly* about sexual orientation, that is something of a moot point. What the Bible prohibits is sexual immorality. Sexual attraction is not the issue; sexual behavior is.

Transgenderism

Though God originally created two distinct and complementary sexes (Gen. 1:27; Matt. 19:4), a distinction evident in the physiological makeup of the human race, one of the effects of the Fall is that some persons experience gender confusion. They perceive their gender to differ psychologically from their gender biologically. This differs from the rare condition of *intersexualism* or *hermaphroditism*, conditions in which a person's sex is biologically ambiguous—that is, a person possesses both male and female primary sexual traits. In the case of *transgenderism*, an individual's sex is biologically clear but psychologically unclear. It is an issue, not of physiology, but of self-perception.

Recently, the American medical community has begun providing a range of treatment options for what is technically called "gender dysphoria," including hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery. Many LGBT (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender) advocates are seeking to normalize transgenderism, insisting that individuals have a right to define gender according to their self-perception, rather than according to their biological makeup. Furthermore, many public schools are encouraging parents and staff to validate the feelings of those with "gender dysphoria."

Nonetheless, any understanding of gender as self-defined or self-determined stands in sharp opposition to the created order and to the Word of God. God, in his wisdom, made humankind "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). That order, and each individual's participation in it, must be valued and affirmed. Gender is an important component of human personhood and cannot be tampered with without individuals suffering untold harm.

How gender roles should be understood and appropriately expressed may vary from culture to culture, but gender itself remains rooted in Creation rather than culture. While gender embraces more than mere biology, it cannot be determined apart from it.

It is indeed tragic that the Fall has introduced biological anomalies like intersexuality into human experience. It is tragic that some individuals suffer from gender identity confusion. We look longingly for the liberation of creation from its current "bondage to corruption" (Rom. 8:21) and the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:23). In the meantime, we must show love and compassion to those struggling with gender identity confusion and invite them to share in the hope for wholeness held out in the gospel.

While we cannot condone the actions of those who seek to chemically or surgically alter their biologically indicated gender, we must sympathize with the profound "gender dysphoria" that inclines them to do so. Some of those who wrestle with this issue are our brothers and sisters in Christ. We must embrace them in the bonds of Christian affection and fellowship, following the example of Jesus, of whom it was said: "A bruised reed he will not break" (Is. 42:3; Matt. 12:20).

As believers, we are called to extend to our neighbors love and compassion. We are called to affirm the worth of every person as an image bearer of God. We are called to invite them into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet we also insist that individuals should not seek to alter their biologically indicated gender in order to align it with their gender as self-perceived.

Sexuality and Redemption (Present and Future)

Disordered sexuality remains a deep and pervasive problem, but God has provided a redemptive remedy in the gospel of Jesus Christ. God created us for wholeness as human beings—including sexual wholeness. This wholeness, so tragically distorted by sin, can be restored by God's grace. Our fallen

sexuality can be redeemed in Christ.

We can be redeemed from the *penalty* of sin. Jesus bore all of our sins on the cross. Christ died for those with same-sex attraction and gender confusion just as he died for those of us whose lives are sexually broken in other ways (Rom. 3:23). There is no sin, sexual or otherwise, that cannot be forgiven by God for those who trust in Jesus. (1 Cor. 6:9-11) When we are in Christ, sin's penalty is cancelled. Our true identity, then, is found in Christ, not in sexual attraction.

We can now also be redeemed from the *power* of sin. God's moral demands are impossible to meet in our own strength. But Jesus breaks the power of cancelled sin. With the divine aid of God's indwelling Holy Spirit, God's grace enables those who follow Jesus to live lives of moral purity and holy sexuality. This does not mean that grace necessarily eliminates the desire for sexual expressions God has ruled out of bounds. It does not mean, for example, that God will necessarily eliminate a person's same-sex attraction or gender confusion. God has clearly forbidden adultery, and yet the Scriptures and Christian experience make clear that Christians still wrestle with adulterous desires. Temptation to sin remains a characteristic feature of the Christian life. But while temptation may be inevitable, succumbing to temptation is not (1 Cor. 10:13). God provides us freedom from sin's enslavement (Rom. 6:6). But, as followers of Christ, in order to experience this freedom, we must continue to resist the dangerous undertow of our sinful nature (Gal. 5:17, Col. 3:5). We are enabled to resist the power of sin, sexual and otherwise, as we walk in the Spirit sustained by God's strength (Gal. 5:16, Phil. 4:13).

Those in Christ will ultimately be redeemed from the *presence* of sin. While we can, by God's grace, progressively overcome the power of sin during this life, we will not attain complete perfection until our bodies are fully redeemed and glorified (Rom. 8:23). Then we will forever dwell, sin-free, in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1-5). While gender distinctions will remain in eternity—we will still be male or female—human sexual expression was designed by God only for the current created order, where it serves as a symbol of the spiritual intimacy between Jesus and his bride, the Church (Eph. 5:31-32). Once Jesus has been fully united with his bride, marriage and sexual expression, as we now know them, will be replaced with the higher pleasures and the perfect intimacy of the new creation (Matt. 22:23-33).

Human Sexuality: Core Affirmations

Therefore, the Missionary Church, in faithfulness to the Scriptures, and in concert with historic Christian orthodoxy, affirms the following truths:

- We affirm that God's intention for sex is that it adorn the institution of marriage--a sacred covenant between one man and one woman.
- We affirm that sex is a divine gift, given to seal the marriage covenant, and intended both for pleasure (Pr. 5:18-19) and for procreation (Gen. 1:28).
- We affirm that sex is part of the current order of creation, where it serves as a symbol of that glorious spiritual intimacy by which it will be subsumed in the new creation (Matt. 22:23-33).
- We affirm that God intends heterosexual marriage to serve as a living symbol of the relationship between Jesus and his bride, the Church (Eph. 5:31-32).
- We affirm that God declares all sex outside the boundaries of marriage--whether pre-marital or extramarital, whether heterosexual or homosexual--as sin.

- We affirm that sexual disorder is a universal human problem and that *all* sexual sin lies under the judgment of God.
- We affirm that God calls and empowers all Christians, whatever the nature of their sexual attraction, to moral purity and "holy sexuality."¹
- We affirm that homosexuality is contrary to God's original design for human flourishing and that homosexual behavior is clearly forbidden in the Scriptures.
- We affirm that homosexual marriage, even though it may be sanctioned by the State, remains forbidden by God.
- We affirm that gender is a divine gift, essential to both our humanity and personal identity.
- We affirm that God's design was the creation of two distinct and complementary sexes, male and female, a distinction evident in physiological makeup of the human race.
- We affirm that gender identity is biologically (physiologically) determined, rather than being dependent on self-perception.
- We affirm that sexual sin--in whatever form it manifests itself--cannot efface the image of God. All human beings--whatever the precise nature of their sin--remain worthy of our compassion and respect, just as they remain the object of the lovingkindness of God (Rom. 5:8).
- We affirm that God calls us to love sinners, even as we grieve for their sin.
- We affirm that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and are in need of the redeeming and restorative grace of God.
- We affirm our confidence in the saving power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16) and the life transforming power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). God intends grace, rather than sin, to have the last word in the lives of his children. "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57).

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¹ The phrase is Christopher Yuan's from *Out of a Far Country: A Gay Son's Journey to God, A Broken Mother's Search for Hope*.