



Statement on Human Sexuality

The purpose of the *Statement on Human Sexuality* is to articulate a concise biblically and theologically grounded view of human sexuality that reflects our commitments to the authority of Scripture and to being a community of grace and redemption. Because we recognize that human sexuality is a complex, deeply personal matter, as well as a controversial and divisive issue in our society and in the Church, our intent is to approach it with sensitivity, gentleness, compassion, theological acuity and biblical fidelity. Our desire is to affirm in this statement the intrinsic value of every human being, the tragedy of sin and the power of redemption in every area of human life, including sexuality.

Biblical Teaching on Human Sexuality

As part of the original creation design, sexuality is both God-ordained and purposeful in His plan for humanity. Instruction regarding sexuality is found in a wide array of passages in both the Old and New Testaments. Because sexuality is part of God's design for humanity, its significance is both theological and practical.

Old Testament. The creation of humanity as male and female in God's image undergirds the biblical understanding of human sexuality (Genesis 1:26-28) and the assertion of a unique physical and spiritual relationship between the two sexes (Genesis 2:24). The creation mandate for humans to reproduce and "fill the earth" with image-bearers forms a central purpose for human sexuality. The gift of sexuality, the romance of union, and the joy for which God created humans as sexual beings, male and female, are celebrated throughout the Bible, and especially in the poetry of the Old Testament book, Song of Songs. The harmony of the man and woman in a committed sexual relationship realizes the ideal union described in Genesis 2:24. There are many examples of this glorious union in the biblical narrative including the beautiful love story of Ruth and Boaz found in the book of Ruth. In order to cherish and promote this ideal union of male and female in creation, the Old Testament contains specific pronouncements regarding personal and social responsibility in relationship to human sexuality.

The biblical narrative affirms that sin broke apart the harmonious ideal between man and woman (Genesis 3:16) so that all relationships after this are tainted. The Old Testament warns against and forbids sexual behavior that is a violation of God's design and intent of union between man and woman in the covenant of marriage. Prohibitions against adultery (Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:20; 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:18; 22:22), premarital sex (Deuteronomy 22:13-21; 23-24), rape (Deuteronomy 22:25-29), incest (Leviticus 18:6-18; 20:11-12, 14, 17-21), prostitution (Leviticus 19:29; 21:9; Deuteronomy 23:17-18), and bestiality (Leviticus 18:23; 20:15-16) can be found in the law. Although polygamy is not explicitly prohibited in the Old

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Testament, it clearly violates the spirit of Genesis 2:24 and contributes to dysfunctional families throughout the biblical narrative.

Explicit homosexuality appears in the practices of the citizens of Sodom (Genesis 19) and of Gibeah (Judges 19), in the holiness laws of Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13), and possibly in the roles of certain cultic functionaries. The citizens of Sodom are condemned for their sexual immorality (Jude 7), though also for their pride and lack of concern for those in need (Ezekiel 16:49). The Leviticus passages address homosexual activity exclusively. Attempts to qualify these prohibitions by ignoring their clear and repeated emphasis are not exegetically convincing. Nor does the use of the masculine gender found in the Hebrew grammar of these prohibitions exclude female practice.¹ Further, understanding the deep friendships between Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1—4) and between David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18—20) as homosexual relationships imposes an interpretation on these narratives that the texts do not support. In light of the broad and consistent teaching of the OT on human sexuality, it is clear that any sexual behaviors other than consensual heterosexual union between a husband and wife were contrary to God’s creation design and his covenant with Israel.²

The sharp delineation of maleness and femaleness in the creation narrative and the repeated representation of married heterosexual relations as the biblical norm, indicate that clear distinctions between men and women are important among the people of God. Dispositions toward homoerotic attraction, homosexual orientation, trans-sexuality and transgendered identity are not specifically addressed in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 22:5 prohibits women from wearing an item specifically identified for use by men, and men from wearing women’s clothing.³ Although this prohibition’s lack of a clear context in that section of Deuteronomy makes it difficult to apply specifically to transgendered identity and trans-sexuality, it does illustrate that the distinction between male and female established in the creation narrative remains the norm in the biblical laws that speak to sexuality and gender.

The Old Testament affirms that human sexuality, though now thoroughly affected by sin, is not hopelessly lost to sin. God’s intended design and purpose for a complementarity between men and women, each holding a unique and valued identity, affirm the importance and beauty of human sexuality in creation.

New Testament. Essentially, the teaching of the New Testament on human sexuality is grounded in the theology and worldview developed in the Old Testament. Jesus insists that the creation narrative demonstrates that God intended marriage to unite a man and a woman in a life-long monogamous relationship—not to be terminated except when one of the parties is guilty of *porneia* (πορνεία), often translated as “immorality” (Matthew 5:32; 19:9). This breach of the marriage commitment shows God’s inviolable intention of permissible sexuality—a committed man-woman, life-long, consensual relationship bound in the covenant of marriage.⁴ For this reason all other expressions of sexual behavior are forbidden.

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Not surprisingly, the Apostle Paul also bases his view of marriage on the creation narrative (Genesis 1-3). Specifically, he likens the union of husband and wife (the “one flesh” union cited in Genesis 2:24) to the union of Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:31-32). In such a union a man and a woman have the opportunity to portray in their relationship something of the nature of Christ’s relationship with his bride, the Church. Faithfulness, complementarity, service, and protection all flow out of this union—husband and wife mirroring Christ and the Church. Paul argues for the importance of purity in the lives of leaders in local churches using language that specifically refers to moral purity or chastity (1 Timothy 4:12; 5:9). Moral purity, specifically in the area of human sexuality is essential not only for church leadership but for human flourishing. For those who are married such purity demands marital fidelity and for those who are single, abstinence from sexual relations.

Paul argues that by bearing God’s image, humans were created to worship their Creator but foolishly chose to worship created things (Romans 1:21-23). In like manner humans violated the creation pattern of male-female complementarity and union in human sexuality choosing instead homosexual behavior (Romans 1:24-27). Just as idolatry is a departure from God’s design and intent for humanity spiritually, so homosexuality is seen as a departure from God’s design and intent for humanity sexually.⁵

God has made people, male and female, to engage sexually in a way that unites them physically, emotionally, and spiritually, in the covenantal union of heterosexual marriage to reflect his design in creation and his plan for human procreation and flourishing. Any sexual activity outside of this pattern distorts and departs from God’s plan for sexual expression. According to the New Testament, such forbidden behaviors include adultery, fornication, homosexual behavior, lust, rape and incest. While not the worst or most-cited of sins, sexual sins occur in many New Testament lists of behaviors that violate God’s intentions for humanity (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21-22; 10:19; Romans 1:26-27; 13:9; 1 Timothy 1:9-11; 2 Peter 2:14; et al). Undoubtedly, in the New Testament the incidence and condemnation of heterosexual sins far outstrip that of homosexual sins.⁶

The focus of the biblical texts in both the Old and New Testaments is on sexual behavior rather than sexual orientation and sexual identity. Whereas it is uncertain whether the biblical authors were specifically addressing homoerotic attraction or homosexual identity, the biblical prohibitions against and condemnation of homosexual behavior are strikingly clear and consistent throughout Scripture. God’s design and intent in creation is male-female complementarity in human sexuality.

Sin and Redemption in Human Sexuality

Human persons are endowed with worth and dignity unique among all of God’s creatures. This dignity derives from being created in God’s image which, among other features, is relational existence. Gender distinctions provide the basis for that relational existence to be

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expressed in sexuality. Though sexual expression is not mandatory for the fulfillment of our relational humanity in God's image, it provides a sacred opportunity for that expression within the God-ordained structures of femaleness and maleness and the covenant of marriage commitment.

Sadly, human sinfulness, which emerges from both original and individual choices to sin, impacts every aspect of human existence including sexuality and relationships between sexes. As it relates to sexuality, sin results in various forms of alienation and brokenness. Some of these forms result directly from personal, sinful choices; some result more indirectly from the effects of sinful choices by other people; still other forms ripple out from the broad effects of sin on creation in general. The need for Christ's redemption and the possibility of that redemption are coextensive with the dimensions, the expressions, and the results of sin. This implies the radical need for both forgiveness related to sexual sin and for restoration of our capacities for wholeness.

In thinking about God's design for human personhood, the effects of sin on human relationships and sexuality, and the need for Christ's redemption in every aspect of human existence, particular attention must also be given to the domain of the tragic, i.e., those cascading effects of the Fall over which people have no control and which affect their humanity in some inexplicable fashion. The fact that these effects somehow result from sin's impact on the created order implies that all departures from God's original intent and design for sexuality are in need of God's restoring, redeeming grace. Such is the case even when no direct, personal choice is involved. Whatever their immediate provenance, sexual orientations and practices outside God's created structures for humanity are to be considered a result of the Fall.

The Fall's tragic effect on every dimension of human existence does not necessarily create personal moral responsibility for sexual inclinations or impulses that depart from God's design for human sexuality. Rather, the Fall implies moral responsibility for our actions, how one stewards sexuality so that humans can flourish and experience God's design. Nor does the category of the tragic alleviate personal responsibility or eclipse the moral character of decisions made in those circumstances. It does not negate the need for redemption. The existence of this theological category should shape how we interpret and respond to sexual brokenness, distortions, or struggles. Responsibility to follow God's creation design and plan exists for how a person lives in one's life circumstance. Identity is located in God's defining call on our lives (*imago Dei*) and not in the conditions of our lives or experiences over which we have no control. Additionally, the redeemed community serves as a vital context and vehicle of God's grace for living faithfully in tragic circumstances that could overwhelm a person's individual resources.

Redemption involves not only forgiveness but also empowerment for godly choices, and the availability of God's grace to follow God's design for human sexuality. Christ's redemption provides grace to live faithfully "as unto the Lord," whether sexual brokenness is the result of

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personal choices, or the inexplicably tragic consequences of the Fall, or an inscrutable combination of the two. Experientially, this grace may lead to varying levels of healing and restoration or to the resources for living faithfully and joyfully in anticipation of full restoration.

Human Sexuality and Personal / Spiritual Formation

Christian spiritual formation is predicated on specific assumptions about human identity, which encompass both who we are and who we are becoming. A biblical approach to spirituality addresses those two themes with reference to the image of God as the defining construct for who we are and the image of Christ as defining the trajectory and goal for who we are to become.

Our experience of who we are is determined by a complex interaction of genetic, physiological, relational, cultural, and spiritual realities with various aspects of our personhood (e.g., physical, cognitive, affective, moral, social, spiritual, sexual, and personal identity) continuing to develop throughout the lifespan. Two core principles arise from this perspective: 1) everyone is always in process of becoming, and 2) simple statements regarding human functioning are almost always inadequate. These principles must inform our understanding and practice of spiritual formation so that it is not disconnected from the realities of human experience, including sexuality.

How individuals understand and experience their own sexuality is an important aspect of their growth in Christlikeness. It directly affects the trajectory and character of that growth. When considering sexuality in the context of personal and spiritual formation, there is a danger of making this aspect of humanity more than it is or less than it is. Sexuality is not all of who we are, but neither is it peripheral.

Christian spiritual formation must impact every aspect of our lives, including sexuality. While radical, about-face changes in behavior are much rarer than we would like, and changes in sexual orientation not always even possible, the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the healing context of Christian community bring hope for change. Throughout the process, living with integrity, grace, truth, and love is of paramount importance. Difficult as it is, Christian spiritual formation requires that one must live in relationship with others while abstaining from biblically prohibited sexual behavior, whatever one's sexual preferences or orientation. Such sacrifices are part of the process of developing in Christlikeness. They focus our attention on things beyond our own needs and desires for the sake of Christ and the world. We must not underestimate the difficulty of maintaining sexual abstinence or the spiritual benefit of the self-control and discipline that abstinence demands. The support of the Christian community in upholding a commitment to sexual purity is of paramount importance.

Human Sexuality and the Mission of the Church

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The scope of the gospel of Jesus Christ and, therefore, the mission of the Church encompasses all people. The gospel that we embrace includes not only the hope of forgiveness but also the call to lead a life that is consistent with the character and purpose of God in all areas, including sexuality. In like manner the gospel invites believers into a dynamic relationship with the indwelling Spirit of God through whom we come to recognize and resist deeply embedded temptations to sin. Furthermore, the gospel invites believers into a community of faith where relationships of genuine love for one another can meet deep needs and longings for intimacy. The posture and message of the Church regarding sexuality must be based on the truth of Scripture and bathed in the mercy and compassion of Christ. The behavior of the believing community must not in any way support the misperception that Christians hate others who have embraced sexual identities and behaviors that are not consistent with the biblically affirmed life pattern of sexual purity and fidelity in marriage. Redemption and transformation are deeply rooted in the gospel message. So must they also permeate the Church's life and mission.

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NOTES

¹ If such were the case then one could argue that the ban on coveting, for example (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21), applies only to men because it explicitly mentions only wives (and not husbands) as an object of coveting.

² The Leviticus passages clearly prohibit homosexual activity. Attempts to qualify these prohibitions by ignoring their broad apodictic nature are not exegetically convincing. For example, to argue that this applies only to close relatives who live in Israel ignores the book's wilderness context (Leviticus was not given in the land of Israel). On the other hand, the suggestion that the idiom, "lie in the beds of," refers to a non-sexual activity, on the basis of four of the five other occurrences of this expression (Psalm 149:5; Isaiah 57:2; Hosea 7:14; and Micah 2:1), is problematic. The fifth occurrence, Genesis 35:22, does refer to an illicit sexual act (Reuben lying with his father's concubine). Further, this interpretation misses the context of both Leviticus 18 and 20, which are primarily concerned with forbidden sexual activity. Only in these two locations, is the full phrase used, "you shall not lie in the beds of a woman." These attempts appear as special pleading to avoid the implications of the text.

The laws regarding homosexuality in Leviticus 18 and 20 should be considered in the ancient Near Eastern cultural context, in the Israelite social context, and in the literary context of Leviticus. Leviticus 18:2-3, 24-28 identify the prohibited practices here, including homosexuality, as forbidden because they were practiced by the Egyptians and by the peoples of Canaan. While mythic texts of Egypt and of Ugarit (a city on the modern Syrian coast whose myths regarding Baal and other deities provide a 13th century B.C. background for Canaanite beliefs) do indeed describe various sexual practices forbidden in Leviticus 18 (and 20), they do not specify homosexual activities. Across the ancient world (except for child rape which is banned), only the Middle Assyrian laws (14th-11th centuries B.C.) prohibit homosexual activity, wherein as punishment the perpetrator was to be sodomized and castrated. Thus, as found at Sodom (and Hivite influence at Gibeah?), homosexuality may well have been practiced in the land of Canaan.

Sociologically, early Israel was a patrilineal, kinship-based, agrarian society, generally surviving at a subsistence level and valuing large families for economic survival. This is demonstrated by the narratives of Judges, Ruth, and 1 Samuel. These place Israel in the hill country in small villages. There extended families live together around the oldest male and female. Married couples and young families tend to live with or near the husband's side of the family and the identity of both men and women tends to be defined by the patronym (X son/daughter of Y, where Y is the father) and the male line. This description also concurs with the archaeological excavations of Israelite villages with clusters of the so-called four-room (or pillared) houses, ideal for an extended family. This explains the particular prohibited incest relations, which fit in a patrilineal extended family. Generally, they identify relations a male would encounter in his household (e.g., a sister, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law, etc.).

The default masculine gender in Hebrew grammar is part of the patrilineal culture and found in other laws such as the Ten Commandments (e.g., Don't covet your neighbor's wife). However, as the Ten Commandments apply to women as well as men, it can be assumed that the corresponding incest prohibitions would exist for the women of the household. The same is true of the homosexual prohibitions. They should be assumed to apply to both men and women. Further, the value placed on large families in this society would reinforce prohibition of sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage, especially the sort that would not provide for children. This would explain the inclusion of the prohibition of sacrificing children to Molech, as well. Besides committing murder and worshipping a false god, the practice destroyed the lives of potentially productive family members.

The literary context of the homosexual laws in Leviticus 18 and 20 considers three elements: the nature of the ban as "detestable," its position in chapter 18 next to the law against child sacrifice, and its double appearance. While Leviticus 18:26 characterizes all the practices in this chapter as "detestable," only homosexuality is specifically flagged as detestable in 18:22 and 20:13. This suggests a special warning against the

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practice. It may be related to other warnings against improper mixtures (cf. Deuteronomy 22:11) and the crossing of boundaries (e.g., Leviticus 11) that God has set. As for the law against sacrificing children to Molech in the previous verse (Leviticus 18:21), it is possible that homosexuality played a role in the religious cult (cf. the following paragraph on cultic functionaries). However, this connection does not appear in Leviticus 20:13 and thus it cannot be limited to homosexuality as practiced in the religious cult. Finally, the fact that the law, along with the other sexual prohibitions, appears twice suggests a rhetorical emphasis designed to stress its importance.

The question of cultic functionaries raises the matter of the identity of what the NIV refers to as “male shrine prostitutes.” These appear in Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24; 15:12; 22:46; and 2 Kings 23:7 (Hebrew *qadesh*, plural *qedeshim*). Other than their association with the “detestable” practices of the Canaanite religions, there is little that can be stated with certainty. Nevertheless, they may be associated with cultic homosexual activity. A feminine form occurs in Genesis 38:15, 21-22; Deuteronomy 23:17-18; and Hosea 4:14.

The OT contexts for homosexual practice are sometimes associated with either gang rape (Genesis 19; Judges 19) or with Canaanite (and other) religious practices (as in the cultic functionaries). Thus condemnation of these figures may involve other considerations than consensual homosexual activity. However, this is not the case for Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13. Taking into consideration the grammar and the variety of contexts (cultural, social, religious, and literary), the conclusion is that homosexual practice was contrary to God’s covenant with Israel.

³ Although the opening clause of the verse is usually translated, “A woman must not wear men’s clothing,” the Hebrew word translated as “clothing,” *keli*, can refer to items used in a variety of settings, including the Tabernacle. Some scholars have noted that the term may also have military connotations.

⁴ Other NT uses of *porneia* ([πορνεία] e.g., Mark 7:21; Acts 15:20; 1 Corinthians 6:13, 18; 7:2-3; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Colossians 3:5) point to violations of God’s intentions for how the sexual relationship honors God the creator and humans made in his image.

⁵ See particularly Romans 1:21-32. Whereas Paul identifies the idolatry of rejecting God for other gods as the core issue in all human sinfulness, he specifically denounces the shameful and degrading sexual sins that resulted from humanity’s rejection of male/female complementarity as the created design of human sexuality. When condemning homosexual behavior in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:9-10, among other sins that violate God’s intention for human sexuality, Paul uses *arsenokoitēs* (ἀρσενοκοίτης), translated as “men who have sex with men” (NIV) and “practicing homosexuals” (NET). The NRSV translates this word as “sodomites” in both these texts. Paul probably coined the Greek term, but it’s clear to see how he came to use it—from texts such as Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 that include the command, “don’t lie with a male as one does with a female.”

⁶ For example, the sin of “adultery” (translations of forms or cognates of *moicheuō* [μοιχεύω]) occurs forty-eight times in the NIV translation. “Sexual immorality” or “fornication” (translations of forms or cognates of *porneia* [πορνεία]) is mentioned twenty-five times in the NT.