

Foundations of Sexuality and Marriage

An Introduction

Foundations of Sexuality and Marriage, An Introduction

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Goal

The goal is to understand the Biblical perspective more deeply on gender and sexuality so that we can understand our current cultural context of gender and sexuality issues. We will do this by

1. Introducing Biblical concepts of what it means that God gave us bodies and then frame how our sexuality fits into that.
2. Briefly exploring the historical context that produced our current environment about sexuality, gender, and marriage
3. Thinking about the stories of some people who experience different sexual attractions and sexual identities
4. Learning about the current terminology regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, marriage, and related fertility treatments
5. Thinking about how to respond as a church to people with different views.

Foundations of Sexuality

The Creation Narratives

The Mystery of Elohim

Genesis 1:1 (NIV) *In the beginning, God (bərêšît bārā 'ēlōhîm, בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים) created the heavens and the earth.*

Right in the first verse of the Bible, the third word (in Hebrew) opens up a mystery. The word that we translate here as ‘God’ is actually a plural word. In many places in the Bible, it is translated as ‘gods,’ but in places like here, *Elohim*¹, is preceded by a singular verb, and so it is translated as ‘God.’ Further exploration of the Bible reveals that the one person, *Elohim*, is also, at the same time, three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, where each person is unique and has a unique role. The Church has come to call this concept, the Trinity.

Summary

Elohim is complex, and each person of the Trinity is integrated with each other. This integration is displayed throughout God’s creation and serves as a hallmark of God’s design, including in human relationships.

The Good and Very Good Creation

Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31 *God saw ... it was good (tov, טוֹב).*

Seven times in the creation story, we see that after *Elohim* created something, He called it ‘good’ (*tov*). And when God’s creation was complete, He called it ‘very good.’ Unfortunately, ‘good’ does not cover the full essence of the Hebrew word, *tov*. A fuller understanding of *tov* carries the meaning of something that is functional²; able to produce life³; flourishing and moving to a God-ordained reproduction and growth⁴; well-formed and viable⁵.

Summary

The material universe was God’s idea. He created it to be productive, flourishing, reproducing and growing. Despite the current brokenness of the universe, this great goodness is displayed throughout God’s creation and serves as hallmark of God’s intention for life.

Creatures of the Dust

Gen 1:20, 24 *And God said, “Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures (nephesh chai, נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה) , and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens ... And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures (nephesh chai, נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה) according to their kinds—livestock and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.” And it was so.*

Gen 2:7 (CSB) *Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust (aphar, עָפָר) from the ground and breathed the breath of life (neshamah chai, נִשְׁמַח חַיָּה) into his nostrils, and the man became a living being (nephesh, נֶפֶשׁ).*

1 Chaim BenTorah. Hebrew Word Study – Similar Actions - Demth <https://www.chaimbentorah.com/2021/01/hebrew-word-study-similar-actions/> “The plural ending could also just indicate that something is the greatest or ultimate, but the later passages also suggest that *elohim* can mean more than one.”

2 One Covenant, *Tov – A Word Study*, <https://rymcovenant.net/tov-a-word-study/>

3 Nelson, Mandy. Morin, Scot. And Sons, *Tov: An Explosive Word*, <https://www.andsonsmagazine.com/inspiration/tov-an-explosive-word>

4 Plymothian, *Genesis 1 Tov (Good)*, <https://theplymothian.me/2015/09/30/genesis-1-tov-good/>

5 Chanes, Jerome. Jewish Telegraphic Agency, <https://www.jta.org/2018/01/02/ny/its-all-good-but-is-it>

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Deut 6:6 (ESV) *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (nephesh chai, נֶפֶשׁ חַיִּיתָ) and with all your might.*

Aphar - One of the uses of dust is to refer to it as to what the human body is made of and to which it returns (Genesis 2:7; 3:19; Job 4:19; 8:19; 10:9; 34:15; Psalm 103:14; 104:29; Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7), which is basically to refer to our mortality. A mortality we share with all the other ‘living creatures.’

Nephesh chai – We, like the other living creatures that God had made, are mortal physical creatures made from the substance of the earth. *Nephesh* literally refers to the *neck*. But because the neck is where food and air accesses the rest of the body so that it may live, it is sometimes used as a figure of speech that has a broad range of meaning. It may refer to us our physical essence: our need for water, food, sex or even our bodies themselves. It may also refer to our emotional and spiritual aspects: the essence of who we are, our life, our existence, our deepest passions, our sense of self. *Nephesh* refers to all of these: our entire physical, spiritual, and emotional being integrated together. The Hebrew Bible does not imagine creatures apart from their bodies. In Biblical terms we are more accurately described not as creatures with souls but as *creatures who are souls*.

Summary

The concept of *soul* that we import from Greek philosophy is that we have an inferior physical essence that is can be separate from a superior non-physical essence. In Greek philosophy, the goal is to eventually have our non-physical essence escape from the burden of a physical essence – a non-Biblical concept that still affects the theology of many believers today. The Biblical concept of *nephesh/soul* is that we were created as physical beings and will be resurrected as physical beings, and there is little Biblical description of what happens to us in between our death and resurrection.

God's image and likeness

Gen 1:26 (CSB) *Then God said, “Let Us make man (adam, אָדָם) in Our image (tselem, תְּצַלֵּם), according to Our likeness (demuth, דְּמוּת). They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, all the earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth.”*

Tselem - Image is the Hebrew word *tselem*, תְּצַלֵּם, and always indicates a “physical” or structural image of some kind.⁶ The term, *tselem*, was most often used to identify idols, statues which embodied a deity or embodied a king who ruled on behalf of the deity. So the statues could either serve as a deity’s priest directly representing that deity or as the representative of a king who ruled on behalf of the deity⁷. After an idol statue was made, there would be a ritual which would cause the deity or king to inhabit the statue.

Demuth – Likeness is the Hebrew word *demuth*, דְּמוּת, and usually refers to some kind of “functional” image, likeness or expression. *Demuth* is also used to relate dissimilar things (e.g., comparing wickedness to snake venom (Ps 58:3-4), comparing angels to humans (Dan 10:16), comparing what is seen in heaven to what is seen on earth (Ezek 1:5-28)⁸).

Summary

As creatures made in the image of God, we are ‘idols’ of God as if we were statues fashioned out of clay (as many idols in the ancient Near East). But the difference with us, is that we are living idols – God breathed into

6 First Thoughts. Image and Likeness of God in Genesis 1:26 <https://firstthoughtsofgod.com/2016/08/04/image-and-likeness-of-god-in-genesis-126/>

7 “Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so humans are placed on the earth in God’s image as God’s sovereign emblem.” — Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis, 60

8 Moen, Skip. Hebrew Word Study, <https://skipmoen.com/2012/03/identity-theft-5/>

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us and made us into living creatures. All humans are to be living idols on earth, representing Elohim's presence and authority, ruling the earth and its creatures on behalf of Elohim.

Because we are idols with physical bodies, we are reminded of our limitations, We have limited strength and knowledge; we have limited gifts and abilities; we are limited to particular place and time, particular communities, particular families, particular culture. Our bodies remind us that we are not God but instead we are dependent on him and each other.

Although we are called to particular times, places and people, there are ways in which God's transcendent character spills over onto us. The mark of his transcendence is even placed in each of our hearts. The expressions of transcendence are impossible to avoid in our day and age: Although we were not born with the ability to fly, we can fly to the moon, although we were not born to live under water, we are able to spend months at a time under water even at incredible depths, although we were not born to run like a cheetah, we don't even think about climbing into a vehicle and going more than 60 miles an hour for hours at a time, we can also create works of art that show places we have never been, we can use the resources of the earth to generate more power than we can imagine ... and the list goes on.

Male and Female, Man and Woman

Gen 1:27 (NIV)

*God created human in His own image;
in the image of God He created him
male (zakar, זָכָר) and female (neqebah, נֶקֶבָה) He created them.*

This is the first poetry in the Bible. The word order expressed in this translation⁹ more closely reflects the original phrasing. One of the typical uses of poetry is to create symmetries, with each phrase expanding the meaning of previous phrases by setting up comparisons and contrasts. In this case, meaning is added by the reversing of phrases; we can see the progression of God created the human – created him – created them. We can also see “image of God” linked to “male and female.” This suggests the image of God is at once linked to each individual human and also to the combination of male and female.

The Hebrew words for male and female in this verse are as close as we can get to what are biological and physical terms. But in Gen 2:23, there are different terms used: man (*ish*, אִישׁ) and woman (*ishshah*, אִשָּׁה), which refer more to the gender roles. The male and female bodies are meant to correspond to the roles of men and women.

Summary

Our *nephesh* integrates our bodies with our essence. We are integrated creatures. Individually, Each person's biological role is meant to be integrated with their social role. Together, the biological and social roles of women and men are meant to be complement and complete each other.

Adam's side: God's help for Adam

Gen 2:18 (CSB) *Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helper (‘ezer kenegdo, עֵזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ) corresponding to him.”*

Gen 2:21-23 (CSB) *So the Lord God caused a deep sleep (tardemah, תַּרְדֵּמָה) to come over the man, and he slept. God took one of his ribs (tsela, צֵלָע) and closed the flesh at that place. Then the Lord God made the rib He had taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man. And the man said:*

⁹ Bible Project, Heaven and Earth class, session 27, Bibleproject.com

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*This one, at last, is bone of my bone
and flesh of my flesh;
this one will be called “woman,”
for she was taken from man.*

‘Ezer - When *‘ezer* is used elsewhere in the Bible, it refers to the strong, rescuing help God provided Israel.

Kenegdo - *Kenegdo* means alongside, in front of or opposite to; so the woman is God’s provision of help alongside of Adam; a partner who complements him.

Although other ancient Near East languages give some grounds for translating *tsela* as rib in Genesis 2, in all other cases in the Old Testament, *tsela* is translated as side, as in the side of the tabernacle or side of the ark. If we combine this idea with God causing a deep sleep, *tardemah*, to fall on Adam in the same way that a *tardemah* came upon Abraham when he had a vision from God, then we can picture God causing a *tardemah* to fall on Adam where he has a vision of the woman being created out of one of his sides. This would give a better explanation for the woman being *bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*. This equality would also fit better with men and women being equal partners in being God’s image-bearers, ruling the earth. This relationship indicated by this phrase is expanded later on in Gen 29:14. When Laban meets Jacob he says, “surely my bone and my flesh you are,” using this phrase to indicate family ties.

Summary

The woman that Yahweh provided for Adam would be someone who could enable Adam to fulfill God’s purpose in filling and ruling the earth, a strong counterpart¹⁰ that would enable both Adam and the woman to flourish as they enabled the flourishing of the earth.

Procreation and Vocation

Gen 1:28 (CSB) *God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful (parah, פָּרָה), multiply (rabah, רָבָה), fill the earth (male, מָלֵא), and subdue (kabash, כָּבַשׁ) it. Rule (radah, רָדָה) the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.”*

Gen 2:15 (CSB) *The Lord God took the man and placed him in the garden of Eden to work it (abad, עָבַד) and watch over (shamar, שָׁמַר) it.*

Kabash The original meaning of *kabash* means to place our foot on the neck of a conquered enemy; so we are to bring the earth under our submission and control it.

Radah means to rule by going down and walking among the subjects as an equal. *Radah* is what Yahweh did when walking in the garden with Adam and Eve, and what Jesus did when he walked around with his disciples. Our rule is not one of dictatorship but of caring and compassion and desiring the flourishing of all life¹¹.

Abad can mean to work, serve, worship, or cultivate. The garden was served by taking care of the place God provided. God is served when we worship and honor him.¹²

Shamar can mean to keep, watch, observe, protect, confine, attend to the service and preserve. If Adam had remembered to *shamar* the garden God provided, he would have not allowed the serpent to present the

10 Rednsburg, Gary. Woman: Helpmate no Longer The Torah <https://www.thetorah.com/article/woman-helpmate-no-longer>; Hebrew Word Lessons. Neged: Standing before YHWH <https://hebrewwordlessons.com/2023/07/23/neged-standing-before-yhwh/>; Benner, Jeff. What is a “help meet?” Ancient Hebrew Research Center <https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/studies-interpretation/what-is-a-help-meet.htm>

11 Benner, Jeff. Ancient Hebrew Research Center. Subdue. Hebrew Word Definition: Subdue | AHRC (ancient-hebrew.org)

12 Sneller-Vrolijk, Annechien. Biblical Vocabulary: עָבַד (“To Serve”) Biblword <https://www.biblword.net/biblical-vocabulary-serving-the-lord/>; Abarim Publications. עָבַד <https://www.abarim-publications.com/Dictionary/ay/ay-b-d.html>

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temptation to turn from God's provision. We should remember to *shamar* all God has given to our charge, even our hearts. (Prov 4:21-23)

Like the other creatures, our procreative role is to produce offspring so that we can fill the land. But filling the land is only part of the display of abundance that God intends. He intends for us to flourish in all our ways. When the Israelites enter the promised land they were told to have an annual celebration marking God's intentions that the Israelites be able to celebrate not just abundant children, but abundance of all the work of their hands (Deut 16:13-17; 28:11-14; 30:9-11).

Unlike other creatures we have a special vocative role, we are to subdue (*kabash*) and have dominion (*radah*) over the earth. Our control is meant to be modified by the second part of command to *radah* the creatures of the earth and helping all that is under our care to flourish. Genesis 2:15 further modifies that with our charge to work (*abad*) and watch over (*shamar*). These words have both agricultural and priestly meanings. We worship and honor God when serve the world and its creatures, our families and communities, all that he placed under our care.

Summary

Our role is physical and spiritual. We rule over the earth by living within it as God's representatives, serving and watching over the good earth that God has provided us so that all that God has given to our care may flourish.

The Marriage Covenant

Genesis 2:24-25 (KJ21) *Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother and shall cleave (dabaq, דָּבַק) unto his wife, and they be one flesh (basar echad, בָּסָר אֶחָד). Both the man and his wife were naked, yet felt no shame.*

Genesis 4:1 (ESV) *Now Adam knew (yada, יָדָע) his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the LORD."*

Dabaq – cleave, cling, adhere to¹³, join, closely pursue, hold fast. The noun form of the word means “glue.” The sense of “cleaves and leaves” is also used in the case of Ruth, who chose to leave her Moabite culture and gods and instead cleave to Naomi's culture and her God.

Basar echad – united body/person¹⁴. *Echad* is also used in the well-known phrase uttered by all Jews, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one (*echad*),” specifically denoting the unity within God rather than using *yachid* which would specify a singular one.

Yada – to know, perceive, discern, enter into a covenant together¹⁵. For most creatures, copulation is purely a physical event, an acting on physical urges. For most creatures, there is nothing to “know.” But humans are created in the image of God, with emotional, moral, and spiritual dimensions. If we reduce the “one flesh” union of a man and woman to just a physical act, we dehumanize ourselves. To join ourselves in marriage is to join all

13 Precept Austin. Ruth 1:14-18 Commentary https://www.preceptaustin.org/ruth_114-22

14 Chavurat Bekorot. The Truth about Biblical Marriage, 11. One Flesh, <https://www.nccg.org/fecpp/book/book11.html>

15 Hagg, Tim. As a Covenant Term in the Bible and Ancient Near East Torah Resource <https://torahresource.com/hebrew-word-yada/>
“Thus, when Moses writes in Gen 4:1 that “Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived...”, he is using the word “know” (*yada*) in its covenant sense: Adam was faithful to the covenant of marriage into which he and Eve had entered, a covenant which meant he would have a spiritual and physical oneness with her and she with him, and they would have no such relationship with anyone else. The physical relationship in marriage is an essential part of the “being one” which God intends in marriage. But the physical relationship does not exhaust the meaning of “know” in its covenant sense relating to marriage. To “know” one's spouse means to be faithful to one's spouse, not only in the physical relationship but also in all aspects of the marriage: support, comfort, friendship, service to each other, etc.”

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the dimensions of ourselves¹⁶, it is to join all of who we are in body and spirit, in life and health, in finances and possessions, in plans and dreams, in victories and losses.

Summary

The Biblical Covenant Marriage¹⁷

When a husband and wife leave their parents and come together as “one flesh,” they overcome the original biological divide by re-creating a unified state of humanity, a rejoining of the two halves. This rejoining does not have just a physical dimension but encompasses rejoining of the whole human: body and soul. The physical bond should reflect the covenant bond of two individuals who know each other socially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually and who are committed to faithfully and permanently uniting with each other in a reflection of God’s commitment to bind himself to us and ultimately unite all of humanity together as His Body in the new creation. This marriage also becomes the natural and expected setting for expanding God’s Kingdom through child-bearing and child-rearing. God Himself shows us his commitment in Hosea, when He said, “I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will know the Lord.” Those words of commitment are repeated by Jewish men every weekday morning as they wind the strap of our tefillin around their fingers like a wedding ring and renew their vows to God.¹⁸

The Cosmic Temple

God had created sky, sea and land and filled those spaces with creatures, including the land creatures he had designated to be his idol representatives who would rule the land on his behalf. In effect, God had made a temple. When that cosmic temple was complete, God ceased (shabbat, שָׁבַט) the creation of that temple so that he could now rest (nuach, נָוַח), that is live in that temple, with humans as his appointed royal priests. God has charged His priests with three loves: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might.”; “Love your neighbor as yourself.”; and more than 30 times we are commanded in the Torah, “Love the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger.”

Summary

Our role is to serve as God’s priests who are given the “mental, emotional volitional, moral, and physical components¹⁹” to serve as God’s agents in the world. We are to be interdependent on one another and on God. As sexual beings we can fulfill God’s instructions to procreate, filling the world, creating communities and spreading God’s kingdom, his rule and his will. The assigned task is not one of slavery, but of creativity and fulfillment as priests engaged in all aspects of culture making: education, business, arts, sciences, government and more.

Failure and restoration

Gen 3:6 (KJ21) And when the woman **saw** (*ra’ah*, רָאָה) that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be **desired** (*chamad*, חָמַד) to make one wise, she **took** (*laqach*, לָקַח) of the fruit thereof and ate, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he ate.

Gen 3:16-17 (KJ21) ... Unto the woman He said, “I will greatly **multiply thy sorrow and thy conception**. In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” And unto Adam He said, “Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree of which

16 Shirley, Steve. Q:#343. What does the Bible mean when it says a married couple becomes “one flesh?” Jesus Alive <https://jesusalive.cc/one-flesh-meaning-in-bible/>

17 There is already a legal definition for “Covenant Marriage” <https://legaldictionary.net/covenant-marriage/>

18 Sacks, Jonathan, “The Beautiful Institution” 2 Feb 2022

19 Allison, Gregg. R. Embodied: Living as Whole People in a Fractured World. Pg. 30

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*I commanded thee, saying, 'Thou shalt not eat of it,' cursed is the ground for thy sake; **in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life.***

The perennial human problem is that we allow the temptation of what we see to turn our desires from God and toward the object, and then to take what we corruptly desire. Adam was the one who was warned about the tree of knowledge, but he failed to guard the garden. Even as the serpent was tempting the woman, Adam was also overcome by his own wrong desires. He failed to pass on the warning about the tree to the woman, allowing the woman to be deceived and to take the first bite.

There were two levels of consequences announced by God. 1) They would both suffer the sorrows that would be expressed in later Biblical passages. There would be difficulties in getting pregnant and difficulties with the children. There would also be difficulties related to farming and ranching, such as drought and other issues around access to water. 2) There would also be relational consequences that would be expressed in later Biblical passages. The woman's desires would be contrary to husband while the husband would authoritatively rule over the woman instead of ruling with her.

The fracturing of the marriage itself would only be the beginning of fractured relationships. The fracturing would extend to the fracturing of families, extended families, communities, nations and even to the relation between God and humans. The remainder of the Bible and all of history reveals the extent of that fracturing and God's plan to heal that fracturing.

However, the moment of failure would also signal the beginning of restoration. Humans would not cease to be God's priests in his cosmic temple, but God would raise a people to serve as a kingdom of priests who would participate in his project to restore all of now fractured creation and bring all of creation fully into his kingdom rule.

Summary

To be creatures designed in the image of the transcendent creative, loving God, we needed the kind of independence that could allow us to choose who or what to love – or not love – and to be free to imagine and create wildly new and different things as proper for God's image-bearing creatures. We were free to do this in a place where everything was very good and designed so that we could flourish. However, that very freedom which gave image-bearers the possibilities of independent thoughts, also gave those image-bearers the opportunity to also confront temptation. While the image-bearers were given the opportunity to meet with God and to walk with him in a specially designed garden, they were also allowed the opportunity for questions. They could even question the motives of the God who made them ... And so, it happened. The one thing that could create the ultimate catastrophe did happen. The good Creator, who only intended good things, allowed his image-bearers to give into their temptation, to put their own authority above His and violate the one restriction placed before them. This violation by the stewards of His creation broke everything: the relationship between themselves, the relation between them and Him, and the relation between them and creation. All of creation was affected and is even now waiting for things to be made right again. (Romans 8:18-25)

Science can help address issues where our brokenness affects our ability to conceive children. But what gets complicated is that the same science can be used not just in the case of married couples but can also be used in various other relationships that reflect our cultural brokenness.

The rest of the Bible rests on the foundation of the theology provided in the first chapters of Genesis. He made us as living creatures, created in his image with soul and body so that we can be his living idols in his cosmic temple. The good bodies he gave us allow us to be his agents in his good creation. With the gift of body and soul we are able to represent him by ruling, serving, and watching over the good earth he provided. The task we have cannot be done alone, we need God's help in the form of other people, as we interdependently serving together

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as partners. The complementary relationship between men and women will be expanded in the complementary relationships of the Christian community in which we serve together as the Body of Christ, enabling each other to flourish with the gifts and abilities He has apportioned to each one of us.

However, our role has become more difficult because of our failure to trust God. Our rebellion, which began with the first humans, continues today and will continue until Jesus returns again and fully restores his kingdom on earth. This failure has added another dimension to our original priestly role. Now our charge to rule over and steward God's creation includes the need to deal with our own rebellious nature and participate with God in the restoration of His Kingdom until He comes again.

We were created by God with mind, body, and soul – and it is through all those means that we can come to know and love God. Jesus' disciples are recognized not by their knowledge, but by how their knowledge of God is expressed in their love of God and neighbor. Therefore, the practice of following Jesus (aka discipleship) is something we practice both within the community of believers and within the larger community.

Our love should look like the descriptions we find for the “fruit of the spirit” as shown in Galatians 5 and in 1 Corinthians 13: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, does not envy or boast, is not proud, rude or self-seeking, is not easily angered, takes no account of wrongs, takes no pleasure in evil, rejoices in truth, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love is also expressed through the various gifts that God provided each one of us for the purpose of building each other up in the faith: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophets, discernments, tongues and their interpretation, leadership, serving, exhortation, giving, mercy, helps apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher. All these things should constrain our everyday behavior and also constrain how we express our sexuality.

Eph 5:29-32 (NIV) After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.

The one-flesh union of husband and wife in their complementarity reflects Elohim in a profound way. As ordinary people they share their intimate moments both within their messy day-to-day life and within the intimate sexual union, reflecting the risk of vulnerability in their giving and receiving with bodies that experience bad breath, body odor, menstruation and impotence. In the full intimate experience of the day-to-day life of marriage there is no hiding of vulnerabilities, expectations, desires, the need for forgiveness and compassion, tolerance and understanding and other needs as well, we learn what it is to selflessly love.²⁰ In some profound way, as spouses make themselves vulnerable and learn to love each other as well as their imperfect bodies, they learn to their children and others as well. In that intimate expansion of love, we somehow reflect the love of Elohim and His body, the church.

As we wait in our now-broken world and deal with the sin within us, we can hold onto the fact that the ultimate goodness of our bodies is reflected in Jesus 1) who was born as a human male, a descendant of Adam and Abraham and David 2) who, through the death and resurrection of his body redeemed us from the effect of sin and 3) in his resurrected body he has adopted us as his brothers and sisters, and 4) when He returns, He will provide us with a renewed creation/temple where we, in our resurrection bodies, can live with him forever.

Gender roles and community

As we look at how God has created the created world to flourish, we can see a balance of order and diversity. As humans we can consider how we reflect that order and diversity. While men and women have distinct sexual

20 Yancy, Phillip. “Holy Sex” 30 Sept 2003

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differences, both men and women have a range of height and weight such that while the average man is usually taller and stronger than the average woman there is some overlap where some women are taller and stronger than some men. There are also other innate biological characteristics in which the average man is different than the average woman but within each range the characteristics of men and women overlap each other, in areas like aggression, self-confidence, activity level, verbal ability and empathy.²¹

The Bible is equally complex in regard to gender roles and differences. Overall, the Bible's stresses much more the many ways in which men and women are equal and are worthy to rule together over the land that God has provided us: in value, in abilities and in giftedness. The Bible also stresses the importance of how our identity and behavior as male and female reflect the values of God's kingdom – although there are differences in interpretation in how those differences should be expressed²².

This complexity has generated much discussion in the church about how to balance the values of equality and complementarity both within the home and within the church body. That complexity is amplified by the range of individual differences, the range of cultural differences and the range of individual and community circumstances. But the Biblical foundation laid in Genesis is for men and women to use their complementarity to enable each other and the world to flourish.

This then is the context for community life and marriage. None of us exist unto ourselves. We were created by God as a product of men and women who came together out of separate families within their own communities. We are charged as individuals and communities to enable each other and to enable the world to flourish. It is a charge that none of us can fulfill alone.

For the community to do its task, it needs people to marry and produce children. The Biblical Covenant Marriage is a faithful, life-long covenant between a man and a woman who have bound themselves physically and spiritually. This Biblical Covenant Marriage provides the context for sexual relations and is the intended place to produce, raise and nurture children. The Biblical Covenant Marriage is intended to be an expression of the faithful, life-long covenant between Christ and the church, and any sexual intimacy outside the context of the Biblical Covenant Marriage is not only a sin God but against our own bodies as well.

The union in the Biblical Covenant Marriage is like the union of Christ and his followers and is meant to be joyful and celebrated. It is to this end that Jesus provided more than sufficient wine for a marriage ceremony. But the commitment of the Biblical Covenant Marriage, just like the commitment of Christ and his followers takes a sustained effort and can be hard. The fullness of the intimacy of husband and wife requires continual mutual submission, the willingness to be inconveniently available in all situations, and the willingness to be increasingly vulnerable in the uncovering of souls as well as bodies.

Whether by choice or circumstance, not everyone in a community will be married. Just like in a marriage though, there are both blessings and hardships for those who are single. Those who are single also have a longing for connection. While they may have different kinds of opportunities for connection, they still do not have a ready relationship in which that need can be met. As in everything else, all of those in a community are called to help each other flourish. Ultimately, whether married or single, only a relationship with God can satisfy our deepest longings and each of us is called to draw each other to that relationship, to be a conduit through which God can work.

21 Johnson, Gregg. 16. The Biological Basis for Gender-Specific Behavior Bible.org <https://bible.org/seriespage/16-biological-basis-gender-specific-behavior>

22 Exqueda, Octavio. Much Ado About Gender Roles. Christianity Today. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/august-web-only/complementarian-egalitarian-debate-gender-roles-explainer.html>

Our historical context

Our Biblical foundations have given us a highly integrated understanding of who we are as body and soul creatures. There is obviously a very large gap between that understanding and highly fragmented understanding of ourselves in our current culture. Knowing the historical context will help us understand our current cultural context surrounding our understanding of sexuality.

Slicing the whole

The Biblical conception of the person found in the Old Testament included the wholeness of our being: body and soul, mental and physical, biological sex and gender identity, individual and community. These Biblical values stood in stark contrast to the cultures around it. Genesis claimed that all people were created in the image of God and therefore to be valued, whereas in the surrounding cultures only kings could claim that. These Biblical values framed sexuality in the context of everyone's intrinsic value as an 'idol' of God and also of the covenant marriage of a man and woman. This stood in contrast to the surrounding cultures which framed sexuality around the values of power and preserving one's heritage.

The following historical narrative is an attempt to capture a particular trend that happened in the cultures that are defined as the "West" (that is, Western European and American cultures which happen to be west of the area we call the Mideast). We can trace how elements of Greek philosophy first affected developments in the Western church (which had a prominent role in the Western part of the Roman Empire) and then the rest of society. This "western" framework has tended to degrade the wholeness of our humanity by deconstructing who we are as people, splitting the facets of our humanity into pieces to be analyzed and valued separately instead of valuing the wholeness of our identity as individuals and as communities.

*"Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean."*²³

Severing our Hebrew roots

Beginning with Moses, the portion of the Bible that Christians call the "Old Testament" was written primarily in Hebrew. Of all the empires that overran Israel during that time, Greece was the empire that successfully made its language the international language of the empire. In the 2nd century BC, the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language as a translation called the Septuagint. When the Romans conquered the Greeks, they kept Greek as the international language, and that was the situation at the time of Christ.

Ever since the creation of humanity, we have continually chosen to not love God nor to love one another. We tend to blame whatever problems we have on others or even to blame God. It is this sort of mindset that caused the New Testament church to disconnect itself from its Judaic heritage, setting the church up for continued divisiveness in the future.

We know that Jesus spoke of how scriptures – and he could only be referring to what we call the Old Testament scriptures – pointed to him and his ministry, and how he was the fulfillment of those scriptures (Matthew 26:47-56; Luke 4:21; 22:35-38; 24:13-27). That would mean that Jesus' ministry was a continuation of God's love and grace as set out in the Old Testament. Later on, as the ministry of the church strongly expanded to Gentiles, the apostle Paul spelled out that the Gentiles in the church were like the branch of a wild olive tree being grafted into nurtured tree; the tree being the Jews that were in the church and whose roots went back to the Old Testament people of faith. Paul then warned the Gentiles not to become arrogant about any of the other branches that were broken off because God is capable of grafting the original branches back onto the tree (Romans 11).

23 Sacks, Jonathan. Not Just Good but Beautiful: The Complementary Relationship between Man and Woman

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As the ministry to the Gentiles proceeded and expanded, Christian Jews still met in the temple and the synagogues with the non-Christian Jews, increasing their ministry there even as many of the non-Christian Jews strongly resisted. But there were two events that would change the trajectory of the church.

In Jesus' time there was a Jewish group called the Zealots who sought to restore the nation of Israel by re-establishing an Israelite nation. In AD 66, this group started to revolt against the Roman government. The Christians in Jerusalem wanted to avoid getting caught up in the political rebellion and moved to Pella, causing tension between the Zealots and the Christians. After the rebellion was defeated by the Romans, the temple was destroyed and the Jews were scattered, but now there was increased tension between the Christian and non-Christian Jews.

Later on, in AD 132, a Zealot nicknamed Bar Kokhba (meaning "son of the star") arose to start another rebellion. He, with the support of a prominent rabbi, declared himself a messiah. Now, the Christian Jews not only did not want to participate in a rebellion, but they had to refuse to acknowledge a messiah other than Jesus. But the Zealots who supported Bar Kokhba, declared Bar Kokhba as messiah, rejected Jesus as messiah. This quickly led to a hardening of those non-Christian Jews against the church, making them even more resistant than before to the gospel. When the Romans again defeated the Zealots, Jews were now banned on penalty of death, from entering Jerusalem²⁴.

After this point, when leaders in the church tried to reach the Jews with the gospel, they encountered hardened hearts. However, instead of recognizing that it had been foretold that Jews hearts would be hardened until the time of the Gentiles was over, the leaders in the church now arrogantly hardened their own hearts and became increasingly anti-Semitic. This resulted in the church increasingly turning away from their Hebrew roots, adopting the Septuagint as their version of the Old Testament scripture. However, by divorcing the Hebrew scripture, they lost touch with how those scriptures would have interpreted by the Hebrew speaking church and then became susceptible to increasing influence of Greek thinking, culture, and philosophy²⁵.

Splitting body from soul (dualism)

The severed Hebrew roots opened the way for a wide variety of Greek philosophies to affect the theology of the church. The first philosophy that would impact (and still does impact) the church is the teachings of Plato. By the first century AD, Plato's teachings were merged with Jewish and Christian ideas into a world-view called Gnosticism. Gnostic teachings taught that the physical world was bad and only the spiritual world was good so that the goal in life was to abandon the physical world. In this view, the human body and sexuality were rejected as evil and sinful, asceticism was changed from a form of spiritual discipline to a rejection of the pleasures that God created as good things.

Splitting individual from community (W.E.I.R.D.)

Although the motivations are not clear, beginning in the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church started to place increasing prohibitions on marriage to first cousins and even eventually up to sixth cousins. Up until this point, it had been common throughout the world for individuals to marry people within their communities, however small those communities were, creating communities with very strong kinship relationships. This new inability in "western" communities to marry cousins, meant that people now had to travel outside their communities to find marriage partners. This forced travelling caused people to decrease their ties to their communities of birth and instead to develop more individualistic identities. The momentum of this change of identity would eventually lead to cultures around the world that are distinct from other cultures. Anthropologist Joseph Heinrich calls these cultures W.E.I.R.D – Western Educated, Individualistic, Rich, Developed – where

24 MacCulloch, Diarmaid. Christianity The First Three Thousand Years, p. 106-111

25 Wilson, Marvin R. Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith p.64-74

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states would replace tribes, science would replace lore and law would replace custom. One of the hallmarks of Western civilization is the high value it places on individualism. The development of Western civilization also led to the possibility of separately identifying one's religious practices and beliefs from one's culture.²⁶

Splitting natural forces from spiritual forces

From the beginning of civilization, the natural world and spiritual world were thought to be of the same system. Any study of the natural world was labelled as natural philosophy. However, when the world was thought to be inhabited by irrational gods, there was no impetus to study the natural world as if it were orderly. Aristotle was the first prominent thinker in history to try to study the natural world in an organized fashion, and there are some who consider Aristotle to be the first scientist.

In the Biblical framework, the natural world was seen to be a creation of God – so it was separate from the spiritual realm but also ordered as it was created by a God of order, but because of the influence of gnostic thinking at the beginning of church history, the church did not make any significant attempt to study natural philosophy.

The writings of Aristotle and other classical Greek writing did become available in the twelfth century. The availability of these writings led to an increased interest in classical Greek culture leading to a period called the Renaissance which focused on a Christian version of humanism and classical Greek culture. At the same time, these same writings spurred the development of natural philosophy by Christians. Unlike Aristotle however, the Christians did link the natural world to the laws of God.

Splitting authority from the church

Martin Luther's attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church from within did not succeed. Instead, he was forced out of the Roman Catholic Church, causing him to begin what is called the Protestant Reformation. His success was due in part to the recent invention of the printing press, not only allowing his writings to be made widely available, but also making the Bible widely available. The new ability for people to now own a copy of the Bible made it possible to build a case for the transfer the authority for interpreting the Bible from the church to the individual. The immediate impact created various new church movements in Europe: the Lutheran church, the Reformed church, and various versions of the Anabaptist church. The split of authority within the church to the various church movements would eventually lead to individuals centering interpretive authority on themselves instead of relying on church traditions.

Splitting reason from Biblical faith

Even though our knowledge of God ultimately has to rely on his revelation to us, that has not precluded our need to think through his revelations in order to better understand God. This study of God, theology is sometimes called the "science of faith" because it uses formal reasoning to discover God's nature, intentions, etc.

"I believe in order to understand"

Augustine of Hippo

The Protestant Reformation's challenge to the authority in the church was one of the influences on philosopher René Descartes²⁷. Descartes was a devout Catholic, and even tried to reason his way to prove God's existence, but he ultimately rejected the authority of the church and its reliance on revelation. Instead, he would base his

26 Heinrich, Joseph. The WEIRD People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous. 2020 Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux

27 Colley, Caleb. A Christian Response to Decartes' Radical Doubt. Apologetics Press <https://apologeticspress.org/a-christian-response-to-descartes-radical-doubt-2790/>

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certainty on how to know things on his skepticism and his ability to reason, leading to his statement (“I think therefore, I am”).

Descartes also furthered the Greek’s dualistic view of the mind and body by doubting the reliability of the body’s senses as a source of information. Although René Descartes did not formally abandon Christianity, the splitting of authority that happened within the church combined with the desire to split rationality from revelation would lead to other splitting: the splitting of the natural world from the spiritual world, leading to an increasing number of scientists with a secular view instead of a Biblical view, and an increasing emphasis on ordered human accomplishments than on the natural world.

This all led to a period called the Enlightenment (which viewed a world dominated by the church as the “Dark Ages”) and began what is called the Modern Era (with a worldview that the truth about the world can be studied, discovered and harnessed for progress).

Splitting emotion from Biblical faith

A backlash developed in response to the Enlightenment and its emphasis on rationality, the scientific rationalization of the natural world and the development of the industrial world. This backlash led to the period of Romanticism where the emphasis was on individuality, freedom, emotions and an idealized view of the natural world. The natural world was sometimes given spiritual values, although those spiritual values did not include God nor the church.

Splitting truth from reality

The awful suffering in WWI dampened the optimism of Modernism and its expected uninterrupted progress. This led to the Postmodern era which incorporated all the previously discussed ways in which humans have rejected the wholeness that God had intended. Postmodern thinking denies the possibility of objective truth (thinks that all truth is relative, or speaks in terms of “my” truth versus anyone else’s truth), rejects any external source of authority (centering authority on one’s self), and prioritizes an individual’s mental/spiritual view of themselves over their physical bodies.

Our current context

Stories from our neighbors

Introduction

As you listen to the following stories²⁸, do not try to solve them. Instead, think about being with each person and needing to understand them. What are your observations? What questions do you have?

The point of these stories is to help us begin to listen and to begin to grasp the complex stories of people's lives and the complex nature of sexual attraction and gender identity. These stories are chosen to help us create a framework for understanding the language in the following section discussing sexuality and gender. Resolving the following stories is not our goal. These people being presented may have issues, but so do we.

...our pain is not only shaped by our current circumstances but also by the stories we bring to those circumstances. What this means is that two people can experience the exact same painful circumstance and feel completely different feelings because of the different wounds they were already carrying when they confronted this painful situation. ... Understanding others' stories also helps us have compassion for others' reactions to their pain.²⁹

Our differences in views on sexuality does not need to prevent us from relating to one another as fellow image-bearers of God. Our stories of sexuality and gender are not the whole of who we are. Most of our lives are occupied by the same kinds of things like sleeping, eating, getting dressed, going to work, doing chores and errands, and buying groceries. We all live according to values like integrity, compassion, mercy, and justice. All of us possess some goodness because we are made in the image of God.

We are also all different from each other in regard to personality, upbringing, and experiences. We all have different stories. When we listen to each other's individual stories, we can discover the fullness of our humanity. Our differences in views on sexuality are just a part of the wholeness of who we are. By listening we may be able to find common ground in those things that bring us joy and pain, needs and wants – and the opportunity to share love as walk with each other – for our call is to love, not to judge, one another.

Our neighbors

Brian – Is a same sex attracted male raised in church and had an absent father. He was into gay pornography at 10, he led double life, in high school but no one asked "what are you watching" until a new youth pastor talked about John 7:37 - *are you thirsty come to me and I will satisfy you*. When Brian came out in college, it was received well. Brian still has identity issues complicated by his father's death.

Bridgett – Identifies herself as lesbian, gay, queer. She was raised in church and has good relationship with parents and family. She was in an evangelical church that was hostile to homosexuality – it considered gay to be a choice and a rebellion. Bridgett loved Jesus and did not consider being gay, until college when she realized that she was never was attracted to guys. She was in denial about feelings but thought that she would be satisfied

28 The first five stories are from a seminar conducted by The Center for Faith, Sexuality and Gender. (The Center was created by a pastor who once had a project to present the issue of sexuality in the church. In the middle of his project about the issue, he realized that the project was actually about people – people he had never talked to. So the pastor in him urged him to go and have conversations with the people he was writing about. The Center was founded to create a way for himself and others within the church to continue to have conversations – or listen to conversations – about the people working through their experiences of sexual attraction and gender identity.) The last story is from the NY Times.

29 Blanco, Jerome. Celebration is a Rhythm with Nicole Zasowski. Interview with Nicole Zasowski about her book, "What If It's Wonderful?: Release Your Fears, Choose Joy, and Find the Courage to Celebrate." Nicole Zasowski (MSMFT) is a licensed marriage and family therapist.

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if she could find the one guy to be attracted to. She did not know what godly women looked like and tried to find something that she wasn't being called into other than marrying a Christian and having kids.

Matt - Is a same-sex attracted male. From a young age he never felt male. He wasn't into video games or sports, but liked music, was sensitive, and felt outside of norms. When watching a romantic movie, he wanted to be courted by the male lead. He was bullied and made fun of. He grew up in a church which had a negative view of gays and did not think gays could be saved. Matt loved Jesus but went through youth group thinking Jesus hated him because their solution was self-help books to become straight. Later, at Juilliard school, a staff member mentored him and wrestled with him. Matt has grudgingly accepted celibacy and how Jesus made him.

Katt – Identifies as a transgender who was raised Christian. She felt accepted by church, but they pushed femininity. She thought that she must be dishonoring God. LGBT and celibacy were not discussed, and she felt like she didn't fit. College pushed her into wandering. She wanted to find people she could fit in with. She is same-sex attracted and identifies with maleness. She has felt God's pulling her but subdued it. She identifies as transgender but has no desire to transition.

Benjamin - Is a bi-vocational pastor with an M.Div. from Grand Rapids Theological Seminary and has a B.S in Intercultural Studies from Cornerstone University. He and his wife Lauren love to serve their community through hospitality and coffee. When he was a youth pastor in the last year of seminary, as well as in the process of being hired as an associate pastor at another church, Benjamin told his wife that while he did not intend to leave her or to transition, the fact is that he experiences gender dysphoria. Since that day he has grown tremendously in his faith and holds to his confidence that Jesus sees him fully and still chooses to call Benjamin his own.

In Nov 2020, Jay and Krystle donned wedding gowns, walked down the aisle, exchanged rings and shared their first and only kiss. Krystle is in the process of changing her last name to her partner's name. They want to be best friends and life partners. Jay and Krystle identify as queer and are open to dating anyone but each other. They sleep in the same bed, but their relationship remains platonic. They wanted to get married because they wanted to be legally and socially recognized as a family and so they could handle legal matters with the other appropriately. They are committed to a marriage that is stable, long-lasting and with no conditions.

The Conversation

Shattered pieces

We are designed to be whole individuals, embodied image-bearing creatures of God, responsible to God to serve Him and each other in community. When we center ourselves on ourselves, instead of God, we bring on ourselves the consequences we inherited from the first humans. We fragment ourselves and our relationships, allowing broken desires to distort the wholeness of who we are as individuals, as marriage partners and as communities.

Separating sex and gender

There was a time when the words 'sex' and 'gender' meant the same thing and served as synonyms. If you were talking about male or female, a man or woman, girl or boy then you could say that you were talking about someone's sex or someone's gender. The expectations are that our sex (our biological identity as male or female) aligned with our gender (our social and cultural roles in our communities).

Our biological sex refers to all the physical, physiological and biological dimensions of being male or female including anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones. There is a significant range of variation in each one of the physical dimensions that is possible for males or females. Our gender refers to all the social and cultural aspects of being a man or woman. This term may also be used in different ways, such as:

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- *Gender Identity/Experience*: Who you identify and experience life as. Who you feel yourself to be. Your internal sense of self.
- *Gender Expression*: The masculine or feminine (or other) ways in which you express yourself (clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms, interests, etc.).
- *Gender Role*: How you relate to and adopt cultural expectations of maleness and femaleness.

However, the pervasive brokenness in our world sometimes includes broken connections between what our body shows (our biological sex) and what we sense in our minds (our gender identity), a disconnect we call Gender Dysmorphia. It feels like you've been born in the wrong body. Although there is concern that our culture may pressure individuals to identify any confusion as gender dysmorphia, there is evidence that our broken biology does produce this dysmorphia. Complicating the discussion on dysmorphia is the post-modern thinking that reality is only what we individually create instead acknowledging what God has created.

It is normal that we long for wholeness, but individuals may try to treat their dysmorphia by "fixing their body" through surgery instead of pursuing wholeness through mental health or spiritual treatments.³⁰ Fixing the body may involve cross-dressing or they may use medical intervention such as hormonal treatments or physical reassignment surgery. The problem with creating changes based upon our emotional feelings is that our emotional feelings tend to change with time. Some people who have gone through sex reassignment surgery have been more satisfied for a long time but some have opted to undergo another sex reassignment surgery to reverse the first surgery.

Another symptom of brokenness is finding ourselves sexually attracted to people of the same sex. Normally, we expect sexual attraction should occur between a man and a woman. However, men may be sexually attracted to each other, or women may be sexually attracted to each other. We call that *same-sex attraction*. We should keep in mind that having an attraction does not mean we are acting on it. As in the case of broken gender identity, while there may be concern about the effect of social pressure, same-sex attraction may be rooted in broken biology.³¹

A common question regarding the issues of gender identity or sexual attraction is whether our identity or attraction is due to nature or nurture – that is, are these things that we are born with or is there something in our environment that causes these things? Despite strong opinions on either side, the science itself is not yet definitive. That fuzziness probably means that both nature and nurture are involved. But either way, the job of the church is not to scientifically resolve the causes, but to invite and encourage people to follow Jesus. Follow Jesus to let him change you rather than change yourself so that you can follow Jesus.

It is not up to the church to determine the causes of people experiencing gender dysmorphia or same sex attraction. But the church is called, in its own brokenness to walk with people in their brokenness as we try to live Christ-honoring lives. Whatever the state of our brokenness is, whatever our nationality or ethnicity or gender or vocation, we are all called to place our primary identity in Christ.³² We need to understand who we are

30 Genesis of Gender A review of Abigail Favale's *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* By Serena Sigillito – 3 Nov 2022. *"trans identities signal a longing for wholeness, for an integrated sense of self, in which the body does reveal the person. This desire is fundamentally a good one."* And yet, while affirming the goodness of this desire for integration, Favale also cautions: *"The error comes in thinking that this integration has to be achieved through artifice, through violence against the body, rather than recognizing that we are integrated by our very nature."*

31 Williams, Sam R. "A Christian Psychology of and Response to Homosexuality" Biblical Counseling Coalition 2011

32 *"It's true there's a danger we all face to make anything more central to our identity than Christ. And it's true some will struggle with making their sexual orientation too central to their identity (similar to how others make things like their nationality, or their vocation, too central to their identity). But I would suggest that "identity" is an ongoing discipleship area for pastoral leadership to guide their entire congregation through over time. We all need to be continually encouraged towards finding our primary identity in Christ."* Sprinkle, Preston. "Why Christians need to think about Polyamory"

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in the light who God created us to be, which will include understanding how Jesus in His incarnation and resurrection shows the intention God has for us.³³

Marriage

Power under control

The Bible gives us a view of the wholeness of who we are individually, the wholeness of who we are as a community, and the wholeness of what marriage should be in that context. When we pull marriage away from that entire context, we distort what God has intended marriage to be: a unity and complementarity of husband and wife which is a witness to the unity and complementarity of the Trinity, an expansion of the Kingdom of God by the natural fruit of the desires and love expressed in the children produced by one-flesh union husband and wife which reflects the expansion of the Kingdom of God by the natural fruit of desire and love within the Trinity.

Moses, the man who confronted the Pharaoh time after time with the request to “Let my people go,” who led the people of Israel across the Red Sea and through the wilderness despite much resistance from those people, was called the meekest man on the face of the earth. Jesus is also described as *meek*. In the New Testament, the word we usually see translated as *meek* is from the Greek word *praus* which can refer to a horse that is broken in, or power under control. Both Moses and Jesus exercised great power, but under the control of God.

In Genesis, humans were given power; they were created in God’s image, empowered with some of his attributes, so that on his behalf they could exercise authority over the earth. The problem is that throughout history since the time of Adam and Eve, humans have continually exercised uncontrolled power, claiming their own authority, often finding that the power they abused ended up controlling them – and in the process harming others and well as themselves. The power of sex is not an exception.

Our modern culture has managed to idolize sex to the point where we base our primary identity on our sexual identity and sexual attractions. However, by mis-prioritizing sex in regard to our covenant relationships, we end up dehumanizing ourselves and others. Sexual encounters were designed to be in context of personal encounters and not just as a physical act. We are the only creatures that commonly copulate face-to-face with full body contact and with a preference for privacy. We are the only creatures that can copulate at any time, not just once or twice a year and not just when we are of child-bearing years.

The normal desires of a fully integrated human create a longing to connect with others in the community, and to connect with our Creator. Our sexual drive is part of our daily reminders that we need to connect with others, but sexual relationships are not the only context for relationships. We ought to respect and appreciate the power of our sexual drive, which is a gift, and a power we need to control.

Whether we are in a marriage relationship or not, we are called to chastity, purity in thought and conduct. We are called to control, not be controlled, by our sexual drives and desires. We are called to wholly love one another with body and soul, to seek and desire the best for one another, to lift each other up with purity of heart. We cheapen the power of sex if all we ask is consent of each other rather than commitment, for spouses to offer to exclusively release the primal power of sex to each other, for all of us to trust God to be the Lord of our sexuality and honor him in our faithfulness.³⁴

33 Assemblies of God. “Transgenderism, Transsexuality and Gender Identity” 5 Aug 2017

34 Scarcello, Tony. “The One Humanizing Sexual Ethic” 16 Mar 2021

Separating sexuality from child-bearing

Once marriage was separated from child-bearing and became seen as just a way to be emotionally and sexually fulfilled ... once marriage was about self-fulfillment instead of self-giving ... then marriage was more for personal convenience³⁵. This redefinition opened the door for any sexual arrangement, with same-sex marriages being just one option. The definition ultimately and surely leads to more divorce because two (or more) people looking for self-fulfillment from each other will surely become dissatisfied because our ultimate fulfillment cannot happen apart from God.

Separating marriage from covenant

Marriage is meant to be an unconditional life-long commitment giving of one's self to another, reflecting the unconditional eternal commitment of God to us. If we seek less than that, if marriage just becomes a formal contract of two people seeking self-fulfillment, it is no better nor stronger than a one-night stand where the "contractors" will eventually find that their self-fulfillment won't be satisfied in a relationship of mutual selfishness. Related to this is a recent trend to what has been called co-parenting, where a contract is made with a "rented woman" or "rented man" to be available as a sort of co-parent but without the emotional attachments and richness of marriage.

Separating child-bearing from marriage

One fertility "treatment" involves bringing in another woman as a surrogate to bear the children when the wife cannot. This was actually used in the Old Testament when wives offered their servants to be a concubine. These relations ended may have ended up in child-bearing, but they also created more problems. In our present day, couples, and sometimes someone who just wants to be a single parent, will create a contract with a woman to bear a child. The insemination may be through sexual intercourse, or it might be through in vitro fertilization. It is a good thing to desire to have children, but we shouldn't neglect the normal context God has intended, a context that is both messy and rich while providing for the wholeness of ourselves, our society, and our children.

Separating sexual union from total union

Polyamory includes but is not restricted to polygamy (a type of marriage).³⁶ Polyamory does not need to involve formal marriage and may include any number of male and female members. Related to that is a category called "consensual non-monogamy" which includes polyamory but also includes what is called an "open marriage" in which a couple agrees to stay together but have each other's permission to engage in other (hetero or homo) sexual relationships.

The Identity Crisis

We are created to be highly complex but integrated creatures; creatures with both body and soul, intelligence and emotion, capable of understanding our circumstances and then transcending those circumstances so that we can rule on behalf of our creator, capable of wisely using our will to make moral decisions. By the time that history has rolled around to the postmodern era, we find that our complexity has been partly revealed by all the ways that we have been able to dissect and analyze our essence. Unfortunately, our rebellion from God has separated us from our capacity for wisdom and unable to reintegrate what we have fragmented, leaving our society immersed in a full-scale fragmentation of our identities.

³⁵ "Marriage had come to be seen by many—even some who continued to view it as the union of a man and a woman—as an emotional-sexual relationship set apart by its intensity and priority over other relationships. On such grounds, what objection could be made to allowing same-sex couples to get marriage licenses " Patterson, Jennifer, "The Case for Traditional Marriage in the Midst of Efforts to Redefine It" 7 Feb 2023

³⁶ Sprinkle, Preston. "Why Christians need to think about polyamory"

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The fragmentation of our identity is expressed in a set of identity labels that began as LGBT and then progressed to LGBTQ, LGBYQ+ and even expanded to LGBTQQIP2SAA. People who identify themselves with any variation of these labels set themselves apart from others in terms of gender identity and sexual attractions. The continually expanding alphabet uncovers how our need to be whole results in an unsatisfactory search for identity and connection when we lack the wholeness that can only be found by receiving our identity in Christ and following the design given to us by our Creator. The list below shows the results of looking in the wrong places for identity and connection, a complex fragmentation of identities which is compounded by the complexity of people's individual stories such as the ones shown in the "Our Neighbors" section.

Our goal as Christians is **not to try to learn or memorize the list**. It is more reasonable to become somewhat familiar with the list so that, if the occasion arises, we can have a meaningful conversation with someone who identifies as LGBT. We should listen to their stories and ask questions; learn what questions they have; love them. By listening, we may learn how God has been already working in their lives.

The Identity Alphabet

- **2S** – two-spirit: a term that traditionally originated from Native American culture that describes people who are male, female, or intersex and have both a male and female spirit within them. It's sometimes referred to as a third gender.
- **Agender** – refers to those who do not identify as any gender at all.
- **Ally** – a person who actively supports the LGBTQ community.
- **Amalgagender** – gender identity is linked to or impacted by the fact that they are intersex.
- **Asexual** – not sexually attracted to anyone.
- **Autosexual** – primarily feels sexual attraction to and desire for themselves.
- **Bisexual** – attracted to both men and women.
- **Cisgender** – a person who identifies as the gender they were assigned at birth.
- **Closeted** – state of being totally private about one's sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Coming out** – the act of sharing one's sexual orientation or gender identity with loved ones.
- **Deadnaming** – calling someone by a name they no longer use.
- **Demisexual** – describes someone who requires an emotional bond to form a sexual attraction.
- **Gay** – attracted to the same sex; used of both men and women. The term gay has been around for a while, and it has come to mean different things to different people. If someone identifies as gay, in your conversations be aware of how they are using the term. People may use the term to express: Identity (attracted to same sex), Attraction/Orientation (attracted to same sex), Lust, Sexual Behavior, or Political Activism (e.g. Gay Rights, Marriage Equality)
- **Gender fluid** – describes a person whose gender identity or expression changes over time.
- **Gender non-conforming** – describes a person who does not abide by traditional or cultural expectations in regard to appearance or behavior — of their gender.
- **Genderqueer** describes a person who does not follow static categories of gender, embracing a fluidity of gender identity and, oftentimes, sexual orientations.
- **Graysexual** – refers to the "gray area" between asexuality and sexuality.
- **Intersex** – Although there's a debate among intersex specialists about how to define intersex and hence determine many people are genuinely born intersex. Only 1 in 4,500 people are born with actual ambiguous (or a blend of) reproductive or sexual anatomy. Those people who do present as intersex are presenting as a blend of male and female, not as something other than male or female. The only gametes we produce are only sperm or ova – there is not a third option. A mistake is also made when we try to isolate our sexuality to a particular attribute, whether physical, hormonal, or genetic, instead of considering the whole individual.

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- **Lesbian** – a woman who is physically, emotionally, or romantically attracted to other women.
- **Non-binary** – describes a person whose gender identity falls outside of strictly male or strictly female. Options are: Gender Queer, Gender Fluid, Gender Nonconforming, and many others. Like transgender, but emphasizes a non-binary view of gender—i.e., that male and female are not the only two options but simply points on a spectrum. Not a medical diagnosis.
- **Pansexual** – a person who may have a physical, emotional, or romantic attraction to people of any gender. They may not experience these feelings at the same time or in the same way or level.
- **Polyamorous/Polysexual/Multisexual** – a term for those open to multiple consensual romantic or sexual relationships at one time
- **Queer** – Queer means different and it's used as sort of a catch all term for other experiences and identities that aren't straight or cisgender (Cisgender just means you identify with your biological sex). It used to be a derogatory term but it's now been used positively by younger people. It includes the following categories of non-binary, gender fluid, genderqueer, gender nonconforming.
- **Questioning** – used to describe a person who is exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- **Sapiosexual** – describes a person who is attracted to intelligence, regardless of a person's gender identity.
- **Transgender** – Sometimes called transexual. Its an umbrella term capturing many different ways in which someone does not identify with their biological sex. Typically, a biological man who identifies as a woman, or vice versa. Not everyone under the “transgender umbrella” experiences gender dysphoria. There's a growing number of younger people who identify as transgender out of social pressure or peer influence. **(Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria)**³⁷
 - Transgender variations include:
 - **Genuine Gender Dysphoric** – A true gender dysphoria that is manageable for some while for others it's debilitating, and life threatening and requires professional help. If you get to know someone who falls in this category, you should enter into this relationship with sensitivity and care and seek professional guidance as you continue to walk with them. Stress and depression are common. Only 3% have transgender surgery.
 - **Don't Fit Masculine/Feminine Stereotypes** - People who simply don't fit the cultural stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Stereotypes don't determine gender but can self-perception. A friend can help them see through the cultural stereotypes and gaze upon the One who created them to be male or female.
 - **Autogynephiliac** - Some people (almost always biological men) who are erotically turned on at the thought of themselves as a woman. They may be sexually attracted to either men or women. They're often not stereotypically feminine, usually married to a woman, have a history of cross dressing in secret, and often desire to transition later in life. Several pro LGBT scholars and scientists who are experts on sex and gender have shown that this category is much more prevalent than people care to admit.³⁸

Use of language

When discussing the above issues, we sometimes run into concerns about the language we use. One area of concern is that we use clearly defined words so that we don't confuse our conversation. A second area of

³⁷ Dr. Stephen Stathis, an Australian psychiatrist who runs a gender clinic, said that only a minority of the transgender patients that come to him are diagnosed with gender dysphoria. They don't truly, deep down, believe that they are a member of the opposite sex. One even said: “Dr Steve ... I want to be transgender; it's the new black.” <https://honey.nine.com.au/2017/04/10/14/39/psychiatrist-notes-increase-in-childrens-use-of-transgender-asway-to-be-different>

³⁸ e.g., Drs. Ray Blanchard, J. Michael Bailey, Alice Dreger, and Anne Lawrence, who is herself a male-to-female transgender medical researcher.

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concern is that we don't want to prematurely close off conversation by using words that may cause unnecessary offense to other people. Our goal should be to encourage other people to follow Christ or to build up others who are trying to be His disciples. Our biblical instruction is to love others as we love ourselves.

Sometimes people with gender dysphoria will want to use different names or pronouns. There is a divide in the Christian community about how to handle this. On the one side are those who want to express love by not enabling the 'lie' and therefore use the original names and pronouns in the desire to speak the objective truth to the other about the identity that they were born with. On the other side are those who want to express love by using the new names and pronouns in order to create an atmosphere where the other will feel like they are being heard and will then be more able to listen.

Fertility issues

In our practice of science, we can see the reflection of both God's transcendence in us as well as our brokenness. We begin to see our brokenness in the inability of a couple to bear children because of physical or biological issues. We can also see our transcendence by means of the medical means available to help overcome fertility problems that couples may experience. While we have not gotten to where we have "created life" from scratch, we have developed ways to have women produce more ova to be available for fertilization.

Hormonal treatments

The first hormonal treatment involves stimulating the pituitary glands to produce hormones that will stimulate the ovaries to produce the ova which allows the body's other functions to operate make for a more controlled production of ova. The second hormonal treatment involves the direct stimulation of the ovaries, which is less controlled, and the doctors need to monitor the situation closely to prevent multiple fertilizations to reduce the risks to mother and babies.

Artificial Insemination

Artificial insemination method involves medically injecting sperm into the cervix or uterus. The sperm may be washed and concentrated to enhance the chances of fertilization.

In vitro fertilization

The second artificial insemination method is *in vitro* fertilization where sperm and ovum are gathered from a male and female which are then mixed in a laboratory setting. This method usually produces multiple fertilized embryos. where the most viable embryo is implanted in the uterus while the others are either destroyed or frozen. This option is also expensive (\$10,000-\$25,000 per insemination).

Genetic modification

Genetic modification is, at first, being considered as a way of fixing broken genetic code while the baby is still in utero in order that will remove birth defects. But once that goal is reached, the next conversation will be about "designer babies."

The Mystery of Ensoulment

To be fully human is to be a creature with body and soul. The question surrounding birth is, at what point does the newly-conceived body also have a soul. There are different viewpoints on how and when this ensoulment occurs. Is ensoulment a gift God gives to His co-creators so that when children are conceived, they are conceived with both body and soul (traducianism)? Or is the creation of a soul only a capability of God which He may add to the human body at any time He chooses (creationism)? Traducianism is usually associated with ensoulment happening at conception, whereas creationism leads to the possibility of ensoulment at any time in the birth process. Christian views through history range from ensoulment happening at conception or when the embryo becomes "formed," or when the baby first moves in the womb or at birth.

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Views on ensoulment can be affected not only by theology, but also by political/sociological factors. When it was more common for children to die prenatally or in early childhood, creationism was more acceptable because, if children died prenatally or as infants and if they bear the guilt due to original sin, then they are condemned to hell before they even have a chance to live. These theological views are not talked about much in current times, but they could be when we could think about how even today 1/3 to 1/2 of pregnancies result in miscarriages.

There is a mystery about ensoulment, but there is no mystery about the grief of pregnancies that end too early, whether from the heartache of an unexpected miscarriage or from the numbing need to end a pregnancy out of necessity. We are image-bearers of the Creator who desires to multiply creatures to love, so it is a normal desire for us, as His co-creators, to share in that same desire by bearing and rearing children. This is evident even in the broken desires of adults who don't want to be married but still desire to have children.

As a church community we need to help each other to acknowledge that grief and bear that grief, to mourn the loss of life and the brokenness that caused that loss. We should remove the grief from its hiding place in broken hearts so that hearts can heal. We are not just co-creators of life, but co-bearers of the cross.

The role of the Church

The Church as community

By being a community of acceptance, the Church can be a place of healing for all those who go seeking fulfillment in ways that will ultimately not fulfill them. It starts with individuals already in the church who respond to the love of Christ and seek forgiveness by acknowledging and repenting of their own sins, then inviting others to do the same. That provides a place of mutual humility in which we place all our needs and desires before the Lord. If we can firmly establish our identity with Christ and within the Body of Christ, we then have a proper framework to set our needs and desires, whatever they are.³⁹

Human children are different than children of other creatures. Human children require a long period, usually at least 13 years, of nurturing before they become independent. It is for that reason that civil society has promoted marriage as a “a comprehensive, permanent, monogamous relationship rooted in the biological complementarity of man and woman. It is an emotional and bodily union ordered to procreation, spousal unity, and shared family life. Marriage unites a man and a woman in the only type of relationship that brings about new human life and joins mother and father to structure a new family.”⁴⁰

In our current day, marriage is mainly about the needs of adults. By detaching marriage from the needs of the children, there has been an increased need for government support to provide for the welfare of the children and the need for family courts to address disputes over custody, financial support and care.⁴¹

The emphasis on the needs of the children comes into play in those situations where an unmarried adult seeks to have children “in order to be fulfilled.” If such adults are integrated into a church community, there will be childcare opportunities within the congregation, avoiding the drive to seek alternate forms of fertility that produce children outside the context of a heterosexual marriage. Also, the availability of non-parental adults helps to provide a healthier context for nurturing children. This same dynamic also applies to infertile couples which may reduce the need to pursue fertility treatments.

39 Sprinkle, Preston. Cook, Jeff. “Grace, Homosexuality, LBGT, Same sex attractions, theology”

40 George, Richard P. “Clash of Orthodoxies”

41 Patterson, Jennifer. “The Case for Traditional Marriage in the Midst of Efforts to Redefine It” 7 Feb 2023

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This brings us to the role of any single or childless couple within a congregation. It is possible for people who are not constrained by the role of raising children to help serve the needs of others within the congregation. In return, the congregation should also recognize and honor the service of such individuals, also remembering to return their service by helping provide for their needs within the congregation.

When a church community fosters relations between all groups (married with children, married without children, single adults) everyone can benefit and help each other thrive.⁴² Such communities offer visible alternatives for those individuals who come into the church and had sought to meet their needs and desires through alternative life-styles. So, as we all seek Jesus together, repenting of our own sins, we can help each other find healing and wholeness together as the Body of Christ.

Proposed Statement on Marriage, Gender and Sexuality

- 1) God created us as sexually embodied creatures, as male and female.*
- 2) We recognize that while our primary identities are in Christ, our bodies provide our physical identities, and while our individual and cultural expressions may vary, our bodies identify us as male and female.*
- 3) It is as male and female that we may, through the mystery of Christ and in natural sexual union, become one and in that union naturally produce offspring, fulfilling God's purpose for us to fill the earth and, as his vice-regents, expand His Kingdom here on earth. As creatures who bear his image, we reflect the character of God through faithfulness within and abstinence outside of heterosexual marriage, recognizing that marriage is the one appropriate place for sexual intercourse.*

⁴² Allberry, Sam. Butterfield, Rosaria. Yuan, Christopher. "Singleness, Same Sex attraction and the Church"