

Human Sexuality

This Letter supplements the EPC Position Paper on Human Sexuality, available at www.epc.org. A Pastoral Letter is intended to shine the light of God's Word broadly on a general area of concern to the Church. Requiring the approval of only one General Assembly, it is not as definitive as a Position Paper—which requires the approval of two General Assemblies, including a minimum of one-year circulation among the presbyteries. The primary purpose of a Pastoral Letter is to guide churches within the EPC rather than to identify our positions to the world.

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Introduction

For followers of Jesus Christ who desire to be faithful to Him, navigating the complexities of contemporary life is daunting at best and often overwhelming. We want to be faithful to Him by being holy as God is holy, for without holiness no one will see the Lord.¹ Yet having been brought out of darkness into God's marvelous light, we want to be faithful to our privileged calling as a kingdom of priests, as living stones being built up together into a house for God, so that we will proclaim God's excellencies.² Therefore we want to live before the watching world by honoring Christ the Lord so that, when asked, we are ready

¹1 Peter 1:15-16; Hebrews 12:14.

²1 Peter 2:9.

to give an account of the hope that is within us.¹ We want to love the world in Jesus' name without being worldly, because we believe the highest happiness for any person is to be reconciled to their Creator through His powerful transforming grace. Knowing that even our best efforts often will not be welcomed by the world, we want to be prepared to suffer for Christ's sake when called; for we know that in sharing in the fellowship of Christ's suffering we have the promise of sharing in the power of His resurrection and the opportunity to fulfill the purpose of His suffering.²

When we reflect upon these challenges we realize that they have been before the people of God since the beginning, as Peter's letter to the "elect exiles" testifies to so powerfully.³ Although it may seem so at times, we don't really live in a unique time of history because being a holy nation in the midst of an unholy world, living as citizens of the world to come in the midst of a world that is passing away, has challenged the people of God since faithful Abel felt the deathly ire of his brother. At times the culture has provided a veneer of spirituality to mislead us into believing that all is well, but in God's providence He also graciously removes the veneer at times to remind us that apart from His saving grace in Jesus Christ, the world is lost in sin.

So as we reorient ourselves during a time of momentous cultural changes regarding sexuality, it is necessary and helpful for us to look once again to God's Word for guidance in the face of these changes.⁴ As we do, we believe we will gain renewed clarity about the revealed will of God, humility by seeing how we ourselves have often failed to follow God's commands, courage to resist the conforming powers of culture and to endure the hostility that comes in doing so, and charity as we are renewed in our zeal to love the world around us in a way that would make the love of God in Christ real and powerful in the lives of those with whom we share it.

Thus our goal in this Pastoral Letter is, in the light of Scripture, to examine in greater depth the issues addressed in the *Position Paper on Human Sexuality* so that we can more faithfully walk in God's ways, more humbly repent of our own failings, and more lovingly bear witness to the redeeming power of the gospel. In doing so, this Letter offers more detailed analysis of some of the issues, as well as wisdom for church leaders and members for navigating the challenges. We begin with singleness in order to communicate that who we are as image-bearers of God not only includes God's design for human sexuality, but also to make prominent the idea that we are more than sexual beings and life's greatest good is found in God, not in sexuality or even marriage. We proceed to the subject of marriage, which is the principal context in which human sexuality finds its expression—ultimately as a reflection of the divine-human love of Christ and His church. The discussion

¹1 Peter 3:15.

²Philippians 3:10-11; Colossians 1:24.

³1 Peter 1:1.

⁴Psalms 119:105.

then moves to those principal areas in which contemporary challenges have arisen—same-sex attraction, gender dysphoria, and pornography—followed by consideration of the broader issue of how the church must engage the world in which it exists and into which God has sent it. The letter concludes with a reminder of the Good News, the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the world’s hope for healing from sexual sin and brokenness and restoration to sexual holiness and happiness, followed by a special note for parents.

Sexual abuse is so monstrous and depraved, and involves numerous issues besides sexuality, that it cannot be treated purely as a matter of sexuality. But because by definition it involves sexuality and usually has far-reaching and devastating implications for sexuality for perpetrators, victims, those related to both, and the church which aspires to offer hope and healing, it is included as a full subject in this Pastoral Letter. We do so mindful particularly of the devastation it wreaks on victims.

Most topics are addressed in the same basic format: biblical and theological foundations, contemporary challenges to the biblical view, pastoral guidance on common practical questions, and recommended resources on the topic. In some cases the order varies due to the requirements of the subject. In reviewing these discussions, the reader will discover the EPC to be a biblical community, living in the ongoing hope of being reformed to the Word of God because we believe that in it God has spoken; a confessional community, believing that we are to faithfully and accountably hold to our common understanding of the faith once delivered to the saints and to declare it without compromise to the world; and a missional community reflecting the heart of God to make Himself known among the peoples by being a community of light and confidence in a darkened world.

This is our particular aim—to celebrate, commend, explain, and defend the Bible’s message about human sexuality; for we believe that it is good news for a world burned over by late modern, individualistic, technologized, human-centered sexuality. The more clearly we embrace what Scripture says, the more compassionately we can minister to those in our midst who have been misled by falsehood and marooned in a desert of disobedience.

We realize that this analysis will not be received happily by the world. We will be accused of selectivity about sin, which is hypocrisy, and some may say that our very beliefs constitute hate. Perhaps even some within our fellowship may feel this is majoring on minors and that we should be known for what we are for and not merely what we are against. After all, the gospel is about grace—not judgment—some might say. But we believe that divine love is love that also speaks the truth—the truth about the world and about ourselves. We have tried fervently here to speak that truth in love.

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## Singleness

### Biblical/Theological Foundations

Marriage and procreation played a central role in the fulfillment of God's original creation mandate<sup>1</sup> and continued to do so in God's covenant with Abraham, but their limitations are transcended under the New Covenant in Christ.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, all those who are of faith in Christ share in the promises to Abraham.<sup>3</sup> The barren rejoice, bereft are comforted, orphans adopted, and vocational singleness is commended as a privileged opportunity. As God's covenant people, we have an imperishable inheritance in Christ whether single or married.<sup>4</sup> But single people may have greater freedom to give and serve along with greater prospects of blessedness. The single person can fulfill the creation mandate by making disciples.<sup>5</sup>

The New Testament commends the single life. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am."<sup>6</sup> The church was not to pressure believers to marry or to regard themselves as inferior, treating both marriage and singleness as gifts and callings from God.<sup>7</sup> Paul delineates the significance of both marriage and singleness and points out the advantages of each.

For example, the early church distinguished itself by institutionally supporting widows.<sup>8</sup> Rodney Stark writes, "The church stood ready to sustain poor widows, allowing them a choice as to whether or not to remarry."<sup>9</sup> This choice was a radical idea for the culture in which the early church existed.<sup>10</sup> Thus unencumbered by their own marital responsibilities, widows could give themselves wholly to spiritual endeavors.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 1:28. All quotes are from the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2008), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup>Barry Danylak, *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Scripture Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 138.

<sup>3</sup>Galatians 3:7.

<sup>4</sup>1 Peter 1:4.

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 28:19-20; Genesis 1:28.

<sup>6</sup>1 Corinthians 7:8.

<sup>7</sup>1 Corinthians 7:7.

<sup>8</sup>Acts 6:1; 1 Timothy 5:3, 9-10.

<sup>9</sup>Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>10</sup>One may note that Paul instructed the young widows in Ephesus to remarry in 1 Timothy 5:14. A look at the context, however, makes it clear that this instruction was in response to a particular problem in which heresy was being spread through young widows who found themselves idle (1 Timothy 5:13, 15) and was not a general elevation of marriage over singleness. Paul wanted young widows in Timothy's church to remarry and have families as a productive alternative to the idleness which facilitated spreading false teaching (see also 1 Timothy 2:15).

<sup>11</sup>1 Timothy 5:6.

This view of singleness as a calling and respect and care for widows set the Christian faith apart from Judaism. Stanley Hauerwas goes further: “One... clear difference between Christianity and Judaism [and all other traditional religions] is the former’s entertainment of the idea of singleness as the paradigm way of life for its followers.”<sup>1</sup>

As a single man, the Apostle Paul acted and spoke in ways that reflected his total devotion to God’s call on his life. He treated his singleness as a blessing that God had bestowed on him and he praised God for it. Single men and women today are similarly free to serve our Lord with undivided attention.<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller summarizes, “Paul’s assessment in 1 Corinthians 7 is that singleness is a good condition blessed by God, and in many circumstances, it is actually better than marriage.”<sup>3</sup> Paige Benton Brown personalized this, writing, “I am single because God is so abundantly good to me, because this is His best for me.”<sup>4</sup>

As followers of Christ, our contentment and completeness come from our union with Him, our Bridegroom.<sup>5</sup> This transcends our single or married status. As the Kellers also have said, “Unlike sex-and-romance-saturated Western society, Christians see singleness as good because our union with Christ can fulfill our deepest longings.”<sup>6</sup> Both single and married Christians find their truest family in the fellowship of the church.<sup>7</sup> Matt Smethurst affirms this truth: “Late-modern Western culture conflates sex and intimacy, but Scripture does not. God’s people, gathered in kingdom outposts called local churches, are meant to be the most intimate communities on earth. For a man or woman in Christ, there is nothing ultimate about being single or married. They are a child in the Father’s house (1 Timothy 3:15), a member of the Son’s body (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), a stone in the Spirit’s temple (Ephesians 2:21-22). And, unlike their marital status, these realities will endure forever.”<sup>8</sup>

## Contemporary Challenges to the Biblical View

The proportion of single adults is growing, both in society and the church. There were 111 million single people over the age of 18 living in the United States in 2015, representing 45 percent of all U.S. residents over 18. This includes 59 million households maintained by

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 174.

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 7:32-35.

<sup>3</sup>Timothy Keller and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011), 195.

<sup>4</sup>Paige Benton Brown, “Singled Out by God for Good,” *PCPC Witness*, February 1998, [www.pcpc.org/ministries/singles/singledout.php](http://www.pcpc.org/ministries/singles/singledout.php) (accessed 11/16/2017).

<sup>5</sup>John 15:5; Ephesians 5:25, 32; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10.

<sup>6</sup>Keller and Keller, 201.

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 12:48-50; Mark 3:33-35; Luke 8:21.

<sup>8</sup>Matt Smethurst, “9 Ways to Pastor Those Longing for Marriage,” 9Marks, March 20, 2017, [www.9marks.org/article/9-ways-to-pastor-those-longing-for-marriage/](http://www.9marks.org/article/9-ways-to-pastor-those-longing-for-marriage/) (accessed 12/19/2017).

unmarried men and women, representing 47 percent of all households nationwide.<sup>1</sup> Society and the church often distort singleness in opposite ways. Society celebrates singleness as a way of enjoying all that life has to offer without the hassle of commitment, and the single life is sometimes viewed as an invitation to experience true freedom. On the other hand, the church has sometimes made singles feel like they are on the outside looking in, as if their singleness is a problem to be solved. As we have seen, the Bible has a different view of singleness. The New Testament celebrates singleness as a blessing that enables unique participation in and contributions to God's Kingdom. Our churches must be places where both married and single people can grow in their faith, serve one another, and serve together as equally vital parts of one body.<sup>2</sup>

### **Pastoral Guidance**

As we recapture the New Testament view of singleness, the church has an opportunity to affirm the important contributions of single adults and to address their unique needs.

We need to respect singles as equal and uniquely blessed members of our fellowships. Singles should feel more than merely welcome in our congregations and ministries; they should also feel called. "Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him."<sup>3</sup> Pastors and leaders in the church must come alongside single adults and help them embrace and steward the gift of singleness.

While we uphold the goodness of the single life, we must also acknowledge that it can bring real challenges. Before the Fall, God declared, "It is not good that the man should be alone."<sup>4</sup> There is good reason why singles sometimes feel lonely and yearn to be connected with others: God created us for relationship. We were created as relational beings, capable of forming deep connections with God and one another. Many singles experience these longings while participating in churches that seem to be filled with married couples and families. It is vital for the church to respond to feelings of loneliness and isolation by fostering deep, lasting relationships between believers.

Singles need opportunities to form healthy relationships with people of the same and opposite sex, with other singles, and with married people. They need to enjoy the fellowship of believers in which they can hold each other accountable and mature in the faith. Long-term relationships between single and married people allow each to see the other's unique challenges and to be more understanding of one another.

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<sup>1</sup>United States Census Bureau, Release Number: CB16-FF.18, Revised August 26, 2016, [www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2016/cb16-ff18.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2016/cb16-ff18.html) (accessed 11/16/2017).

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 12:12.

<sup>3</sup>1 Corinthians 7:17.

<sup>4</sup>Genesis 2:18.

As we seek to welcome singles fully into the life and ministries of the church, we might heed the advice Whitney Wollard provides about singles, from singles:

There are simple things we can do (or not do) so singles in our midst know we love them and respect them as fellow image-bearers of God:

1. Do: Get to know the person. Don't: Assume that singleness is his or her life.
2. Do: Initiate discipleship relationships. Don't: Start another program.
3. Do: Ask, "How can I pray for you?" Don't: Pray based upon your own assumptions.
4. Do: Utilize singles in the church. Don't: Make them the church's workhorses.
5. Do: Recognize singles' need for intimacy. Don't: Assume marriage and children are the only way to fulfill this need.
6. Do: Place them in appropriate leadership roles. Don't: Wait for them to be married to ask them to lead.
7. Do: Reach out to singles at your Sunday gathering. Don't: Reduce singles to a personal project.<sup>1</sup>

In our sensitivity to the needs of single people in the church, we need not shy away from commending marriage; however, we need to take care not to represent marriage as the ultimate good for every believer. Early in the life of his Manhattan church, Tim Keller preached nine sermons on marriage to a congregation predominantly composed of singles. In Keller's words, "... single people cannot live their lives well as singles without a balanced, informed view of marriage. If they do not have that, they will either over-desire or under-desire marriage, and either of those ways of thinking will distort their lives."<sup>2</sup> By the same token, it would be wise for pastors occasionally to speak to the realities of singleness from the pulpit, teaching single and married believers alike the New Testament value of singleness as a calling.

While we must work to make our churches welcoming communities where singles can flourish, we also need to encourage our brothers and sisters to pursue holiness in their personal lives. As people are getting married later in life, Christians have at times become less committed to upholding God's desire for chastity. One of the most common pre-marital questions asked of EPC pastors concerns the church's policy about marrying people who are already living together or sexually active. If we are to resist the world's encroachment and the church's neglect when it comes to sexual promiscuity, church leaders need to be more willing, equipped, and effective in promoting godly sexuality, offering encouragement and hope for those who have given in to temptation, and addressing promiscuity through redemptive shepherding. Such a willingness will not only help our people to experience

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<sup>1</sup>Whitney Wollard, "7 Dos and Don'ts of Discipling Singles," *9Marks Journal*, March 22, 2017, [www.9marks.org/article/7-dos-and-donts-of-discipling-singles/](http://www.9marks.org/article/7-dos-and-donts-of-discipling-singles/) (accessed 11/30/2017).

<sup>2</sup>Keller and Keller, 192.

more of the grace of God but will encourage sexual purity among those who might be tempted not to live sexually pure lives.

Though it is certainly a minority position in our society, we must regain our courage in promoting the goodness of God's design in reserving sexual intimacy for marriage. We must model and explain what holiness looks like for singles as well as for married persons. We need older singles in the church to model chastity and to encourage younger singles who may struggle with unmet sexual desires. Our college students and young adults need to know that through the power of the Holy Spirit, sexual holiness is possible—and that chastity is a good gift from God. Indeed, while holiness is its own reward, the purity of devotion to Christ afforded by chastity creates an opportunity for intimacy with God that can be difficult to achieve for married persons. This message will be most powerful coming from those who have faced the challenge of remaining chaste in adulthood and can speak to God's faithfulness. This challenge is not limited to the young, but is manifesting itself in new ways among the aged singles who also are called to remain chaste in singleness and reserve sexual intimacy for the God-ordained context of marriage.<sup>1</sup>

We also must say a word here regarding use of pornography. While pornography tempts and afflicts married as well as single people, there are distinctly powerful temptations for singles who do not have a spouse with whom they can share sexual intimacy. Though we address pornography separately in this Letter, it is important to note in the context of the subject of singleness that the church needs to be aware and supportive of singles in this area of intense temptation, including providing supportive groups in which this burden can be borne with the help of others.

God's plan for EPC congregations and ministries is for single and married people to serve side by side, as the called and gifted members of one holy and missional body. In this community of deep and committed friendships, we encourage single people to find their home in the body of Christ and to live full, holy, and God-honoring lives as the Spirit empowers them.<sup>2</sup>

### **Recommended Reading**

Brown, Paige Benton. "Singled Out by God for Good." *PCPC Witness*. February 1998.

[www.pcpc.org/ministries/singles/singledout.php](http://www.pcpc.org/ministries/singles/singledout.php) (accessed 11/16/2017).

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<sup>1</sup>See this subject addressed more at the conclusion of the section on marriage.

<sup>2</sup>EPC "Position Paper on Human Sexuality," 2017, [www.epc.org/file/beliefs/positionpapers/PositionPaper-HumanSexuality.pdf](http://www.epc.org/file/beliefs/positionpapers/PositionPaper-HumanSexuality.pdf) (accessed 11/16/2017).



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Sexuality within Marriage

Biblical/Theological Foundations

We have a generous heavenly Father who gives good gifts,¹ and He has blessed humanity with the creation ordinance of marriage.² For married and single alike, the lifelong covenant between a man and a woman is a visible depiction of God's love for His church.³

In the beginning, God created humanity in His image (both male and female) and told them to be fruitful and multiply—both a blessing and a command involving sexual union and procreation.⁴ After He had created human beings and set them in their place in creation, He pronounced His work "very good."⁵ The Scriptures tell us that initially the man and woman walked in unbroken fellowship with God and one another and were unashamed by their nakedness, which exposed their sexual difference.⁶ As a result of the fall, the couple became ashamed of their nakedness, covered themselves, and hid from the Lord.⁷ Sin introduced shame and a breakdown in intimacy between the man and his wife and between humanity and God. Despite this breach, God preserved the life-giving capacity of the womb, albeit it not without birth pangs, and graciously covered their shame as they continued under their

¹James 1:17; Psalm 34.

²Genesis 2:23-25.

³Ephesians 5:22-33. This is stated well in the EPC's "Position Paper on Human Sexuality." Cf. Ezekiel 16 and Hosea, where God is like a faithful husband, and conversely, Israel is like an unfaithful wife.

⁴Genesis 1:27-28; 2:23-24. Notice that the man observes both the similarity between the woman and himself ("bone of my bones...") and their sexual difference ("she shall be called Woman...").

⁵Genesis 1:31.

⁶Genesis 2:25.

⁷Genesis 3:7-10.

charge to procreate.¹ In fact, the whole purpose and plan of God would depend upon it in the promised seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent.² Similarly, after the earth had become corrupted and the Lord purged it through the great judgment flood, He restated His blessing/command for humanity to be fruitful and multiply.³

As God established His covenant with Abraham, that blessing of a promised seed became central, as the covenant was to be perpetuated through the family line.⁴ The ability of husband and wife to bring forth children was a prerequisite to the fulfillment of God's promise.⁵ Subsequently, Scripture is replete with examples of miraculous births that enabled God's purposes to progress toward fulfillment.⁶

Yet, it is vital to note that procreation is not the only purpose behind marriage or the sexual intimacy of marriage. As the *Book of Worship* states:

While marriage is not a sacrament of the church, it is ordained of God and intended to last as long as the couple shall live. God has designed marriage to be between a man and a woman for the mutual help of husband and wife and for the development of their moral and spiritual character, and for the propagation of children who are to be reared in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.⁷

This multifaceted purpose of marriage and sexual intimacy is borne out in Scripture. In Genesis we read that following the death of his mother Sarah, Isaac found comfort in his marriage and sexual union with Rebekah.⁸ And the Song of Songs is a joyful celebration of sexual love between a man and a woman. Framed as a poetic dialogue between the two lovers, the Song is playful and provocative. Here there is no shame or alienation in the partners' sexual difference but rather a mutual celebration of one another's bodies and the intimacy they share.⁹ There is security in the knowledge that the man and his wife belong to one another, that the sexual expression of each is for the other.¹⁰ Sexuality in this covenantal context brings both pleasure and stability.

As we read the Song of Songs, however, we see a repeated refrain that reminds us that our sexual expression is not to be without bounds. Three times the "daughters of Jerusalem"

¹Genesis 1:28; 3:16, 21.

²Genesis 3:15.

³Genesis 9:1.

⁴Genesis 12:2; 15:5.

⁵Genesis 3:15.

⁶Cf. Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Samuel, Samson, John the Baptist, and, of course, Jesus.

⁷*Book of Worship* 5-1.

⁸Genesis 24:67.

⁹See, for example, Song of Songs 1:9-16.

¹⁰Song of Songs 2:16; 6:3.

are warned to “not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.”¹ Sexual intimacy has its proper place and time; there are boundaries. This is a message we also get from the Law of Moses, with its stipulations concerning sex,² and in multiple passages in Scripture that exhort us to abstain from adultery and sexual immorality.³

Sexual intimacy within marriage is pleasurable and bonding. It has also been a means of perpetuating and advancing God’s covenant relationship with His people as each successive generation would come to know the God of Abraham. Sexuality has community dimensions, as the boundaries around our sexual behavior are meant to preserve our holiness and protect the unique intimacy of marriage. And like every other facet of human life, our sexual expression is meant to point to our Creator and bring Him glory.⁴

Perhaps because of the important role Christian marriage has in reflecting Christ’s love for His church, our enemy is quick to take advantage of our sexual weaknesses in order to undermine God’s work. The Apostle Paul takes this threat seriously in his instructions to married couples in 1 Corinthians 7. There we read that marriage (a man having a wife and a woman having a husband⁵) is a good provision for those who aren’t able to remain chaste in their singleness (as Paul was apparently able).⁶ We also see that it is important for husband and wife to meet one another’s sexual needs with mutual respect and care,⁷ not to be selfish or territorial about their bodies but to recognize that they belong to one another.⁸ Paul provides for times of abstinence in marriage only by mutual consent (not one partner depriving the other) for the purpose of prayer, because sexual deprivation in marriage is an opportunity for Satan to introduce temptation.⁹ Rather than allowing this vulnerability to creep into our marriages, husbands and wives are to be proactive in keeping their sexual intimacy deep.

In order to appreciate the importance of Paul’s teaching, we again remember God’s original intent for joining a man and a woman in marriage. The covenant of marriage is not only for the couple’s mutual enjoyment and prosperity. It is not merely a means of perpetuating the human race. Rather, the picture of a husband and wife loving and respecting one another is meant to point us to the sacrificial love Christ has for His bride, the church.¹⁰ It is for this

¹Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5; 8:4. In each case, this line follows on the heels of a description of an intimate embrace between the man and woman.

²Cf. for example, Leviticus 15:18, 24, 27; 18.

³Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:20; Deuteronomy 22:22; Proverbs 6:32; Matthew 5:31-32; 19:9; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Hebrews 13:4. These various sexual sins are articulated in detail in the “Position Paper on Human Sexuality.”

⁴1 Corinthians 6:19-20; 10:31.

⁵1 Corinthians 7:2.

⁶1 Corinthians 7:6-9.

⁷1 Corinthians 7:3.

⁸1 Corinthians 7:4. See again Song of Songs 2:16; 6:3.

⁹1 Corinthians 7:5.

¹⁰Ephesians 5:22-33.

reason that Scripture instructs us to protect the integrity of our marriages.¹ Distortions of marital sexuality directly corrupt our understanding and experiencing of God's love for us. If marriage is meant to remind us of God's faithfulness, it must weather the storms of life, just as God's love never ends.² The gift of sexual intimacy is meant to express and strengthen that covenantal love between husband and wife.

Contemporary Challenges to the Biblical View

The biblical preservation of sexual intimacy for marriage is sometimes criticized because of the hypocrisy of God's people. For example, the Old Testament has many examples of polygamy and concubinage which are not explicitly condemned in their context. It is true that the people of God have often conformed to cultural practices rather than staying faithful to God's intent, and God in His forbearance preserved His people even in their disobedience and overlooked their sins to some extent.³ However, Jesus made it clear that God's design is for a man and a woman to preserve a lifelong exclusive covenant.⁴

In our contemporary context, many Christian couples seem to struggle with infidelity and end their marriages in divorce as readily at times as any couples. Some would say that Christians have so damaged the intended witness of marriage that other types of sexual relationships are no worse or no more damaging to God's intent. It is hypocritical, they might argue, for the church to claim a moral high ground and presume to speak of the purity of sexuality within marriage when so many believers have failed to exhibit that purity. Without a doubt, the people of God have often failed to reflect the Lord's intention for marriage, but our failure does not destroy the goodness of God's design. While admitting our own failures, we must continue to teach the goodness of God's creation and the blessedness of keeping His commands. As the saying goes, "Two wrongs don't make a right." We acknowledge that our sin is often at times as grievous as any other and that God will judge the church,⁵ even as we encourage all people to come to Christ and experience the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Others may scoff at the church's exaltation of intimacy within marriage because of our past mistaken attitudes toward sex. It is true that we have sometimes been prudish or shamefully silent, perpetuating the idea that sex is dirty. We have sometimes communicated, intentionally or unintentionally, other false and harmful messages regarding sexuality in marriage, such as "Married sex is boring," "Sex isn't important in marriage," and "Men want sex, and women don't."

¹See above and also Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:5-9.

²Exodus 34:6-7; 1 Corinthians 13:8.

³Cf. for example, Genesis 16 and 21:8-21 where God deals graciously with Hagar and Ishmael.

⁴Matthew 19:4-6; Mark 10:5-9.

⁵1 Peter 4:17.

With messages like this, we have alienated people and hurt those who are looking for answers to their sexual questions. More than that, we have undermined the Word of God, which celebrates the gift of sexual union between husband and wife. What a blessing it is that God's Word corrects us where we are wrong! Rather than perpetuating stereotypes or neglecting the importance of physical intimacy in marriage, we ought to continually return to Scripture for the life-giving message that God sees goodness in our maleness and femaleness and is glorified as husbands and wives love one another intimately.

An important word must be said regarding the misuse of sex within marriage. Sometimes, due in part to the mistaken attitudes mentioned above, partners have sought to use sex as a tool to exert control in their relationships. This is a perversion of a gift God has given to married couples for their enjoyment and growth and for His glory. When we withhold sexual intimacy or force it in an attempt to dominate one another, we violate one another and sin against God. This is inexcusable and we must call to repentance anyone who has sought to use sex in these abusive ways.

Alternatively, while sexual intimacy is to express and strengthen a married couple's love for one another, it should not be the only means of doing so. Sometimes a husband or wife expects sexual intimacy to be a substitute for relational intimacy, using the physical aspect of their relationship to cover up or avoid dealing with areas of brokenness that need to be addressed. We would caution that while sex is a profound expression of the oneness of marriage, it should not bear the full weight of a couple's need for unity, mutual enjoyment, and ability to reconcile after a rift. A married couple needs to exercise wisdom in appropriating the gift of sexual intimacy properly so that it does not become detached from the other realities of their relationship and allow vulnerabilities to expand.

Pastoral Guidance

In seeking to overcome errors in thinking about sexuality both within the church and in the wider world, it is worth reading the Song of Songs to appreciate the unique, God-given sexual intimacy between husband and wife. The fact that this poetic expression has found a place in Scripture is an indicator of the value and importance of mutual physical attraction and enjoyment within a marriage. Although our society has often perverted God's gift of sex, and although the church has sometimes reacted by shying away from the topic, we see in Scripture that the Lord affirms the creativity, playfulness, and mutual upbuilding of marital intimacy. We encourage our pastors and church members to read the Song of Songs as a corrective to distorted understandings of God's attitude toward our sexuality.

Along those lines, it is important to affirm the wide range of sexual activity that a married couple can enjoy together. Again, the graphic imagery in parts of the Song of Songs suggests many different ways of enjoying sexual union. In general, we would affirm that a married couple's sexual intimacy should be mutually upbuilding, not painful or degrading to either

partner, and that it must be limited to the two partners. This precludes the use of pornography for sexual excitement or enhancement even within a monogamous heterosexual marriage because it inherently involves adultery of lust. Beyond those parameters, husband and wife should communicate with one another regarding their sexual desires and concerns.¹

We have seen that sexual intimacy within marriage is not only a means of pleasure and enjoyment for a couple, but also a way of glorifying our Creator and of having children. It is of concern that many Christian couples have removed the possibility of procreation from the sex act without adequate prayer or reflection. While we would not forbid the use of non-abortionifacient birth control, the casual nature of its use may belie a self-centered attempt to use sex for one aspect of God's intent while disregarding other aspects of His intent. We would encourage married couples who are using artificial birth control to seriously consider their motives for doing so. Do they have legitimate reasons for preventing pregnancy at this time, and are they viewing birth control as a gracious provision, while being open to God's sovereign plan? Or are they seeking to control an aspect of their married life without regard to what God may have for them? What is their view toward children—are they a wonderful gift of God or a burden? These matters call for prayer and reflection.

There are times in a marriage when sexual intimacy becomes a source of disappointment and tension. In these times, pastors should encourage the spouses to view their trial as an opportunity to move toward one another, to grow both individually and as a couple instead of quietly drifting apart. When injury, disability, age, or life circumstances lessen one or both spouses' sexual desire or function, we ought to encourage husband and wife to recommit to serving and loving one another affectionately. Even when the realities of living in a broken world take a toll on a married couple's ability to come together physically, in faith we must affirm that we are still male and female, that God is still at work in the intimate relationship of husband and wife, and that each is still called to serve the other. In these cases, the Song of Songs again serves as an important corrective to some mistaken attitudes, as it reminds us of the joyful creativity of sexual freedom in marriage.

Some couples may deal with sexual frustration or dysfunction following a struggle with infertility. If a couple endures a protracted period of attempting to conceive, sexual intimacy can begin to feel mechanical, or one or both partners may associate sex with feelings of disappointment and grief. For these couples, sensitive pastors and Christian friends can encourage them to recover the joy of the other aspects of their sexual relationship, affirming the good gift it is even when it does not become a means of having children.

¹There is a variety of responses to questions about appropriate boundaries within marital intimacy. See the bibliography for a range of evangelical approaches.

Other couples may struggle with their sexual intimacy following infidelity on the part of one or both spouses. While infidelity can be grounds for biblical divorce, many couples instead seek reconciliation and restoration of the marriage relationship. In these cases, it may take a period of time before the couple can re-engage with one another intimately. While it is important to give the aggrieved spouse time and opportunity to forgive and recover trust in his or her partner, we must guard against a desire to punish the offender by withholding intimacy. Pastors are encouraged to take special care to address this issue when counseling couples who find themselves in this situation.

At the same time, we must be realistic about the fact that, given our fallen condition, there are married couples who experience a complete breakdown in their sexual intimacy. Perhaps there has been past emotional or physical abuse which renders one partner physiologically incapable of becoming sexually intimate. Perhaps other factors lead to sexual dysfunction, and despite their best efforts, a couple is unable to engage with one another sexually. The church has an opportunity to extend the grace and compassion of Christ to those who have this sort of persistent “thorn in the flesh.” Rather than feeling ashamed or judged, we want our brothers and sisters to feel loved, accepted, and hopeful. Even if God does not grant healing this side of eternity, we know that in the new heavens and new earth, we will all experience the intimate union with Christ to which our marital unions were meant to point.

When we preach or teach on Scripture passages regarding marriage, we must communicate that, viewed properly, sex in marriage is a good gift that is a physical expression of the love and oneness of the marriage covenant, an opportunity for husband and wife to serve one another, to enjoy the God-given function of their bodies, and to glorify the God who made us. In this way, the sexual intimacy of husband and wife is an opportunity to demonstrate love for God and neighbor, a spouse being one’s first and closest neighbor.

Sexual activity is not, then, an individualistic quest for physical or emotional satisfaction but rather a community-building pursuit. The sexual relationship of husband and wife is to be a means of building up and strengthening their marriage, which is to be a picture of the gospel for all to see. When a married couple’s intimacy suffers or breaks down, there are implications for the church as a whole. The alienation, shame, sexual temptation, and struggle that can ensue affect not only husband and wife but also the church of which they are a part and the world to whom they are seeking to reflect the gospel of Christ. As the Scriptures teach, a married couple’s obligation is to communicate love and care for one another in their sexual relationship, not violating or taking advantage of one another, but satisfying one another and building each other up, thereby glorifying God.

We must say a word about protecting our marriages from infidelity. Scripture is clear in prohibiting adultery, and yet many Christian couples have faced the devastating reality that one or both spouses have gone outside the marriage to meet their sexual needs. We

strongly encourage couples to prayerfully consider and mutually agree to boundaries to protect their relationships. How will they guard against developing a problematic relationship at work? What is their position on traveling or having meals with members of the opposite sex? How will they navigate friendships to prevent a disruptive attachment from forming? Being proactive in this area and developing healthy boundaries can be a safeguard against temptation.

It ought to be said that faithfulness within marriage is not simply a matter of abstaining from infidelity, but rather the loving practice of regularly cultivating an intimate relationship with one another. To that end, we encourage husbands and wives to be open with each other about their sexual needs and desires. It is possible that a spouse might be depriving the other and not even realize it, creating distance between the two and an opportunity for temptation. We urge married couples to work at becoming more comfortable talking to one another about sex, not sequestering it from the rest of their relationship.

We recommend that pastors work to become comfortable discussing the sexual realities of marriage in order to be able to support and encourage healthy affection between husbands and wives. If a couple seems to be struggling in this area, and their problems go beyond the pastor's knowledge or comfort level, it would be wise to offer referrals to Christian therapists who could supplement the pastor's ministry. Pastors have a wonderful opportunity to encourage healing and growth in their church members' marriages when they tend to the whole of the marriage relationship, including a couple's sexual intimacy.

An essential tool in promoting and preserving healthy marital sexuality is prioritizing premarital counseling. First, it is vital that all pastors officiating at weddings require a course of premarital counseling for their couples. Second, it is imperative that pastors be prepared to speak plainly and knowledgeably with engaged couples about the opportunities, challenges, and realities of the sexual relationship. Many engaged couples will be going into marriage after having lived together for a period of time. Chaste couples also need reassurance and guidance as they move toward sexual intimacy.

Some couples will be burdened with harmful and/or sinful sexual "baggage" that will challenge their sexual intimacy. This is the sad reality we face with the prevalence of pornography, sexual abuse, and the pervasive sexuality of contemporary society. Some of these issues cut to a person's core and will not be easily resolved. We encourage pastors to be sensitive to areas of brokenness that will require patient pastoral care and perhaps even referral to a professional Christian counselor. As pastors counsel engaged couples, they ought to encourage them to pursue honesty, purity, and selfless love through their sexual relationship. It could be helpful to assign "homework" to the couple, asking them to speak plainly with one another about their expectations, fears, and previous experiences with sex. For couples who are sleeping together or cohabitating, a pastor ought to require a period of

abstinence before the wedding. Perhaps the pastor could identify an individual or a family in the church who would allow one partner to move in during the period of engagement. While impractical from a worldly perspective, this requirement can be a grace to a couple, as it introduces them to the goodness of following God's commands.

With that said, the struggle for sexual purity is not unique to young adults. In recent times, it has become fairly common for older adults to develop sexual relationships or live together without marrying, often to avoid Social Security, pension, or estate losses and dilutions. Such arrangements, no matter how heartfelt the commitment, do not meet the biblical standard for marriage but are instead fornication. We must call our senior brothers and sisters to submit this area of their lives to the lordship of Christ. Financial liabilities and challenging family dynamics are no justification for violating the Word of God. Just as God calls younger singles to chastity out of their reverence for Him, so are older singles, widows, and widowers called to honor God by reserving sexual intimacy for marriage.

Recommended Reading

Burk, Denny, *What is the Meaning of Sex?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013.

LaHaye, Tim F. and Beverly. *The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998.

Leman, Kevin. *Sheet Music: Uncovering the Secrets of Sexual Intimacy in Marriage*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2011.

Mohler Jr., R. Albert. *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, and the Very Meaning of Right and Wrong*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015.

Penner, Clifford and Joyce. *The Gift of Sex: A Guide to Sexual Fulfillment*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Wheat, Ed and Gaye. *Intended for Pleasure: Sex Technique and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage*. Ada, MI: Revell, 2010.

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## **Same-Sex Attraction<sup>1</sup>**

### **Biblical/Theological Foundations**

We know from the Scriptures that God made the first man, Adam, from the dust of the ground and formed the first woman, Eve, from the rib of Adam.<sup>2</sup> He bound them together in a marriage covenant intended to endure as long as they both lived.<sup>3</sup> From that primeval union, God has willed that all marriages would consist of one man and one woman in a lifelong commitment.<sup>4</sup> In marriage, the two genders were made to be mutually compatible—spiritually and physically—and also to have the potential for conceiving, bearing, and rearing children.<sup>5</sup> God has explicitly forbidden sexual intimacy outside the bounds of this marriage covenant.<sup>6</sup>

After the fall of humankind, many perverse distortions of God’s order were conceived and practiced by men and women.<sup>7</sup> Among these sinful distortions was the practice of sexual relations between persons of the same gender. The Scriptures mention this phenomenon in seven different texts, all of which speak negatively of homosexual conduct.

The men of Sodom sought to have intercourse (perhaps by force) with the angels who visited Lot, and this was one demonstration of the depravity of that city.<sup>8</sup> The Mosaic Law explicitly forbade homosexual intercourse in two places.<sup>9</sup> And in Romans, Paul mentioned homosexual acts among both men and women as evidence of God’s abandoning them to their sin.<sup>10</sup> In 1 Corinthians, Paul included those engaged in same-sex relations in a list of those who will not inherit the Kingdom of God.<sup>11</sup> (It should be noted, however, that this statement was not simply a word of condemnation, but rather an invitation to live in the reality of being “washed,... sanctified,... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”<sup>12</sup>) Similarly, in 1 Timothy, Paul mentioned homosexual men among those who are doing things which are contrary to the gospel.<sup>13</sup> Finally, Jude pointed to the

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<sup>1</sup>While various terms such as same-sex attraction, homosexuality, LGBT, etc., could be used, each has various connotations and sometimes specific agenda. This Letter uses primarily the former and its abbreviation SSA in an effort to be merely descriptive and not pejorative or ideological. Other terms will be used at times, but with the same intent. “LGBTQ” will be used in part of the discussion because of the context to which it refers, but also without pejorative or ideological intent.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 1:27; 2:18-22.

<sup>3</sup>Genesis 2:24.

<sup>4</sup>Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:3-6; Ephesians 5:22-33.

<sup>5</sup>Genesis 2:23; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Song of Songs; Malachi 2:15; Ephesians 6:1-4.

<sup>6</sup>Exodus 20:14; Proverbs 5:15-23; Matthew 5:27-30; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

<sup>7</sup>Genesis 6:5, 6; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

<sup>8</sup>Genesis 19:4-11. The text makes it clear that the men of Sodom believed the angels to be men.

<sup>9</sup>Leviticus 18:22; 20:13.

<sup>10</sup>Romans 1:26-27.

<sup>11</sup>1 Corinthians 6:9-11.

<sup>12</sup>1 Corinthians 6:11.

<sup>13</sup>1 Timothy 1:8-11.

sexual immorality of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example to warn us of God's judgment.<sup>1</sup> Although Jesus is not quoted on this specific topic in the gospel accounts, He repeatedly endorsed the sexual standards as well as the law as a whole given in the Old Testament,<sup>2</sup> which includes a ban on all homosexual conduct.

## **Contemporary Challenges**

Biblical teaching on homosexual practice has come under severe attack in recent decades. It is important, therefore, for the church to be prepared to respond to these several objections.

### *Exegetical Challenges*

The objections to historic biblical teaching which may well have the most insidious long-term effect upon the church are the so-called "revisionist interpretations" of Scripture. In seeking to justify homosexual behavior, these revisionists employ innovative exegetical methods to avoid the intended meanings of multiple biblical texts. Their methodology not only undermines the biblical sexual ethic, but also the clarity and authority of the Scriptures themselves. They suggest that Sodom was not judged for homosexual conduct but for lack of hospitality, that Levitical laws against homosexual conduct no longer apply in our New Testament age, that Jesus' lack of specific mention of homosexuality is an implied approval of it, that Paul's explicit condemnations of homosexual behavior are culturally conditioned and linguistically ambivalent. All of these interpretations are contrary to a good faith reading of the texts. Those who use their intellectual prowess to deceive others through revisionist reinterpretation fall under the same severe condemnation as those who did the same during the age of the apostles.<sup>3</sup> Integrity requires that someone who disagrees with biblical teaching simply say so rather than attempt to distort the plain meaning of Scripture.<sup>4</sup> As Jesus warned the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira, He will not condone or tolerate such behavior by His Church.<sup>5</sup> Evangelical scholars have written excellent exegetical analyses of relevant Scripture texts that help guide those who are genuinely seeking the truth from God's Word.<sup>6</sup> Pastors and elders must be proactive in countering these deceptive teachings, especially because the revisionism appeals to a view of truth based upon individual happiness that is pervasive among younger people, as well as increasingly among older believers. We must call our people back to the truth of God's Word.

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<sup>1</sup>Jude 7.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 5:27-32; 19:7-9.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 16:17-19; Colossians 2:8; 2 Timothy 3:13; Revelation 2:20; 1 John 4:6.

<sup>4</sup>2 Timothy 3:8; 2 Peter 3:1b; Jude 4.

<sup>5</sup>See Revelation 2:14-16; 20-23.

<sup>6</sup>See especially DeYoung, Gagnon, and Via and Gagnon in the recommended readings.

### *Scientific Challenges*

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a disorder, thus normalizing it among American physicians and psychologists. Arguments are often made that same-sex attraction is genetic and no different from simply being left-handed. The Christian's response is that regardless of what social scientists may declare as "normal," we believe that the Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Furthermore, we are all born with many innate tendencies which must be resisted or controlled—the tendency toward anger, greed, lust, and pride all can be inherited, but that does not make them acceptable. The nature/nurture debate should not alter the ethical assessment of homosexual behavior, except that by these studies we are made more deeply sympathetic toward those struggling with the temptations and sins involved. In instances where there has been childhood sexual abuse or other environmental influences, these need to be compassionately recognized and taken into account in counseling the SSA person. The thrust of the Christian concern is not with one's sexual orientation, but rather with one's sexual beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and actions as they reveal one's attitude toward God.

### *Social Challenges*

In 2015, the United States Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriages must be allowed and recognized in all 50 states.<sup>1</sup> This highly controversial action by the United States' highest court was the culmination of many years of growing dissent among those who believed the prohibition was discriminatory against those of the LGBTQ community, including (for example) violence and housing discrimination. The Christian response should begin with our whole-hearted endorsement of granting all legitimate civil rights equally to all citizens of our country. We should be grateful when true injustice is addressed. At the same time, we believe that sexual conduct is a moral issue for individuals, churches, and nations. Therefore the church would be unfaithful to her mission were she not to speak out clearly and boldly. We live in a strongly secularized, human-centered, morally relativistic culture, and we should, therefore, expect many challenges from our society to our belief system, our standards of conduct, and our views on healthy public policy. To those who say that the evangelical church is on the wrong side of history, we would say that our hope is in the Lord and not in human approval.

### *Missional Challenges*

In recent years, the evangelical church has experienced a growing concern that our historic theological and ethical beliefs regarding homosexual conduct have marginalized us in our culture and minimized our ability to reach the LGBTQ community for Christ. As a result, a

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<sup>1</sup>*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 576, U.S. Supreme Court, June 26, 2015. [www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556\\_3204.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/14pdf/14-556_3204.pdf) (accessed 12/19/2017).

number of former evangelicals have announced a change in their views and have led some churches openly to endorse same-sex marriage and to invite unrepentant, practicing homosexuals to join those churches and even to serve in positions of leadership. Many have questioned whether the evangelical church will survive in our times without adapting its beliefs on sexual morality. The Christian response is that we believe we must adhere faithfully to the Scriptures, no matter what it costs us, no matter whether we grow or shrink, and no matter how the world will view us. Furthermore, we must insist to those former evangelicals that the Scriptures place our sexual conduct at the core of our ethical behavior as Christians.<sup>1</sup> To believe otherwise is to put one's self outside the boundaries of historic orthodox Christianity. We believe ultimately that the only ones who can effectively reach this generation are those who radically and sacrificially follow the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that our very marginalization gives us a prophetic stance for a faithful, biblically compassionate ministry to our LGBTQ neighbors.

## **Pastoral Guidance**

### *Our counsel to those who are same-sex attracted (SSA)*

Our commitment to same-sex attracted people, both within the church and without, is that we shall love them as God loves them, and God helping us, we promise them our unequivocally loyal friendship. We want them to know that we believe that we are all sinners, bruised and broken by the fall, and in need of God's pardoning and transforming grace. We have all violated the Seventh Commandment—and every other commandment.<sup>2</sup> None of us has the right to condemn another, but rather to encourage each other to find forgiveness, healing, and guidance from the Lord Jesus Christ. But one aspect of the gospel message is to remind ourselves and others that a rejection of Christ's lordship leads to eternal misery.<sup>3</sup>

We believe that an individual should not condemn himself or herself because of his or her sexual attractions or orientations; rather he or she should concern himself or herself with one's affections, beliefs, attitudes, and deeds. Without exception, we all must continually repent of our lusts and sinful desires and turn in faith and obedience to the Lord. It is important that we all find our true identity as human beings solely in our relationship with God; therefore, we are not ultimately gay or straight, but rather sons and daughters of God. Those who make their SSA tendencies their primary identity are not comprehending and embracing their full identity as image bearers of God.

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<sup>1</sup>For example see 1 Corinthians 6:9 where sexual immorality epitomizes ungodliness.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew 5:27.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 19:27; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Revelation 21:8; 22:15.

God has provided His church as the community in which we all must give and receive affection, encouragement, and accountability.<sup>1</sup> SSA persons should exercise great care and wisdom when it comes to disclosing their sexual orientation publicly. They are well-advised to share initially only with trusted, wise advisers including godly friends, pastors, and counselors. The culturally-shaped process of “coming out” is often complicated by motives such as seeking same-sex partners, relieving guilty consciences, or publicly pronouncing the rejection of biblical ethics. During a time period of wrestling with same-sex attraction and the Bible’s teachings, it is not dishonest to wait and be discerning in how and to whom one discloses one’s struggles. In some cases, after receiving wisdom from godly counselors, it could be helpful for some Christians to make known publicly their ongoing, largely fruitful struggle with same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria.

In some cases, SSA persons experience a transformational healing of orientation. While this should not be held out as a universal expectation for all (since God does not always grant it), we should not fail to invite God to do so. We can fervently pray and seek such healing, but must do so in a way that helps rather than harms and in a way that is open but without suggesting it is the norm.

There can be a peculiar and intense loneliness that accompanies SSA Christians who have committed themselves to a life of celibacy. It can be a loneliness more intense than that of the celibate heterosexual, who may someday have opportunity and choose to marry. The church must grant special understanding and sympathy toward those who bear this burden, while at the same time confidently calling all her members to sacrifice all things joyfully for the sake of Christ, knowing that we shall all one day be rewarded beyond our most extravagant dreams, and that we even now experience the pleasure of His presence and favor. Like the Apostle Paul, by God’s grace we can learn to be content in all circumstances *in Christ*.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Our counsel to family and friends of those who are SSA*

With the increasing frequency, openness, and popularity of homosexual relationships, evangelical Christians are confronted with some difficult decisions to make: how shall we relate to our sexually active homosexual family member? Shall we invite his or her partner

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<sup>1</sup>While controversial in some circles, Wesley Hill has suggested that non-sexual physical affection is a missing element to some proposals that address same-sex attraction. See his *Spiritual Friendship: Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2015). For a less controversial suggestion, see Ed Shaw, *Same-Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 71-80. We are fully aware of the controversy surrounding the use of the term “gay Christian,” a controversy that at times has been unproductive. This is a semantic issue meaning that the merit of the term depends upon how it is being used. If “gay Christian” refers to a Christian who affirms and/or engages in same-sex sexual activity, it is an oxymoron. But if it refers to a same sex-attracted Christian who is making every effort by God’s grace to think and act according to God’s will, then it is a genuine descriptive term. For our purposes in this Letter, we choose to focus on the substance and not the semantics.

<sup>2</sup>Philippians 4:10-13.

to dinner? ...to spend the night? ...to holidays and family vacations? Shall we attend his or her wedding to a same-sex partner? Do we celebrate births and adoptions of same-sex partners and marriages of friends, family members, and co-workers? In making these decisions we want to be fully faithful to the Scriptures in our words, actions, and attitudes, while at the same time expressing genuine love and acceptance to our SSA family member or friend. This can be a challenge.

Perhaps the place to begin is with our mental framework. We must be rigorously gracious. We must communicate love consistently to our loved ones, letting them know that nothing they believe or do will ever quench our love for them. In fact, our love for them demands that we urge them to make Jesus Christ Savior and Lord over every aspect of their lives so that they may enjoy eternal life. We also want to continue to enjoy their company and be involved in their lives. At the same time, they will need to be fair to us and understand that our differences of belief and practice about sexual morality will mean that, at times, we will be unable to participate with them in ways that would compromise our own convictions. We should freely ask them to accept us in the same way that we strive to accept them. For those who would say that any disagreement with their view of sexuality is inherently hateful, we would say that no one should be coerced into following Christ and that we are committed to a common civic life with all who are willing to live peaceably with one another.<sup>1</sup>

What are ways that our participation in the lives of SSA family and friends could compromise our commitment to Christ? In general, anything that communicates, either explicitly or implicitly, support for sexual immorality of any sort would be inappropriate for the Christian. Surely, there is room for discussion and debate on how to handle various situations pastorally, but generally speaking, we advise the following.

When people are old enough to be on their own, their parents, siblings, and friends should not presume to have the authority over their moral decisions; but neither should the ones in immoral relationships seek to manipulate the moral decisions of their parents, siblings, or friends. It is the Christian's moral obligation to respond appropriately to the sin in other people's lives, and the closer our relationship to the one sinning, the greater the obligation. If, for example, a family member chooses to date someone of the same gender, we must love both the family member and his or her partner with Christian love, but we should be sure to lovingly and appropriately communicate to our family member our disagreement with the romantic, sexual, and marital aspects of the relationship and not participate in any way that would signal our approval of it. If a family member chooses to marry someone of the same gender, once again we would love both people in the relationship but should strongly consider excluding ourselves from participating in the immoral union, including attending or participating as a guest in the wedding ceremony. In no way should we officiate the service or actively give sanction to the union (The same would be true of a

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 12:18.

wedding involving heterosexual individuals who were not biblically suited for marriage.) We cannot endorse the marriage after the ceremony, for example, in allowing them to share the same bed while hosting them in our home (any more than we would allow an unmarried heterosexual couple to do so). Making these detailed decisions is very challenging, subject to misunderstanding, and must be done within the context of clearly affirming our love for all involved and so these decisions are not be made lightly or done thoughtlessly.

When minor children or youth express homosexual desires or tendencies, we should listen carefully and sympathetically to their feelings and experiences. We should thank them for sharing with us and reassure them that we shall always love and support them. At the appropriate moments, we should also help them understand what God's Word says to all of us—that we are to be chaste in all of our relationships (with males *and* females) and remain celibate unless married to a biblically suited spouse. Our children may experience transient SSA as well as gender dysphoria which may be more related to developmental issues, assertion of independence, peer influences, and other factors. Discerning this requires patience and wisdom. But if children and/or youth are convinced of their homosexual orientation and show no interest in potential opposite gender romance, we should help them to understand that they can live very faithful Christian lives as single persons. We would probably also advise them to disclose their struggle only to those who would edify them and to demonstrate modesty and restraint in their public lives. And we should pledge our lifelong support to walk with them in their weakness just as we hope from them in our own.

*Our counsel to pastors, elders, and congregations*

It is incumbent upon the local church to minister faithfully in situations involving LGBTQ issues. We advise church Sessions explicitly to endorse the EPC "Position Paper on Human Sexuality" as well as this Pastoral Letter to provide a general theological, ethical, and pastoral framework for its ministry. While we welcome anyone to attend our churches and to participate in our various ministries, it is essential that our churches admit into their membership and into positions of leadership only those who have a credible testimony of repentant faith in Jesus Christ. One involved in unrepentant homosexual or heterosexual misconduct does not have such a credible testimony.<sup>1</sup>

When same-gender marriage couples become believers and desire to join the local church and baptize their children, each case must be carefully assessed; but normally we believe that those who genuinely receive Jesus Christ will want their repentance to be more

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<sup>1</sup>Church Sessions are already responsible to exercise this type of discernment under G-8, including "The Session shall satisfy itself that each applicant for membership demonstrates evidence of true commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and determination to live as becomes a follower of Christ" (G-8-2-C).



notable than their sin.<sup>1</sup> This would mean that a same-sex couple who commits themselves to following Christ would come to acknowledge their marital union was contrary to His will, would take steps to renounce all inappropriate conduct, and seek to remove even the appearance of evil.<sup>2</sup> In the case of children, when the parents become believers, one of the parents would assume parental custody and the other would continue to be an influence for good in the children's lives. Only the parent who assumed custody of the child would present the child for baptism and assume the parental vows.

## Recommended Reading

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 19:1-10.

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Gender Dysphoria

Biblical/Theological Foundations

We have already addressed God's creation of male and female in His image and the role of human sexuality in the outworking of God's covenant relationship with His people. It is vital that we remember, beyond sexuality, one foundational aspect of what it means to be human is to be relational. God did not leave the man alone in the Garden of Eden; He saw the man's isolation as the only "not good" aspect of His creation, and created the woman to be his partner.¹ Human beings are meant to be connected to one another, not to operate as autonomous individuals. The oneness of a married couple reflects God's intent that people flourish in relationship, but ultimately it is within the church itself that we see the beauty of unity amid diversity. As one body with many different parts, the church demonstrates the interplay of individuality and mutuality.² We grow in our knowledge of God and in our understanding of ourselves in the context of our relationships within the body.

We have also seen that the entrance of sin into the world marked a radical breakdown in humanity's relationship with God and the relationship between the sexes. The nature of sin

¹Genesis 2:18.

²Romans 12:4-7; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

is to corrupt every aspect of human life, leaving us with self-deceptive hearts.¹ In Scripture we learn that even creation itself has been corrupted by sin and groans awaiting its full redemption.² Simply put, there is no aspect of our life that has not been in some way affected by the brokenness brought about by sin. We see this brokenness in the contemporary desire of some to redefine sex and gender.

As we embrace the gospel, we see that the only way people are able to overcome sin and be healed from brokenness is through Jesus Christ. In Christ, we find victory over sin, Satan, and death.³ Those who believe in Him are raised from death to life, and the power of God that resurrected Jesus from the dead resides in our very bodies.⁴ By the Spirit, God transforms believers to reflect the image of His Son.⁵ Christians are called children of God and He lavishes His love on us.⁶ Our identity, then, is rooted in Christ.⁷ The most foundational aspect of a Christian's identity is that he or she is a beloved child of God in Christ. Furthermore, we understand that God has in mind who we are and who we will become, and so we eagerly await Christ's return when our new identity will be fully manifested.⁸

As the Spirit enables us, we confess that God's ways are holy and good and we trust His providence in every aspect of our lives, even in the way we feel about our own gender identity. Christians must praise God with the psalmist,

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful; I know that full well.⁹

Contemporary Challenges to the Biblical Worldview

"Am I male?" "Am I female?" "Am I neuter or non-gendered?" Most people never ask these questions, because for them gender identity is simply a given. But people with Gender Dysphoria (GD) do question. The struggle seems to emerge from deep within. In its most intense manifestations, responsibilities of daily life are pushed aside as a person struggles to decide whether they are a he or a she or a "they." In order to better understand this dilemma, we must look at GD through three different lenses.

¹Jeremiah 17:9.

²Romans 8:19-22.

³Romans 5:12; Luke 10:18; Acts 26:18; Colossians 2:13-15; John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

⁴Romans 8:11; Ephesians 1:18-21.

⁵2 Corinthians 4:6.

⁶1 John 3:1.

⁷Galatians 3:28.

⁸1 John 3:2.

⁹Psalms 139:13-14.

In the clinical sense, GD is a psychiatric diagnosis. The American Psychological Association has defined it as “the experience of distress associated with the incongruence wherein one’s psychological and emotional gender identity does not match one’s biological sex.”¹

GD replaced Gender Identity Disorder (GID) in the DSM-V.² Mental health professionals advocated for the change, because in their opinion the term “disorder” unduly stigmatized and pathologized a person. They focused on the distress caused by dissonance between one’s biological sex and the psychological and emotional sense of being a man/boy or woman/girl. The experience was clinically significant when it interfered with interpersonal, professional, and other important areas of functioning. Like GID, people with GD qualified for insurance coverage for surgeries and long-term care for counseling, hormones, and medications.

For most people, gender identity issues are resolved by early adulthood through normal growth and development. Based on current diagnostic criteria, GD patients constitute a miniscule segment of the population: 0.005 to 0.014 percent of males and 0.002 to 0.003 percent of females.³ Most children diagnosed with GD resolve the conflict by identifying with their anatomical sex as they enter adolescence.⁴

Mental health professionals acknowledge that GD patients frequently have other serious psychiatric and medical conditions such as depression, anxiety, and personality disorders. This means that a diagnosis of GD is often symptomatic of serious impairment of identity and interpersonal functioning. Changing the diagnosis from “disorder” to “dysphoria” did not alter the fact that the predominant issue of GD is identity.⁵

Mental health professionals do not know what causes GD; they assume that multiple factors of nature and nurture contribute.⁶ Researchers have examined the brain and such factors as hormonal influences *in utero*. So far findings are inconclusive, and there are problems with the research itself. First, there is the issue of small research groups due to the small

¹Yarhouse *Dysphoria*, 20.

²*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, 5th Edition*, (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), hereafter *DSM-V*. The *DSM-V*, published by the American Psychological Association in 2013, establishes criteria for the classification of mental disorders. Mental health and medical clinicians, legal professionals, and insurance and drug industries use the diagnostic codes and criteria for decision. In *DSM-IV*, GID diagnostic criteria centered on strong identification with the opposite sex and rejection of sex characteristics.

³*DSM-V*, 54.

⁴Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 92.

⁵Richard G. Corradi, “Transgenderism Is Mass Hysteria Similar to 1980s–Era Junk Science.” *The Federalist*. 11/17/2016. www.thefederalist.com/2016/11/17/psychiatry-professor-transgenderism-mass-hysteria-similar-1980s-era-junk-science/ (accessed 11/16/2017) and Dragana Duišin *et al.*, “Personality Disorders in Persons with Gender Identity Disorder,” *The Scientific World Journal*, 2014, www.hindawi.com/journals/tswj/2014/809058/ (accessed 12/19/2017).

⁶Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 79.

population of people with this diagnosis. Second, many research participants had received long-term hormone therapy that caused physical changes in areas being researched (e.g., brain physiology). Third, most studies did not have control groups, thus preventing meaningful comparisons with the general population.¹

Distinct from gender dysphoria, professionals place gender nonconformity in adults and children on a continuum of mild to severe according to its impact on identity and functioning. Children and adults experiment with or regularly do the following:

- Dress in apparel of the opposite sex, privately or publicly
- Identify with opposite-sex parent and friends
- Express strong preferences to be the opposite gender
- Engage predominantly and sometimes exclusively in activities of opposite sex/gender
- Degrade their primary sex characteristics²

Medical professionals have raised serious concerns about treatment approaches for early and late onset of GD. Some oppose treatments that suppress the onset of puberty in children until age 16. Advocates for treatment argue that 16-year-olds have sufficiently matured and can decide their preferred gender and whether to take cross-sex hormones. Medical professionals list risks that include social isolation during early teen years, a delay in maturation as a boy/girl or man/woman, high risk of sterilization, and likely interference with bone mass and brain development.³

Medical professionals also cite risks associated with sex reassignment surgery in adults. In a study conducted in Sweden, a country that highly affirms transgender people, the rate of suicides “among post-operative transgender adults was nearly twenty times greater than that of the general population.”⁴ Other studies found a high rate of depression and suicide among transgender people and low scoring on life satisfaction fifteen years after surgery. One reason may be that adults who transition face serious disruptions in relationships with spouses, children, employers, and friends. Researchers have concluded that surgery may have alleviated symptoms of GD, but did not treat underlying psychiatric problems.⁵

In popular culture, GD is a subcategory of transgender—the T in LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex). The umbrella term “transgender” includes transsexuals, transvestites, drag queens, cross-dressers, and intersex.

¹*Ibid.*, 67–80.

²Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 86.

³Michelle Cretella, *Gender Dysphoria in Children*. American College of Pediatricians, May 2017. www.acpeds.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/6.6.17-Gender-Dysphoria-in-Children.pdf, p. 10-13 (accessed 12/20/2017); Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 98-100, 107-109.

⁴Cretella, *Dysphoria*, 12.

⁵*Ibid.*, 12–3.

Transgender people may or may not experience GD.¹ For example, a man may privately wear women's clothing for comfort or erotic gratification, but does not question his biological sex and gender. Likewise, most intersex people are not gender dysphoric. Intersex is a physical condition in which people have ambiguous or incongruent sex characteristics or anatomy that involves chromosomes, gonads, or genitalia. Intersex people represent .018 to 1.7 percent of the general population and generally identify as male or female.²

GD is used in the socio-political sense to argue that sexual identity should be based on one's internal sense of being male or female, regardless of biology and anatomy. The plight of individuals with GD is taken up into the broader LGBT agenda to gain equal rights as a protected minority. Advocates argue the following:

- Gender identity is a social construct. An individual has the right to choose whether to be a boy/man or girl/woman.³
- People do not choose to be gender dysphoric. Wrestling with one's sex and gender is a legitimate human struggle.

The experience of GD is undeniable and strong. Resolution sometimes only occurs through medical surgeries and treatments that change one's sex.⁴

These assertions are evident in the socio-political context as LGBT action groups advocate for the right of GD and transgender children and adults to express their new identity in social contexts. In the "bathroom debates," the right of GD males to use showers and bathrooms designated for females conflicts with the privacy rights of girls/women. Females of all ages may object to sharing bathrooms and showers with biological males, some of whom may use the "right" as a ruse for voyeuristic or predatory purposes. And children especially deserve protection from those who might use GD as a cover for predatory behavior. Yet we understand that those who genuinely suffer from GD can experience psychological distress by being compelled to use facilities of the same biological gender. Reasonable efforts should be made to accommodate such persons in order to mitigate this distress without infringing upon the privacy rights of others.

¹Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 20-21, 94.

²*Ibid.*, 21; Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015) 44-45. The .018 to 1.7 range reflects differences in researchers' definitions of intersex. Some define it as *any* deviation from the medical ideal of male or female (1.7). Others define it as a chromosomal inconsistency with phenotypic sex (.018). A conservative estimate is that there were 50,000 intersex people in the United States as of 2015.

³In its decision legalizing same-sex marriage, the Supreme Court of the United States defined liberty as the right of a person to define and express identity. Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 91.

⁴For more on surgeries and medical interventions, see Yarhouse, *Dysphoria*, 101-124.

In addition, reframing GD as a human rights issue denies the very real psychiatric condition that needs treatment from qualified Christian mental health professionals. Children and adults tragically suffer deep mental, emotional, and spiritual anguish. Untreated GD disrupts and destabilizes relationships in family and other significant social networks. Such disruption reflects a fallen society, not God. LGBT advocates argue that the angst of people with GD is due to the intolerance, rejection, and disparaging comments of society. They argue that normalizing GD allows these people to be full-fledged members of society. We believe the church must demonstrate a better way to address the challenges of people with GD, one that is rooted in the gospel of Christ.

Pastoral Guidance

The reality of GD presents the church with a challenge and an opportunity to bring the gospel to heal and comfort people who are hurting. When ministering to people with GD, we must listen with compassion and humility. We must rebuke and renounce those who abuse and bully anyone for any reasons, including those who struggle with GD. We must respond to suffering with the grace that Christ gives to us each day.¹ As Christians, we proclaim who God is and who we are in Him, and we share the hope of our full redemption and restoration in Christ. We understand that in His providence, God orders our circumstances. Whether they recognize it or not, people with GD often are struggling with God Himself regarding the way they were born.² And in that respect, we should be able to empathize, acknowledging that in various ways, each of us as fallen people struggle with God. With this in mind, we would encourage pastors and church leaders to view a gender dysphoric neighbor as another person in need of Christ's healing power, not as an enemy to be opposed.

When ministering to people with GD, we encourage pastors to engage with the individual before them and not to participate in impersonal or depersonalized debates on the social, political, and legal issues involved. We can follow the example of Christ in His interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well: when confronted with theoretical questions meant to evade or distract, we can remain focused on the personal, spiritual issues that need to be addressed.³ We bear witness to the One who redeems physical, social, mental, and emotional suffering, and this is the Good News all people need to hear!

The church has an opportunity to affirm that people are more than their sexual identity. Yarhouse writes, "If you've met one transgender person, you've met one transgender person."⁴ And that is true for people struggling with GD and for every person God brings

¹Lamentations 3:22-23.

²Acts 17:26-27.

³John 4:1-42.

⁴"The Church & Transgender Identity," *Commonweal Magazine*, 2/27/2017 (accessed May 9, 2018) www.commonwealmagazine.org/church-transgender-identity.

into His Kingdom. People are more than their presenting problems; everyone's circumstances are unique. In our highly sexualized culture, boys, girls, men, and women may be at various points on the GD continuum. Some have had a single intense experience that has set them adrift regarding their gender identity. Pastors must listen carefully and push the distress to the margins by assuring them that one experience need not define them. Others may have privately struggled for years. Some have already transitioned to the opposite gender. Pastors must listen, walk alongside, and talk with them about their struggles and point them toward Christ. It would be wise for a pastor ministering to a person with GD to connect the individual with a skilled Christian counselor when possible, to help bring understanding and healing.

The term "dysphoria" denotes intense dissatisfaction and unease with oneself. The church needs to recognize that the distress people experience is real, but normalizing and accommodating the condition does not correct the problem or alleviate the suffering. In fact, accommodating a fluid understanding of one's sex and gender ignores the very real task of developing a coherent, healthy, God-honoring sexual identity. Part of what contributes to the normalization of GD is that political advocates for gender dysphoric people use narrowly defined stereotypes of what it means to be male or female. They mischaracterize the problem individuals experience by ignoring the range of attitudes, expressions, and behaviors available within one's sex and gender. In the face of this, the church has an opportunity to free people from unfounded and damaging gender stereotypes and help them embrace their God-given identity with confidence. A young woman who has no interest in stereotypically "feminine" things need not conclude that she was "meant" to be a man; perhaps she needs a Christian friend to help her discover the kind of woman God has created her to be in Christ. Likewise, a man who identifies more closely with his mother than his father can be invited into a fuller understanding of what it means to be a man; the expression of his gender need not be limited to what he experienced in his home. We can and should affirm that there is a wide variety of expressions of masculinity and femininity. In fact, we are guilty of culture-born idolatry when we project that a man or a woman is only a rigid set of traits. Such cultural stereotyping contributes to the confusion, pain, and even ostracism of any who do not conform to these expectations.

One of the tragedies of our society's current struggle with gender identity is the fracture it produces in their relationships when a person identifies as the opposite sex. As we have seen, the Lord created human beings to flourish in relationships with one another, not to be rugged individualists defining themselves apart from community. The bonds between parents and children, siblings, or spouses are radically challenged when a person adopts the opposite sex identity. The social and political agenda that seeks to normalize GD does not adequately grapple with the relational distress and alienation that can result. The church, then, must be ready to minister to families and loved ones of those who are struggling with their gender identity or who have chosen to take on the opposite-sex

identity. We must be ready to listen with compassion before we speak with the grace and love of Christ.

Church leaders may have very practical questions about how to embrace gender dysphoric people into our congregations without normalizing it. We encourage pastors to take care to get to know GD individuals and assess their particular situations. One GD person may be hurting and struggling to settle into their God-given gender. Another might display a rebellious spirit and be unconcerned about what the Lord has to say about their identity. Church leaders need to take the spiritual state of the individual into serious consideration when deciding whether a gender-dysphoric person may become a church member or participate in the Lord's Supper. And how do we address a man who introduces himself as a woman, or vice versa? What if he chooses to use the women's restroom at church? This scenario again presents church leaders an opportunity to speak the gospel into a person's life. Rather than jumping straight into a confrontation over names or pronouns, we strongly suggest that pastors make it a high priority to get to know a GD person's individual situation and then explain to him or her the church's understanding that in God's providence, biological sex and gender are one.¹

So how may we encourage people who struggle with GD to find peace? In addition to offering wise and compassionate pastoral counseling and perhaps referring to a skilled Christian counselor for additional support, we also invite them to take advantage of the ordinary means of grace: being surrounded by a loving church family, hearing the life-giving Word of God, observing the Holy Spirit at work in the sacraments, and turning to God in prayer. A person with GD needs to be part of a faith community that sees them not as a problem to be solved, but as a person made in the image of God to be loved. Pastors understand that we are called to resist strong desires and feelings that oppose God and His commands; resistance is possible when Christians immerse themselves in God's Word in the power of the Holy Spirit and participate in a loving faith community. We must proclaim that Christ is able to heal, redeem, and vindicate all sinners who love and obey Him. Though not all our hurts and struggles may be resolved in this life, we trust in the ongoing, sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of Christ to provide grace and strength.

We concur with the EPC Position Paper on Human Sexuality: "... through His gracious redemptive work in Jesus Christ, God is leading us from brokenness and rebellion to a full and beautiful restoration of our relationship with Him and of our human dignity and purpose."²

¹We must recognize that a small percentage of the GD population is biologically intersex. In our fallen and broken world, some people are born with a gender identity that is unclear, and that may cause confusion and distress later in life. As mentioned in the EPC's "Position Paper on Human Sexuality," we believe that these cases call for special care and wisdom.

²EPC "Position Paper on Human Sexuality"; John 10:10; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-8.

Questions and Answers

Q: How should we address a person identifying as the opposite sex?

A: The most caring approach would be to get to know them, discern where they are on the GD spectrum, and, most importantly, understand where they are in the process of knowing God and following His will. Understand that they may be hesitant or slow to open up about their circumstances. Be willing to walk with them as they are willing to understand who God is in Christ so that you will have the opportunity to bear their burden with them and thus fulfill the law of Christ.¹ Keep in mind that people are more than their presenting issues; they are bearers of God's image. Our primary responsibility is to disciple people and equip them to anchor their identity in Christ. As we do, the Lord resolves conflicts within, including issues of gender identity.

Q: What if a man identifying as a woman wishes to use a women's restroom at church?

A: It is clear that the underlying concern here is for the privacy and safety of women and especially children in the church. In general, churches need to have clear policies and procedures in place for the protection of their children, and a church's insurance company would be a good resource in establishing these boundaries. For example, much potential danger could be alleviated simply by designating a gender-neutral restroom and/or adopting a policy that children not go to the restroom alone. A church may also enlist the help of deacons and ushers to monitor the safety of the church building.

Q: Should a person dressing and identifying as the opposite sex be permitted to receive the Lord's Supper?

A: We recommend that pastors use whatever means they normally employ to fence the table from those who might receive the sacrament to their own detriment.² God nurtures believers through partaking of the Lord's Supper, and confession of faith and repentance of sin are required.

Q: Would a person who identifies as the opposite sex be permitted to church membership?

A: Our recommendation is that if a church has a person with GD interested in joining, praise the Lord! This is a wonderful opportunity to see the power of Christ manifest in a person's life. Since in the EPC one of our membership vows is, "Do you now promise and resolve, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, that you will endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ?" we recommend that individuals be fully instructed and in agreement with the church's teaching on the issue and willing to follow Christ, including acceptance of their birth sex and commitment to live accordingly. While a person inwardly may be growing and maturing in grace, Sessions should be prudent in placing persons in leadership roles when outwardly they still have a lot of recovery and healing to undergo.

¹Galatians 6:2; Romans 13:8-10, 15:1

²Westminster Confession of Faith 29.8.

Q: What type of involvement in ministry is open to those with GD?

A: The degree of leadership in the church should always be proportional to Christian maturity. If the church is unbiblically selective on which sins it focuses, it acts hypocritically. As with all sin, those whose struggle with GD is outwardly apparent and largely unsuccessful should receive compassion and nurture, but not occupy roles for which spiritual maturity is prerequisite. The particular application of standards must also take into account perception as well as substance so that considerations may vary depending on one's cultural context. But as with all forms of spiritual struggle and brokenness, faith and repentance pave the path toward greater responsibilities and leadership within the church. For those who struggle with GD but demonstrate ongoing submission to God's lordship over their sexual identity, the doors to church membership and leadership should be wide open. Let us celebrate the wonder of God's work and be fearless in recognizing and affirming the faith and calling of such a brother or sister.

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## **Pornography and the Christian Life**

### **Biblical/Theological Foundations**

In one definition, "pornography... consists of visual materials containing explicit displays of sexual organs or sexual activities, whether real or simulated, in order to arouse erotic

rather than aesthetic sensations. Or more briefly, pornography is material that depicts erotic behavior intended to cause sexual arousal.”<sup>1</sup> While not typically included in the formal definition, written or oral material, live or recorded, which is also intended primarily for sexual arousal presents the same challenges and calls for the same responses discussed here.<sup>2</sup>

While the Bible makes clear reference to immoral sexual behavior such as adultery, premarital sex, and same-sex relations, there are no direct references to pornography. However, there is a material connection between the biblical term used for sexual immorality, *porneia*, from which we get the word “pornography.”<sup>3</sup> Beyond an etymological link, there are clear and powerful implications of Scripture which make the use and production of pornography an offense against God, other persons, and ourselves, depriving us of God’s blessings and perverting the gift of sexuality.

One of the strongest implicit links to pornography is the Bible’s references to sexual lust. We are taught to make a “covenant with [our] eyes not to look lustfully upon a young woman.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount make the connection between “looking lustfully upon a woman” and adultery.<sup>5</sup> Pornography springs from and produces lust.<sup>6</sup> God cares about our thoughts and meditations, for they reveal the inclination of our hearts as well as constitute acts of obedience and disobedience in and of themselves.

Scripture also calls us not to live according to the passions of our flesh, carrying out sinful desires which characterize those who are “by nature children of wrath.”<sup>7</sup> We are to be free from slavery to our fleshly passions and desires.<sup>8</sup> Compulsive use of pornography makes us slaves of our sin nature rather than righteous servants of Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there is usually the “sin beneath the sin,” and this is the case with pornography, which is essentially a form of idolatry. Paul states, “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.”<sup>10</sup> How is sexual immorality in general, and pornography in particular, idolatry? Idolatry is ultimately self-serving rather than God-serving and neighbor-loving. Idolatry isolates some

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Fradd, *The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Contemporary usage has applied the term to non-sexualized usage to other sensational material created to elicit an action (e.g., violence), but the scope is limited here to sexuality.

<sup>3</sup>For example, 1 Corinthians 5:1; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3.

<sup>4</sup>Job 31:1.

<sup>5</sup>Matthew 5:27-30.

<sup>6</sup>“As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects the man. Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, and never satisfied are the eyes of man” (Proverbs 27:20).

<sup>7</sup>Ephesians 2:3.

<sup>8</sup>Romans 6:12-14; 8:1-8.

<sup>9</sup>Romans 6:17-18.

<sup>10</sup>Colossians 3:5.

aspect or element of God's creation, which is a glorious reflection of God's attributes, and makes it, rather than God, the ultimate end of our existence.<sup>1</sup> Pornography isolates sexuality from the totality of the image of God in humanity by either severing sexuality from that image or by objectifying persons for sexual pleasure. In the end, it removes sexuality from among the most intimate ways of serving and loving another and places it in the service of self-love.

Pornography is only the tip of the iceberg of our brokenness. It is a reflection of our broken relationship with the true and living God. Pornography use at its core is a matter of the heart and whether or not it is set "on the things above."<sup>2</sup> While God offers life in its fullness and beauty, pornography produces deception, cheating, brokenness, guilt, shame, and destruction.<sup>3</sup> John Piper says it this way: "My conviction is that one of the reasons the world and the church is awash in lust and pornography is that our lives are intellectually and emotionally disconnected from the infinite, soul-staggering grandeur for which we were made."<sup>4</sup>

The Bible prohibits pornography and shows us a better way. We are called to think on things that are "true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable."<sup>5</sup> Through the enlivening work of the Holy Spirit, God's people are to seek a "clean heart... and a right spirit within."<sup>6</sup> Those who have used or continue to use pornography are offered a great hope: God's amazing grace, mercy, and forgiveness through repentance and freedom from sin's power through the indwelling Spirit.<sup>7</sup> Those who continue to struggle should remember that while victory over sin's penalty was accomplished at the cross, victory over particular sins is sometimes a lifelong battle which involves many victories and losses. Yet there is grace and hope in the battle because through Jesus Christ we are more than conquerors.<sup>8</sup>

In all, pornography is an attack on the image of God in human beings and destroys its dignity. Pornography robs people of dignity, denying their personhood as God's image bearers and objectifying them for the selfish aims of the producer and user.

### **Contemporary Challenges to the Biblical View**

Pornography use has flourished in the wake of the sexual revolution and accelerated in the digital age. Sadly, it has become one of the primary sex education tools for many children,

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 1:20, 21, 25.

<sup>2</sup>Romans 8:5; Colossians 3:2.

<sup>3</sup>John 10:10.

<sup>4</sup>John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Sex and the Supremacy of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 44.

<sup>5</sup>Philippians 4:8.

<sup>6</sup>Psalms 51:10.

<sup>7</sup>Romans 8:11.

<sup>8</sup>Romans 8:37.

youth, and even adults. Regular use of pornography is shaping attitudes and behaviors in deeply destructive ways. Moreover, the lucrative pornography industry motivates its producers to strengthen and spread its enslaving power.

A vast number of studies agree that both regular porn use and addiction rates are alarming. This problem impacts men, women, and youth inside as well as outside the church. The Barna Group, a well-respected national survey company, completed studies in 2014 for Proven Men Ministries and in 2016 for Internet Accountability.<sup>1</sup> The results are shocking, highlighting an enormous societal problem which is largely unaddressed in the culture as a whole or within the church.

Church leaders should heed findings such as these:

- 36 percent of Christian men ages 18–30 view pornography daily.
- 32 percent of Christian men 18–30 admit they are addicted.
- 55 percent of married Christian men view pornography at least monthly.
- 18 percent of men who identify themselves as born-again Christians admit they are addicted.

Pornography use impacts attitudes as well as behavior. Consider the following:

- Teens and young adults believe that not recycling is more immoral than viewing pornography.
- 70 percent of young adults (18–24) believe that pornography is not bad for society.
- 43 percent of young adults (18–24) are accepting of pornography because “everyone is looking at it.”
- Only 55 percent of adults think images of forced or painful sexual acts are “always wrong.”

Pornography changes attitudes and behavior because it delivers powerful messages about ourselves, our sexuality, and our relationships with others. These messages are shaping us.

So what does pornography say to us? Perhaps first and foremost it communicates that sex with anyone, at any time, and under any circumstances is not harmful but beneficial. Pornography tells us that sex without commitment is best. It reinforces the belief that those objectified only exist to meet the sexual needs and demands of those who objectify them. It implies that no one is sexually pure and that no one can live without sex. It teaches our

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<sup>1</sup>David Kinnaman, “The Porn Phenomenon,” *Barna Group*, February 5, 2016, [www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/](http://www.barna.com/the-porn-phenomenon/) (accessed 12/20/2017). Internet Accountability, founded by EPC elder Ron DeHaas, provides internet accountability and monitoring services founded through its Covenant Eyes software product. For more information, see [www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com).

young people that pornography will enhance one's sex life, bringing freedom and fulfillment.

One of the most pernicious lies told by the porn industry is that the women who participate in violent and degrading sex acts do so voluntarily and with enjoyment. In reality, pornography is a driving force behind sex trafficking.<sup>1</sup> Where outright trafficking is not practiced, many porn actors are deluded and progressively enslaved to their choices and the power of others over them.<sup>2</sup>

We must recognize that these messages are lies from the Evil One himself. Instead of enhancing our humanness and goodness, pornography leaves a wake of destruction and brokenness. The good news is that more churches and ministries are rising up to say "No more!" and are doing more to present God's design for sexuality and fulfillment.

Even the secular press is expressing concern about the widespread use of pornography. The lead story of *Time's* April 11, 2016, issue was entitled "Porn" with the sub-title "Why young men who grew up with internet porn are becoming advocates of turning it off."<sup>3</sup> The article highlighted the lives of young men who had viewed internet pornography regularly and were now experiencing sexual dysfunction as a result. That same issue reviews *How Porn Is Changing a Generation of Girls*, which highlights how pornography is subtly shaping young women's sense that they are performing when engaging in sexual behavior. It is noteworthy and positive that even some outside the church are waking up to the harmful effects of pornography.

## Pastoral Guidance

As church leaders, we must face the reality of pornography exposure, use, and addiction among our people. They desperately desire to honor Christ but the sexualized messages of the culture and pornography in particular are producing brokenness and devastation. We must not remain silent; our calling is to speak, teach, and disciple with both truth and grace.

Pastors and Christian leaders are not immune from this struggle. In their recent study, the Barna Group reported that 57 percent of pastors and 64 percent of youth pastors admit that they have struggled with pornography either currently or in the past. In addition, they

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<sup>1</sup>Arina O. Grossu and Sean Maguire, "The Link Between Pornography, Sex Trafficking, and Abortion," *Family Research Council Issue Analysis*, n.d., 17, available at <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF17K24.pdf> (accessed 5/16/2018).

<sup>2</sup>One recent documentary that shares many of the values of the sexual revolution but exposes the unwitting exploitation of young women and girls is Rashida Jones' *Hot Girls Wanted*, available on Netflix as of this writing. For scholarly analysis of the health risks faced by porn actors, see Corita R. Grudzen, *et al*, "Pathways to Health Risk Exposure in Adult Film Performers," *Journal of Urban Health*, (86.1) Jan 2009: 67-78, available at [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2629520/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2629520/) (accessed 12/20/2017).

<sup>3</sup>Belinda Luscombe, *Time*, March 31, 2016, [www.time.com/4277576/in-the-latest-issue-65/](http://www.time.com/4277576/in-the-latest-issue-65/) (accessed 12/20/2017).

found that 21 percent of youth pastors and 14 percent of pastors admit that they currently struggle with pornography.<sup>1</sup> As church leaders we need to be the first to strive for sexual purity. Brokenness in this area of our lives, like any other sin, is destructive to ourselves, our families, and our ministries. We cannot really help our people if we refuse to admit our own struggles.

Pastors who are struggling with their own pornography problem will be reluctant to speak out about the issue and are without the spiritual power to help others. They desperately need a safe place for confession, repentance, and support. We must find ways to help our own pastors and leaders find the help they need and ultimately experience victory in and through Christ.

As we counter flawed attitudes toward pornography, we know that some people will say that pornography is pleasurable and personal. Using pornography is a private issue that does not affect others, is an acceptable way to gratify sexual needs, and is beneficial to marriages. They will claim that pornography is the lesser of two evils, that it is less destructive than the alternative—sex with multiple partners. In reality, pornography is not a private issue. In addition to those who are objectified in its production, pornography has a profound negative effect on relationships. It changes both our attitudes and behavior toward others. It leads us to objectify and commodify others, including our spouses, and to use them for our sexual pleasure. It introduces additional partners into the intimacy of marriage. Using porn creates unrealistic expectations, because the actors in porn never say “no,” never age, and never lose their allure. It fosters addiction and consumes attention in daily living.

As we address this issue today we must be aware that more and more Christian women are now looking at visual pornography. Many who have habitually read romance novels with sexual content (like *Fifty Shades of Grey*) have moved to internet porn or sexually explicit television for their sexual pleasure. Popular television series like *Game of Thrones* contain a pornographic scene in every episode while its Harlequin plot line attracts a mixed viewership. Whether for men or women, fantasizing about a better lover is at the root of pornography’s appeal.

We must speak the plain truth about the destructive impact of pornography on marriage. It is not a victimless crime. Pornography teaches that we can use our spouses for our sexual pleasure and satisfaction rather than seeking the best for them. Its message is contrary to biblical love.<sup>2</sup> The love to which Jesus calls us is a selfless love, a love that is respectful, honoring, and giving to the other person. Pornography’s distortion of love directly contradicts this, even informing marital love-making, where husband and wife become

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<sup>1</sup>Barna Group, “The Porn Phenomenon: New Research of Global Importance,” [www.setfreesummit.org/barna-study/](http://www.setfreesummit.org/barna-study/) (accessed 12/20/2017).

<sup>2</sup>1 Corinthians 13:1-7.



performers and users of each other. The harsh reality is that pornography prior to or in marriage precludes, inhibits, and destroys sexual intimacy between husbands and wives.

Our young adults and teens know pornography's use is pervasive and thus may question whether or not it is wrong or harmful. Most research indicates that the first-time exposure to pornography occurs at the age of eleven or even younger.<sup>1</sup> Quite often, early exposure is not to a father or older brother's "stash" as it was before the internet age, but to more explicit and even hardcore pornography which is common and readily available on the internet. When pornography use starts at these very young ages, our young adults will often have a decades-long battle before them.<sup>2</sup>

The obvious first response to the pervasive use of pornography is that just because "everyone" is doing something does not make it right or godly.<sup>3</sup> We need to discuss the root problem—our relationship with Christ and its priority over any competing desires such as lust. We must expose the lies of the sexualized culture and their negative impact on our lives. The challenge we should share is to live with a renewed mind free from pornography, lust, and masturbation.<sup>4</sup>

We need to seek confession and repentance and develop accountability relationships with peers or older adults. Installation of an internet monitoring software system (such as Covenant Eyes) on all digital devices will prove to be very helpful in many cases as well as canceling cable, streaming, and other video services.

Many parents are reluctant to talk to their children about pornography, believing that such discussion will entice them to look for it. But we must not deceive ourselves; even our Christian children are finding pornography.<sup>5</sup> They may not be looking for it, but the pornographers are looking for them. Most first-time exposure to internet pornography is accidental—a good estimate is about eighty percent. So we must face reality. Most of our children will see pornography before they are eighteen and most will see it at much younger ages than that.

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<sup>1</sup>The Novus Project indicates that the average age of first exposure is as young as eight years old among boys. See [www.thenovusproject.org/resource-hub/parents](http://www.thenovusproject.org/resource-hub/parents) (accessed 12/20/2017).

<sup>2</sup>Our young people need to be aware of the baggage that pornography use will bring into adulthood and marriage. This truth is highlighted in the booklet *What's Wrong with a Little Porn When You're Single*: "If and when you get married, your porn usage will have already deeply impacted the God-designed richness of an intimate sexual relationship with your spouse, because sex the way God intended it is selfless and other directed." R. Nicholas Black, *What's Wrong with a Little Porn When You're Single?* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 3:10-12.

<sup>4</sup>Romans 12:1-2. We include masturbation here because of the link between pornography and self-pleasure. There is a range of views among Christians on the topic of masturbation itself. For more information, see the "Brief Note on Masturbation" near the end of this Letter.

<sup>5</sup>For more information about this, see, "Parents Guide to Kids and Media," available at [http://media.cloversites.com/27/27f203c5-b6e0-4713-bd7b-e4c7daf4edc1/documents/Parents Guide to Kids and Media.pdf](http://media.cloversites.com/27/27f203c5-b6e0-4713-bd7b-e4c7daf4edc1/documents/Parents%20Guide%20to%20Kids%20and%20Media.pdf) (accessed 12/20/2017).

As pastors and church leaders, one of our primary responsibilities is to equip parents to disciple their children. This must begin by teaching parents about the reality of pornography use and its harmful impact. We must encourage parents to help their children by controlling and monitoring access to technology and by installing internet protective devices and software. Parental strategy must evolve as children mature, from a mode of protection to one of equipping. We should train parents as well to focus on God's plan for sexuality and purity. The wonderful truth is that God's plan is best!

We must recognize that many Christians have struggled with pornography addiction for years. While their personal commitment to change is important, several additional steps may be necessary, such as participating in a support group with others who are facing the same struggles, and Christian counseling with experts in addiction. We as pastors do not need to do the counseling or lead the support groups, but we do need to have access to the right people, local support groups, and knowledge of the best ministries that can help (see the recommended organizations below, including The Nathan Project and Pure Desire). Referral to these resources, however, does not remove our responsibility to encourage, pray for, and hold our members accountable. Because this is a spiritual battle, our consistent, fervent prayers are as important as any other steps we take.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most powerful means of aid in this struggle is the church as the body of Christ, including and especially participating regularly in the opportunity to confess, especially in preparation for the Lord's Supper. In this sacrament we receive by faith the power of Christ's resurrection life, and we exhibit our union with other believers. Participation in Christ and His body helps us to inhabit a world where death gives way to life, indwelling sin is mortified, and the life of the Spirit thrives. Pornography depends deeply on our isolation, while victory will most assuredly come through community in Christ.

Victory over addiction is challenging, complex, and a battle that can last a lifetime. Pastors must be aware of some factors that make the challenge to stop using pornography extremely difficult. One is the pattern of addiction itself. Pornography use becomes more frequent, more controlling, and involves increasingly hard-core and degrading content as the addiction progresses. Regular use actually changes the brain chemistry of the addict, weakening good patterns of thinking and strengthening bad ones. Ted Roberts, founder of Pure Desire Ministry and host of the Conquer Series for men struggling with pornography use, puts it this way: "We tell men to try harder, pray harder, love Jesus more. But what starts off as a moral problem, quickly becomes a brain problem. Telling a man to try harder is only tightening the noose of bondage."

Failure to have victory produces a cycle of guilt and shame for those who become addicted, which drives them away from God and from the community of believers who together

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<sup>1</sup>Ephesians 6:10-17.

represent the only solution to the problem. In our help for the addict, we must recognize that all addiction, including pornography, is the result of sin and is deeply influenced by Satan and his demonic forces.

## **Conclusion**

We live in a pornified culture with exposure, use, and addiction at epidemic levels both inside and outside the church. Despite the enormous challenge pornography presents to us and all of our members, we must stand on God's promise that nothing is too difficult for Him.<sup>1</sup> We must face the reality that silence on this issue is not helpful. Our calling as pastors is to speak the truth with grace and compassion for fellow strugglers. Our hope is not in our own strength or skills but in the living Christ, in whom all of God's promises are "yes."<sup>2</sup>

## **Organizational Resources**

### *Covenant Eyes*

A for-profit company producing blocking and monitoring software systems for digital devices. They also produce reports and articles on the problem of pornography and what both individuals and parents can do to prevent the harmful results of pornography use. [www.covenanteyes.com](http://www.covenanteyes.com)

### *Harvest USA*

A ministry that addresses many of the cultural challenges to biblical sexuality. They have resources for individuals, married couples, and parents on the issue of pornography. [www.harvestusa.org](http://www.harvestusa.org)

### *Living Without Lust*

A ministry for men utilizing teaching resources and personal accountability relationships. [www.livingwithoutlust.com](http://www.livingwithoutlust.com)

### *Nathan Project*

A ministry providing hope, leadership, training, and a place of recovery for men struggling with the compulsive use of pornography, and to the spouses and ex-spouses of these men and their families. [www.nathanproject.net](http://www.nathanproject.net)

### *Pure Desire*

A ministry primarily to men who are struggling with pornography use and addiction. They have resources for individuals and groups addressing this problem. [www.puredesire.org](http://www.puredesire.org)

### *pureHope*

A ministry to pastors, Christian leaders, and parents. Their mission is providing Christian solutions in a sexualized culture. pureHope provides written resources and face-to-face ministry in churches and Christian schools. [www.purehope.net](http://www.purehope.net)

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<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah 32:17.

<sup>2</sup>Romans 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 1:20.

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Sexual Abuse

Whereas God intends for human sexuality to fulfill His good purposes, sexual abusers seek control, domination, and power over victims to satisfy depraved cravings. Biblical examples are David when he saw and took Bathsheba, and Amnon when he craved and raped his

half-sister Tamar.¹ Sexual abuse denigrates human dignity, destroys social bonds, and is an offense to our holy God.

Incidents of sexual abuse are under-reported, and yet the reported statistics are alarming. Approximately one in six boys and one in four girls are sexually abused before the age of eighteen. Teenagers aged sixteen to nineteen are three-and-a-half times more likely to be victims of rape or an attempted rape than the general population. Eighteen percent of U.S. women have been raped during their lifetime. Although firm facts are hard to come by, it is believed that only sixteen percent of rapes are reported to law enforcement.²

What is Sexual Abuse?

Sexual abuse is “any type of sexual behavior or contact where consent is not freely given or obtained and is accomplished through force, intimidation, violence, coercion, manipulation, threat, deception, or abuse of authority.”³ Child sexual abuse is “any contact or interaction (visual, verbal, or psychological) between a child/adolescent and an adult when the child/adolescent is being used for the sexual stimulation of the perpetrator or any other person.”⁴

Child sexual abuse includes all manner of sexually inappropriate behavior: using children in pornographic material, exposing children to pornography, adults viewing pornography in the presence of a child, and incestuous relationships such as older sibling with younger or parent with child. Subtle examples include adults voyeuristically watching a child in the bathtub for sexual excitement, family and friends using sexual language and making sexual comments about a maturing child, and inappropriately touching teens, such as patting the buttocks and worse.

The easy accessibility of internet pornography has resulted in sexual abuse becoming normalized in our culture. Seventy percent of all eighteen to thirty-four-year-olds are regular viewers of pornography; on average, they begin at age eleven. Three-quarters of fifteen to eighteen-year-olds have “sexed” and half have sent nude pictures or videos of themselves. Teens imitate what they see on pornography websites, and this results in the objectification of partners. When an eighteen-year-old sends nude pictures of himself to a

¹2 Samuel 11–12; 13.

²Kilpatrick, Dean G., Ph.D., Heidi S. Resnick, Ph.D., Kenneth J. Ruggiero, Ph.D., Lauren M. Conoscenti, M.A., and Jenna McCauley, M.S., “Drug-Facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study,” July 2007. (www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/219181.pdf) (December 21, 2011). For more statistics on rape and other forms of sexual abuse, see U.S. Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website (NSOPW) “Facts and Statistics.” Accessed May 16, 2018. [www.nsopw.gov/\(X\(1\)S\(pffkh4effqyfvwir5xdvl4oy\)\)/en-us/Education/FactsStatistics?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1](http://www.nsopw.gov/(X(1)S(pffkh4effqyfvwir5xdvl4oy))/en-us/Education/FactsStatistics?AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1).

³Justin S. and Lindsey A. Holcomb, *Rid of My Disgrace: Hope and Healing for Victims of Sexual Assault* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 201) 28.

⁴Daniel Allender, *The Wounded Heart: Hope for Adult Victims of Childhood Sexual Abuse* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2008) 47.

fifteen-year-old, it is sexual abuse. Experts call it the new courtship, but there is no healthy relationship.¹

Adult sexual abuse has similar behaviors. A person in authority intimidates through verbal and non-verbal solicitations and demands. A boss demands sexual favors. A husband insists that his wife perform in a way that denigrates her. A wife dresses and behaves seductively with men to demean her husband. A man watches pornography while his wife is in the next room.

Sexual Predators

Sexual predators beguile, groom, threaten, demand, and physically overpower their victims to satisfy cravings. They use cunning and guile to groom victims and lower defenses. According to the Department of Justice, 30 percent of predators are family members, 60 percent are known to the child (e.g., friends, babysitters, neighbors), and 10 percent are strangers. They are overwhelmingly male.² Internet-based predators connect with victims in chat rooms, and juveniles willingly meet predators face-to-face.³

Predators demand secrecy and threaten retribution if exposed. Members of the family, church, business, or political system might suspect abuse, but they too might fear the abuser *and* the ramifications of exposing it. Exposure of abuse can be as damaging to the victim as the abuse itself when handled poorly. A father who molests his daughter threatens that he will lie and turn mother against daughter. A woman raped by her husband or partner fears family and public exposure or further violence from her abuser. Predators who are successful, affable, well-liked, and in esteemed positions are more often given the benefit of the doubt and more easily forgiven. Predators generally instill the lie that victims deserve and even invite the abuse.

Aftermath and Healing

Victims of child and adult sexual abuse can suffer deep shame and contempt for themselves, their abuser, and for those who suspected but did nothing about it. The severity of the trauma depends on the age when the abuse began, duration of the abuse, emotional and psychological strength of the abused, relationship to the abuser, and the

¹James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017) 59–65.

²National Center for Victims of Crime, “Statistics on Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse,” www.victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/statistics-on-perpetrators-of-csa (accessed 12/20/2017).

³National Sex Offender Public Website, “Facts and Statistics: Raising Awareness about Sexual Abuse.” U.S. Department of Justice, www.nsopw.gov/enus/education/FactsStatistics (accessed December 20, 2017). Statistics represent multiple studies conducted 2000–2014.

response of others. Often children will only drop hints and only describe the abuse when encouraged. Children and adults both most often first discuss the abuse with friends.

Sexually abused people need a defender! And the church should be their fiercest one. We must be a safe place to disclose any abuse, above all that which may have happened within the church and by someone in church authority. It is one of our utmost responsibilities to come to the defense of the vulnerable.¹

Pastoral Guidance

Publicly exposing statistics and facts raises awareness and alerts the church of the need to establish policies and procedures to protect children and the church and to deter predators. Pastors and Sessions have a moral and legal responsibility to understand the law and to report immediately claims of abuse. Organizations like Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE) are dedicated to educating about, preventing, and addressing sexual abuse within the Christian community and provide a range of resources.²

Pastors should address the prevalence and sin of sexual abuse as they preach, teach, and counsel. Jesus Christ is the ultimate defender of the oppressed and abused, and the church is His instrument of grace and healing. Pastors must preach that no sin or injury is beyond God's reach and that the power of God resides in those who believe.³

Healing is not an event, but a process. The process involves belief in Christ and His Word, repentance of sin, and forgiveness of the abuser and others. Sexual abuse is an intensely personal degradation of human dignity, and telling to others one's story is an important part of the healing process for abuse survivors. They need people to listen and believe them. They need tender care. But personal stories must incorporate the grand story of Jesus Christ as Savior, Redeemer, and Lord over all. While past abuse will always be part of the reality of a victim's life, success varies in the degree and pace of transcending the trauma. Some experience significant healing. Others may struggle a lifetime with the aftereffects. But no matter the degree or pace of healing, all should be encouraged to think of themselves as a child of God first and foremost, created in God's image, born again to a living hope to an imperishable inheritance, bought with a price to be God's own special possession, letting faith work through tribulation to produce hope, and to the extent possible by God's grace not to let the abuse define them.⁴

Recommended Reading

¹Proverbs 31:8-9; Psalm 82:3; Jeremiah 22:16; James 1:27.

²See www.netgrace.org/blog.

³Ephesians 1:20-22.

⁴1 Peter 1:2-3; Romans 5:1-6.

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## Church and World

It has been said that what the world needs most is for the church to be the church. This is because the church is a sign, the presence, and a foretaste of the new creation as well as God's means for extending His saving reign in Christ. We are perpetually sent into the world as God's missionary people to be His instrument to proclaim the gospel and to gather all those for whom Christ died. This entails not simply going to distant places to bear witness to Christ, but viewing ourselves as on mission where we live.

In mission, we are called to be in the world but not of the world.<sup>1</sup> If, in our efforts to be in the world, we become a worldly church, our light is dim, we lose our saltiness, and we offer no hope of the transforming power of the gospel. Alternatively, if under a misshapen notion of purity we isolate ourselves from the world, we become proprietary about God's grace like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, and we fail in our central purpose to be faithful stewards of God's "house of prayer for all peoples."<sup>2</sup>

Holding both of these concerns in proper tension has never been easy and has become uniquely difficult in our day. Thus we have said:

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<sup>1</sup>John 15:19; 17:14.

<sup>2</sup>Isaiah 56:7.



In a time when the views of human sexuality and marriage are rapidly changing, we believe it is necessary and helpful to state clearly and compassionately to the church and the world our beliefs about God's design for human sexuality... We long for the church as well as society (the world) to conform to biblical standards of sexuality, but our ultimate desire is that, through the gospel, all may come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives and receive His gift of eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

Given our tenuous and rapidly shifting context, we must strive for wisdom.<sup>2</sup> We must seek that wisdom humbly and diligently in God's Word and seek earnestly to understand our cultural moment and context.<sup>3</sup>

Our circumstances are made more challenging when we consider questions of political engagement. As Christians in a post-Christian society, we struggle to speak out without reducing our witness to mere political advocacy. At one extreme, we are encouraged to engage the culture wars with militant fervor. At the other, persuasive voices argue for a monastic model of withdrawal. Between these two extremes, we must heed the call to be God's people on mission, ambassadors of the Kingdom of God who are called and willing to lay down our lives in witness as we stand for truth in every sphere of engagement, including politics. The following guidance can help us navigate the challenge of being the church in the world.

### **The Church *for* the World**

As God's people in the world, we must aspire to be a blessing to the world by following God's commands. First, we are to do this for the common good. As we live out God's commands, we will embody the blessedness of walking in God's ways.<sup>4</sup> God's commands benefit all who obey them, believer and non-believer alike. We are to "seek the welfare of the city" wherever we find ourselves in exile in this fallen world.<sup>5</sup> With respect to civil government, we must remember that God has established it for our good, that we may and must participate in the processes and institutions of government, and that we should seek to honor those who are in authority over us and to pray for them.<sup>6</sup>

Second, we are to keep God's commands so that God's righteous will is exhibited through our obedience; for when we do so, those around will have the opportunity to see the blessedness of life with God, to sense their own need for forgiveness, and to turn to God in

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<sup>1</sup>EPC "Position Paper on Human Sexuality."

<sup>2</sup>Ephesians 5:16.

<sup>3</sup>Proverbs 2:1-5; 2 Chronicles 12:32; Acts 17:16.

<sup>4</sup>Psalms 1.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremiah 29:7.

<sup>6</sup>Romans 12:1-7; 1 Timothy 2:1-3; WCF 23; 31.4.

repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> As living stones of the new temple of the Spirit, serving Him as a kingdom of priests who are proclaiming the excellencies of Him who called us from darkness into His marvelous light, we will not only display the normative will of God but we will embody the presence of the living God for those we encounter.<sup>2</sup>

Third, we are to remember that the gospel is the power of God for salvation and that God's Word is living and active.<sup>3</sup> The proclamation of the gospel comes not as mere words, but by the Holy Spirit comes in power to bring full conviction.<sup>4</sup> As we proclaim the ministry of reconciliation, people will hear the voice of Christ Himself and His Word will cause people to be born again to a living hope.<sup>5</sup> It is this powerful Word which will set people free from slavery to sin and heal their brokenness.

While we must do all we can to honor civil authorities, there are times when their laws will conflict with God's commands. We must never conclude this lightly out of an over-inflated sense of victimization or persecution, and especially not because of animosity or hatred toward others. But when legitimate situations arise, we must obey God's commands even when they are contrary to human commands.<sup>6</sup> Even then, we are never justified in doing evil in response to evil.<sup>7</sup> We may exercise our rights under the civil law, petition civil authorities for relief, and make certain that we are not creating false dilemmas, but ultimately we must obey God rather than people.<sup>8</sup>

### **The World *against* the Church**

We must understand that truly living as Christ's disciples does not mean that the world will embrace and approve of us. While to some we will be the fragrance of life, to others we will be the aroma of death.<sup>9</sup> God said that life "east of Eden" would be characterized by enmity between God's people and the world,<sup>10</sup> and the witness of Scripture bears this out from Abel until the consummation.<sup>11</sup> The Bible says we are to expect persecution and not be surprised.<sup>12</sup> In fact, we are to be wary when the world speaks well of us.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>1 Timothy 2:11-12; Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

<sup>2</sup>1 Peter 2:4-10.

<sup>3</sup>1 Corinthians 1:18; Hebrews 4:12.

<sup>4</sup>1 Thessalonians 1:5.

<sup>5</sup>2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Romans 10:14-17; 1 Peter 1:23-25.

<sup>6</sup>Acts 5:29.

<sup>7</sup>Romans 12:14-21; 1 Peter 2:20; 3:9-17.

<sup>8</sup>Proverbs 29:25; Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:4-5.

<sup>9</sup>2 Corinthians 2:16.

<sup>10</sup>Genesis 3:15; John 15:18-19.

<sup>11</sup>Genesis 4; Revelation 12.

<sup>12</sup>1 Peter 4:12.

<sup>13</sup>Luke 6:26.

More than that, when we face opposition for being Christ's faithful followers, Jesus said we are "blessed" and that God has a purpose for it.<sup>1</sup> There is an outward purpose in that when God's people are persecuted for doing good and they patiently endure it, it provides the opportunity for the world to ask what is our hope.<sup>2</sup> There is also an inward purpose in that the testing of suffering for the sake of Christ strengthens our character and leads to divine blessing.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, rather than being surprised and overcome, we are to rejoice because it is on account of being identified with Jesus that we are suffering.<sup>4</sup> Jesus taught that whoever wished to be His disciple must take up his cross and follow Him; that by losing our lives for His sake and the gospel we would save our lives.<sup>5</sup> To share in His sufferings means to be united to Him, to fill up what is lacking in His afflictions, and thus to share in His resurrection life.<sup>6</sup>

To navigate this difficult course—to hold holiness and mission in proper relation, to ensure that it is for righteousness' sake and not our own self-righteousness that we encounter difficulties—we must be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves."<sup>7</sup> We must recognize that "the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light."<sup>8</sup> Such wisdom requires us to be watchful about our vulnerabilities. One vulnerability is to hypocrisy—inconsistent practices due to applying different standards to different kinds of immorality. If we overlook or more quickly forgive some forms of sexual sin than others, we are not upholding our own professed standards. In today's environment, such inconsistencies can result in legal challenges. While we enjoy a unique privilege in the First Amendment's free exercise of religion, we make ourselves vulnerable when we deal with different people according to different standards.

Furthermore, church leaders must be prepared for aggressive tactics by activists who wish to disrupt the life of the church, disaffect and confuse its members, and bring it under public scrutiny, pressure, and ridicule. Preparation must include actively and regularly reminding the membership of the biblical standards for the faith and practice of the EPC, being aware of outsiders who are not well-intended, and being aware of the church's own ecclesiastical and civil rights in order to assert them explicitly. This diligence is not only necessary for protecting the integrity of the church, but for the church to fulfill its prophetic role in the culture by proclaiming the truth of God regardless of the cost. Just as the "wounds of a friend" are faithful, so the world needs the prophetic voice of the church to

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 5:10-12.

<sup>2</sup>1 Peter 3:13-17.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 5:3-5; James 1:3-4, 12.

<sup>4</sup>James 1:2; 1 Peter 4:16; Acts 5:41.

<sup>5</sup>Mark 8:34-38.

<sup>6</sup>Colossians 1:24; Philippians 3:10-11.

<sup>7</sup>Matthew 10:16.

<sup>8</sup>Luke 16:8.

remind it and demonstrate for it that the greatest path of human flourishing is in following the revealed will of God. “The Lord’s servants must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.”<sup>1</sup>

A church Session must examine its own church’s practices to determine that they are consistent with Scripture, the constitutional standards of the EPC, and its own by-laws. A Session ought to seriously consider developing written policies in order to limit vulnerabilities of the church and its minister(s) and seek legal counsel on the sufficiency and clarity of those policies. Such policies will not only minimize the church’s and officers’ vulnerabilities, but they will be helpful in communicating the church’s beliefs and practices to members and outsiders.

Yet such self-examination, humility, and cross bearing does not eliminate the fact that as the ruler of the world who has been cast down by Christ’s work on the cross, Satan still seeks to devour and destroy us and our children. The pop culture figures of today display and perform like the porn stars of a previous time. Popular television series routinely include gratuitous nudity in order to normalize it. The bar has been progressively lowered, almost undiscernibly at times, so that professing Christians are more worldly than worldly unbelievers of the past. Without active resistance, we will be consumed from within even while our attention is directed without.

### **The Church, the World, and Human Sexuality**

Our cultural moment places biblical Christianity in something of a vice. On the one hand, the real hate and violence directed toward same-sex-attracted and other non-heterosexual persons provide fuel for those who characterize biblical sexual morality as homophobic and hateful. Add to that the church’s selective focus on certain sexual sins, tolerating immorality within itself while condemning the world, and the church has much for which it should repent. On the other hand, powerful forces have politicized sexuality as they have the sexual revolution in previous times, and unprecedented activism works to marginalize religious faith in general and biblical Christianity in particular from the public square. New forms of intolerance threaten the ability of Christians to participate in public life and even potentially to teach and preach biblical Christianity within the church.

Thus we have a dual challenge—owning our faults and condemning what is evil on one hand, while on the other hand teaching, promoting, and practicing biblical sexual morality in a loving, redemptive way. We may find at times that we must emphasize certain things more than others in order to be heard over the biases, prejudices, and pre-conceived

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<sup>12</sup> Peter 2:24-26.

attitudes toward biblical morality. This is the ancient challenge of speaking the truth in love, the heart of our motto as a denomination.<sup>1</sup> It requires listening in order to know what others have heard and are hearing—from other Christians, from those who falsely claim to be Christians, and from us.

We also must reconsider the extent to which we have expected the civil and cultural order to promote and sustain biblical morality. When religion becomes civil, it tends to become neither true religion nor genuine civility. Until “the kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” we cannot expect the culture to reflect and uphold the righteousness of God’s Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces which take captive the souls of people.<sup>3</sup> God’s Kingdom comes not by might, political or otherwise, but by God’s Spirit.<sup>4</sup> So it is with “deeds of love and mercy” that we must strive to announce, display, and extend the reign of King Jesus. And we must do so trusting that He will build His church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.<sup>5</sup> We must remain vigilant regarding ourselves, recognizing that while the external foes of Christ’s Kingdom will not prevail, internal sin and sickness are what make God’s people vulnerable.<sup>6</sup> And foremost, we must trust in the powerful gospel of God’s grace in and through Jesus Christ to continue to sanctify us and to empower us by the Spirit to proclaim God’s good news to all who are near and far off from God.<sup>7</sup>

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Membership and Leadership Considerations

The church of Jesus Christ should receive all whom Christ would receive. Christ came for the sick, not the healthy.⁸ He is a gentle Savior whose undershepherds, just like Him, desire not to “break a bruised reed.”⁹ Yet the free grace of Christ is costly—our gentle Savior also tells us that we must lose our lives in order to find them, that we must die to self in order to live.¹⁰ Membership, however a local church administers it, is that point when someone declares their desire to publicly identify with and follow Christ and commits themselves to a covenanted relationship with the body of Christ. At that point a “Session is to satisfy itself that each applicant for membership demonstrates evidence of true commitment to Jesus

¹Ephesians 4:15.

²Revelation 11:15.

³Ephesians 6:12.

⁴Zechariah 4:6.

⁵Matthew 16:18.

⁶Galatians 6:1.

⁷Isaiah 57:19; Ephesians 2:13.

⁸Matthew 9:12.

⁹Matthew 12:20.

¹⁰Matthew 16:25.

Christ as Lord and determination to live as becomes a follower of Christ.”¹ This not only includes saving faith, but a demonstration of “repentance unto life” which is a saving grace through which we apprehend God’s grace, turn from sin to God, and strive for new obedience.²

When candidates for membership voice beliefs or exhibit living contrary to the teaching of the EPC on any matter, including human sexuality, it is the responsibility of the Session to ensure that they can take the membership vows with integrity.³ While “the Session may not deny membership for any reason *not related to* profession of faith and obedience,”⁴ that stricture also carries with it the positive obligation for Sessions to ensure that the beliefs and practices of members are in accord with members’ professions and conducive to the peace and purity of the church. This in no way assumes that a new believer, or a maturing one for that matter, has their doctrines fully figured out or their lives perfectly in order. Yet while it is vital that the church warmly embrace all who are truly seeking God and His grace, membership involves covenant commitments into which no one should enter lightly or insincerely. While our confessional standards affirm the importance of Christian liberty so that no one’s beliefs or practices are bound by commands which are beside, beyond, or contrary to God’s Word, anyone who “upon pretense of Christian liberty” believes or practices what is contrary to Scripture actually “betray[s] true liberty of conscience.”⁵ Therefore, those who wish to join the church as well as those who are already members must be willing to grow in faith and practice consistent with the faith and practice of the EPC. Sessions have a responsibility to observe, encourage, and enable this in the church’s members and, when necessary, address beliefs and practices contrary to EPC faith and practice. If a seeker is not yet ready to live as a follower of Christ, they should be welcome to take part in the life of the church to the fullest extent they are able so that they can experience the fellowship of the new creation and witness the power of the gospel at work in the lives of members, but not yet assume the responsibilities and accountability of membership.

Concerning church leadership, there is a greater accountability and therefore a higher standard for those who are entrusted with leadership in the church. The standards of faith (i.e. beliefs) and practice (i.e. obedience) should be commensurate with the levels of responsibility and visibility given leaders—especially officers, those who teach, and those who are entrusted with spiritual influence.⁶ This is partially for their own good because, as James cautions us, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know

¹*Book of Government* 8-3-F.

²Westminster Shorter Catechism 87.

³*Book of Government* 8-3-B-3 and 4.

⁴*Book of Government* 8-2-D, *emphasis added*.

⁵Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2-3. These vows include the promise to “endeavor to live as becomes the followers of Christ” and to “submit yourself to the government and discipline” of the church and “the spiritual oversight of the Church Session” as well as a promise “to promote the unity, purity, and peace of the Church.”

⁶Isaiah 9:16; Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 4:12, 16; Titus 2; ; James 3:1; 2 Peter 2; 3:16; 2 John 1:9-11.

that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”¹ Elders are exhorted to be examples and rule according to the will of Christ so that “when the chief Shepherd appears, [they] will receive the unfading crown of glory.”² Besides officers and others who teach, all who are entrusted with degrees of influence, authority, and who visibly represent Christ should model a commensurate level of faith and practice for the sake of themselves as well as not being a stumbling block to the faith of others and to uphold the honor of Christ. Sessions must bear well in mind that no confessional standard, no Position Paper, no Pastoral Letter—not even Scripture itself—will by themselves preserve the integrity of the church’s witness. The matter rests with the Session and, when necessary, their fellow presbyters, to faithfully shepherd Christ’s sheep in the power of the Spirit according to the measure of God’s grace signified when the hands of ordination were laid upon them.

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### **The Gospel of Hope**

If the church offered the world nothing more than a moral system, then our message could hardly be called good news. At best, such a message would saddle the soul with a set of burdens beyond the capacity of our fallen nature. Additionally, as we have stated, God’s Word stands over against our world and its formula for human flourishing in every sphere of human sexuality. We present a message that is fundamentally at odds with the central claims of prevailing culture.

- To a world that celebrates individual expression as the highest good, we believe joy lies on the path of conformity to Christ.
- For a world that assumes the human instinct and appetite are inherently praiseworthy, we diagnose a condition—sin—that distorts us at the deepest levels of desire.
- In a world that warns against the danger of declaring norms, we present the biblical vision of marriage as the sole context for sexual expression.

We are, to put it mildly, swimming against the current. And yet the message we share is, as it always has been, good news. While we are called to stand against the continuing tide of the sexual revolution as it has evolved into the sexualized culture of our day, we do so not as moralists defending a system but as messengers proclaiming the saving acts of God.

In the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, God has brought His Kingdom into history. It is a present reality, here and now. We live under the protection and

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<sup>1</sup>James 3:1.

<sup>2</sup>1 Peter 5:3-4.

provision of the King who was crucified on our behalf. We invite the world to experience life as it was meant to be lived, within this Kingdom. Even as we proclaim the present reality of this new life, we are a community that waits. We await our King's coming at the end of time which means we live as people who have real hope. Our faithfulness to Scripture's teaching about human sexuality is a response to the God who has brought us that hope.

### **The Hope of the Incarnation**

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."<sup>1</sup> These words from the prologue of John's Gospel reveal the stunning news that God, rather than providing a ladder for us to climb up to Him, initiated salvation by coming down to us. Within the gospel, we proclaim that salvation is, above all, the eternal joy of fellowship with God. How can sinful humanity enter into friendship with this God—invisible, eternal, and holy?

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Philippian church:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.<sup>2</sup>

In a singular expression of divine love, the Son of God embraced human nature. He was born at a definite time in a definite place to a real woman.<sup>3</sup> This act of love not only affirms the essential goodness of God's creation, but it also magnifies the staggering goodness of God's heart. The Lord who called light into existence stepped into the darkness of our world so that our eyes could be opened, our souls healed and, ultimately, so that we could experience a total restoration of humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Not only does the Incarnation assert God's love for His creation, it affirms for us that our God is well aware of what it means to live in this world of struggle. The author of Hebrews reveled in this reality:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with

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<sup>1</sup>John 1:14.

<sup>2</sup>Philippians 2:5-7.

<sup>3</sup>Galatians 4:4.

<sup>4</sup>1 Peter 2:9.



confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.<sup>1</sup>

We are not alone in our struggle. Within the fellowship of the Trinity, there exists a Person who has, first-hand, experienced temptations, struggle, opposition, and rejection. Because the one who sanctifies us and we who are sanctified share in one nature we know that whatever our struggle with sexual temptation, frustration, brokenness, confusion, or enslavement to desire, that it was in our human nature Christ was sent to redeem us.<sup>2</sup> The Incarnation also tells us of the dignity with which God regards others, forbidding us to think otherwise of fellow human beings regardless of their sexual struggles.

These truths of the Incarnation bring hope to every heart. If we embrace the reality of Christ's descent into humanity, our vision is elevated to see a God of great love, understanding, and compassion. Such a God might demand much in the way of obedience, but we can be sure that every command is an invitation into deeper fellowship with the good Father who sent His Son for us. In every step we take down that path of obedience, Jesus of Nazareth walks with us.

### **The Hope of the Cross**

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.<sup>3</sup>

The Son knew that by taking on a human nature, He was embracing his Father's mission—reconciliation. He came into this world with the full knowledge that His invitation to reconciliation would be met with rejection. In other words, from the moment the Son of God said “yes” to the Incarnation, He embraced the inevitability of His own crucifixion. And still, He came.

On the cross, Jesus, the sinless one, offered Himself for us, the sinners. His sacrifice of obedience perfectly satisfied the demands of justice and magnified the God of love.<sup>4</sup> In this

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<sup>1</sup>Hebrews 4:14-16.

<sup>2</sup>Hebrews 2:8.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 5:6-11.

<sup>4</sup>Colossians 2:14.

act of amazing grace, Jesus offered Himself as our substitute. He did what we cannot do, bearing the sentence of death which every sin deserves. He offered what we cannot give, the perfect, sinless sacrifice to a holy God. He suffered what we could not endure—abandonment, rejection, and desolation.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus performed this great act with a willing heart that continues to be moved by compassionate love, even in the moment of crucifixion:

“Father, forgive them.”

“Today you will be with me in paradise.”

“Woman, behold your son”/“Behold your mother.”

“It is finished.”<sup>2</sup>

In His dying words, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of those who crucified Him, offered hope to a criminal, provided for His mother, gave a disciple a great honor, and declared the reality of a completed sacrifice. The Paschal Lamb atoned for the sins of the world! “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree” so “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

When we look upon the cross, we cannot help but find hope. We find hope because this great Savior did all that could be done to reconcile us, make us friends again, with God. He faced the worst that humanity could give and still forgave.

Our sins which led to that cross, including our sexual sins, do not have to bar us from friendship with God. In fact, God has shown us, with perfect clarity, that He does not want our sins to prevent us from His fellowship. He showed us in the most graphic way possible: by dying so that we would not.

We find hope because we have learned that God asks nothing from us that He was unwilling to do for us. In the struggle for holiness, we are rarely asked to shed our own blood. We might have to sacrifice worldly hopes. We might have to surrender certain ambitions or dreams. We might even be forced to relinquish deep relationships. None of these acts of obedience are made in isolation. Each is offered up as an act of thanksgiving to the One who was offered up for us. We all, regardless of sexual brokenness or self-conceived identity, are offered a new identity in Christ because, by faith in Him, we have been raised to a new life in God.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>2 Corinthians 5:21.

<sup>2</sup>Luke 23:34, 43; John 19:26-27, 30.

<sup>3</sup>1 Peter 2:24; Romans 8:1.

<sup>4</sup>Colossians 3:1-3.

The crucifixion also holds out hope for the crucifixion of sinful desire in the Spirit's putting to death our old nature. "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you shall live."<sup>1</sup> We can rejoice as Paul did, who said, "I have been crucified with Christ, It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."<sup>2</sup> Whatever struggle we have with sexual sin, we have the hope of mortification of our old nature and the giving of life to our new nature by the work of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, in Jesus' suffering, our own suffering due to obedience takes on a different meaning. Those moments of self-denial are never an end in themselves. As we follow the way of the cross restraining our natural desires, we can do so in faith that whoever loses his life for Jesus' sake will save it.<sup>4</sup> Moments of sexual struggle never represent the ultimate rejection of what it means to be human. Instead, they become opportunities to draw even closer to Jesus, who alone in human history exemplified true humanity. This gives us hope.

### **The Hope of Resurrection**

When Christ was raised from the dead, a new equation was written into reality: death does not have the final word. In the resurrection, we find the full vindication of Jesus' message of reconciliation. It proved true His announcement that He was the Son of God and the Kingdom of God had begun with His coming.

By embracing human nature, suffering death, and rising again, Jesus has made a new way forward for humanity. He has come down to us so that we might be lifted up with Him! As the first Adam brought death to all, Jesus has brought life to all who will trust in Him and, by so doing, be united to Him in faith.<sup>5</sup> This means new life beginning now for anyone who is in Christ and life in its fullness in the resurrection.<sup>6</sup> It means the ability not to sin now and the inability to sin when we are glorified. Even now, as we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, by faith we are being transformed from one degree of glory to another until we shall be like Him.<sup>7</sup> Whether our disordered, misdirected, distorted, and confused desires or our bodies "bruised and broken by the fall," we will be restored both body and soul by the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead and we will be forever with the Lord.<sup>8</sup> And in this hope we can discipline our bodies now for the sake of attaining that reward.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 8:13b.

<sup>2</sup>Galatians 2:20.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 8:13, Galatians 2:20.

<sup>4</sup>Mark 8:35.

<sup>5</sup>Romans 5:17.

<sup>6</sup>2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Corinthians 15:52.

<sup>7</sup>2 Corinthians 3:18.

<sup>8</sup>1 Thessalonians 4:27.

<sup>9</sup>1 Corinthians 9:27.

Jesus not only rose from the grave, but He also rose from the earth, ascending to His rightful place at God the Father's right hand. This means that the Savior who bled for us now intercedes for us in heaven.<sup>1</sup> The finite has been ushered into the presence of the infinite. The mortal has taken on immortality. The life that has existed through eternity within the fellowship of the Trinity has been granted to us through Jesus' own humanity.

These truths, of course, are inexhaustibly rich. We will spend an eternity contemplating them even as we participate in their reality. How does the truth of Jesus' resurrection and ascension bring hope to us?

We find hope in these truths because they set our life in proper context. In other words, we are able to understand the struggles and temptations of this life with the proper perspective. To put it simply: we are a pilgrim people. This world is pointing us to our home, but it is not our final destination.<sup>2</sup> Whoever we are, we understand the pain of dislocation. Each of us can identify the hurt that arises when the person we are is not the person we wish to be. We feel frustrated when desires we thought were dead instead rear up and demand fulfillment. In these moments, the tension between life as it is and life as it should be seems palpable. Fulfilling those broken appetites seems the only relief.

But it is precisely in those moments that the Resurrection and Ascension bring us hope. We can remember, "This life is short. These trials will end." We can remember, "I know that my Redeemer lives and makes intercession for me right now." We can remember, "The immediate future is dark to me, but the light of the Resurrection has illuminated my eternity." In remembering these truths, hope rises up and we are equipped to put our struggles in their proper place.

But we have an even greater hope than this. The truth is, getting our perspective in order is not enough. Even with that, our sinful hearts can deceive us and trample our will. We need more. But by God's grace, we have all we need!

When Jesus ascended to heaven, He did not leave us alone. In fact, He sent His Holy Spirit to dwell within us and offer the same power that raised Jesus from the dead to aid us in our pilgrimage.<sup>3</sup> The indwelling presence of God brings us assurance that all the Good News about the cross is true and every promise of the new heavens and earth will come to pass. Paul celebrates this work of the Holy Spirit:

In Him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His

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<sup>1</sup>Hebrews 7:25.

<sup>2</sup>Hebrews 11:13-16.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 8:11.

will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory.<sup>1</sup>

## Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, we cannot guarantee that the world will find this news good. We cannot determine whether they will gain an anchor for their souls when we proclaim the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We may feel timid because we know we don't have our own lives in complete order.<sup>2</sup> But we can be sure of something: the more clearly and confidently we preach this message, the more its life and light will shine within our communities. We will be shaped by this message to become more and more like the Lord who gave it to us. This will have a profound impact on our mission together as God's pilgrim people. Here are three ways that will happen:

We will become a people of sacrificial love: Jesus allowed no barrier to prevent Him from reaching out to sinful humanity. He prayed for our forgiveness even as we crucified Him. How could we ever allow human prejudice to prevent us from reaching out to those who struggle with questions of sexual behavior and identity? Our comfort and rights *must* be willingly set aside as we reach out with the gospel of reconciliation.

We will become a people of increasing holiness: Jesus called everyone to take up the cross and follow Him. How can we proclaim this message to others whose sin might seem more apparent when excusing the sin within our own hearts? We, like Paul, must crucify the flesh daily. Our hope in eternity should result in lives that are holy.

We will become a people of joy: Too often, people hear us talk about the Good News while watching us act like the sky is falling. If any community should offer the calm of certainty to a world in chaos, the church should. Our life in the world (and online) should be reflective of people who are not put out of sorts by the state of things. We know the end of the story. Jesus wins. That joy of good news should show up in everything we do.

## **Recommended reading**

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A Note for Parents

Ready or not, virtually every family will face the questions discussed in this Letter. How can parents with children still in school provide guidance to them? We want to provide five pieces of advice:

Do not be naive. It might be comforting to believe our children are not being exposed to these topics, but they almost certainly are. Policies are being put in place that require instruction on human sexuality from the youngest ages. Many schools do not count this as sex education, so the normal parental notifications do not apply to such instruction. The real exposure, however, will come from peer groups. Your child will likely have friends who question their own sexuality, come from same-sex parenting situations, and/or have access to a wide array of inappropriate information in their hip pockets (i.e., on their smartphones). Be proactive in limiting, filtering, monitoring, and acknowledging your children's access to information.

Do not be afraid. You are still the parent. Your children love and trust you. Your word will carry weight with them. Do not be afraid to ask your local school what precisely is being taught to your children. Do not be afraid to speak with your children about it. Do not be afraid to ask about friends and groups of children with which your child(ren) associate(s). Most importantly, don't be afraid of your child being unhappy with your engagement. Too often parents let the short-term happiness or unhappiness of their children dictate their parenting.

Be present. Don't withdraw from your child's world simply because they resist your involvement. Too often both parents and children live in separate technological and information world while living under the same roof and riding in the same car. Set boundaries for yourself and them so that you remain engaged with one another. If you are not fully present with your children at home, your influence will not be with them when they are away from you and home.

Lead with questions. Especially for young children, ask questions to determine exactly what they already know and what information they need. Sometimes, we magnify the gravity of a situation and worry that we will need to provide an extensive explanation. Asking questions will reveal what our child really needs from us. It also puts us in a listening mode and our children in a sharing mode.

Seek Counsel. When you face a challenge, do not face it alone. It might be something as simple as, “How do I put a web filter on my computer?” It might be as difficult as discovering your child struggles with same-sex attraction. Your pastor is more than willing to help you, either by providing counsel or pointing you in the right direction. Support communities and information abound.

Build a strong foundation. The most powerful thing you can do is help your child see God’s design for sex. Help them understand and embrace the central idea that God is our Creator. He designed us and knows how we are supposed to live. He is good and wants us to be happy, so living His way is always the best way.

Recommended Reading

Included in (or in addition to) the recommended reading throughout this Letter, the following will be helpful to Christian parents.

Barr, Adam T. and Ron Citlau. *Compassion Without Compromise: How the Gospel Frees Us to Love Our Gay Friends Without Losing the Truth*. Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2014.

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### **A Brief Note on Masturbation**

Masturbation is relevant to several areas addressed in this Letter, most specifically the single life, marriage, and pornography. Rather than address it separately in every relevant section, we offer a brief series of observations here. In this discussion we are excluding mutual manual sexual stimulation which might occur between a husband and a wife within the context of marital sexuality. Similarly, we are excluding from concern non-sexual genital self-touching as might occur in young and developing children who are engaging in the normal process of self-exploration and discovery.

What we are addressing is expressly sexual self-stimulation, usually involving ideation or actual viewing of persons or sexual actions, intended for sexual self-gratification. It is difficult to provide specific guidance for all the circumstances in which masturbation or masturbation-like actions occur because those circumstances can include anything from momentary self-stimulation preceding or during foreplay in marital sex to chronic addictive-like masturbation to climax by oneself. While historically masturbation has been largely associated with male behavior, recent studies indicate masturbation is significantly on the rise among women.

In spite of the complexities, however, we can state principles that are directly relevant to individuals as well as pastoral and clinical counselors as they address those varied circumstances. First and foremost, as has been stated above, sexuality is God's gift to be enjoyed according to God's will. This means that objectification of persons, actual or fantasized, are offenses against the image of God in specific individuals or in general. Second, sexuality is to be enjoyed through the free and selfless giving of oneself to another. It is not a gift given for self-love, but for neighbor love in marital intimacy. Third, while procreation is not possible for all couples, masturbation intentionally precludes this creational purpose from sexuality.

Beyond what is lawful and not lawful regarding masturbation, it can accompany and/or inflict a wound on one's soul. It can undermine a marriage partner's sexual desire for their spouse in marriage. It can amplify the loneliness a single person might be experiencing or, conversely, engender indifference toward potential marriage partners. For some it can deepen a sense of shame while for others harden their heart to sexual sin and thus to sin in general. Done compulsively, like other such pleasure-inducing compulsive behaviors, masturbation can alter brain physiology and produce effects such as depression and social isolation.



It's important for the individual to recognize the reality of sin's indwelling power, the readiness of God in His grace to forgive a repentant heart, and the power of the gospel to free us from sin's dominion. In order to experience that gospel freedom, one must recognize the circumstances in which the temptation to masturbate becomes strong. It can happen in times of stress, sudden stress relief, loneliness, depression, etc. Recognizing those circumstances and the sequences that lead to temptation and capitulation are critical to diminishing the behavior.

While pastoral care must be quick to reassure the burdened and repentant conscience, it must also be ready to shine the light of God's Word on chronic sin in order to hold out the gospel hope of freedom from sin's dominion. Finally, chronic masturbation can be a presenting symptom or precipitating cause of addictive or compulsive behaviors that have a broader range of symptoms and roots that become complex and debilitating enough to require clinical expertise. In sum, masturbation is neither to be ignored or singled out, but subject to the light of God's law and the grace of the gospel.

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