



ChristCommunity
an Evangelical Free Church

EXPLORING GOD'S DESIGN FOR HUMAN SEXUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

In our contemporary world, we are experiencing rapid social change regarding gender identities, sexual ethics, and the institution of marriage. Many of our families, neighbors, and friends have affirmed and enthusiastically embraced these cultural changes.

As followers of Jesus who affirm the Bible as the timeless and authoritative guide for our lives, how do we lovingly hold to orthodox faith, while extending to others who may disagree with us a spirit of grace and truth? In the days and years ahead, embodying both grace and truth may well be one of our greatest challenges as well as our most hopeful opportunities to be a wise and winsome gospel witness for Jesus in our Monday worlds.

In the midst of this cultural sea-change, heartfelt repentance is also an important consideration. As the body of Christ, we have often held a hypocritical double standard regarding sexual ethics, focusing more on the sins of homosexual behavior while neglecting to focus on the sins of heterosexual behavior. All too often we have harbored non-Christian attitudes toward the LGBTQ+¹ communities, failing to treat all individuals as image-bearers of God. We have been less than willing to repent of our own sexual brokenness, but quick to throw stones of condemnation on others who have divergent expressions of sexual brokenness. The Apostle John shines the needed light of grace and truth into our lives when he writes, “If we say, ‘We have no sin,’ we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8–9). Where we have fallen short in our love for other image-bearers, both as a church family as well as individual apprentices of Jesus, we humbly repent of our sin. In the power of the Holy Spirit, may we with greater earnestness hold on to truth while at the same time grow in our understanding and deepening in our love for others.

While we are called to live lives of gracious compassion for all image-bearers of God, we are also called to be a gospel-centered people who faithfully incarnate and proclaim propositional truth. In our faith tradition, the Bible is the bedrock of our integral Christian faith and worldview. We believe the Bible speaks with timeless clarity and compelling coherence regarding God’s unchanging design for human flourishing. Gender and human sexuality are integral aspects of our image-bearing humanity and

¹ While we understand there are other letters and configurations of this title laid out by various parties, this is the designation we have chosen to use for the purposes of this paper.



foundational in God's good creation design. To be human is to be a biologically embodied person. Being human is more than being a sexual creature, but not less. We believe Christian faithfulness in our time requires not cultural accommodation, but rather a humble and courageous confidence that speaks uncompromising truth with tender love and compassion for God's good, yet badly broken, world.

I am grateful for the skilled team that has refreshed this paper. It continues to be my prayer that this resource will help you be more informed both in regard to the timeless teaching of Holy Scripture as well as the ever-changing contours of our contemporary culture. May each one of us draw nearer in deeper intimacy with Jesus, joyfully embracing God's desire and design in all areas of our life, being a faithful presence in the many spaces and places we have been called to inhabit at home, in our neighborhood, and in our workplace.

Tom Nelson

Lead Senior Pastor



WHAT INFORMS OUR VIEW OF HUMAN SEXUALITY?

Sex is God's idea.

He designed it, and he knows best how it works.

Perhaps there is something that does not sit quite right with this statement. Maybe it feels overstated, outdated, or just too simple. While we believe this is what God's word teaches, we recognize there may be a disconnect or even a revulsion to this foundational framing of sexuality due to a painful experience you or someone you love has had regarding sex. These real stories of pain coupled with the different story our world tells about sexuality today can be disorienting. In fact, statements like this make Christians appear intrusive, bigoted, or just plain silly. What gives anyone the right to meddle in the private lives of other people? If people are happy and satisfied in their sexual expression, why should Christians step in and insist on a different way of life? Shouldn't consenting adults be free to do as they please?

SEXUALITY TODAY

Such questions echo familiar refrains regarding sexuality in our day. If it is thought about at all, sex is often viewed primarily through the lens of individual preference. When we view our freedom for sexual expression as the highest value, it also signals that self-fulfillment and individual pleasure hold the highest value. In keeping with this value, we, the post-Christian West, have increasingly accepted casual sex, cohabitation, and the redefinition of marriage and family as normal and good steps along the road to human advancement. So long as one's lifestyle does not hurt others, there is freedom for personal sexual expression.

We believe there are good reasons, in addition to the biblical witness, to distrust the prevailing view of sexuality. In many ways, the prevailing perspective of the post-Christian West on sex subtly understates the negative impact of privatized sexuality on our society at large. The emphasis on self-satisfaction engenders a relational and sexual consumerism that damages true relationships and cultivates a culture of sexual disorientation. The freedom of casual sex for consenting adults also results in an increased number of children born outside of the covenant of marriage, which in turn adds to impoverished single-parent families, higher rates of abortion, and an overloaded, underfunded, and overcrowded foster care system. Though medicine has learned to treat many of the physical risks associated with having multiple sexual partners, there are still notable risks that cannot be overlooked.

With that said, the social consequences of the prevailing views on sexuality is not the primary concern of a Christian view of sex. The Bible provides clear indications regarding God's design for sexuality, and these words guide our views and inform our posture, regardless of any current moment. In fact, in the biblical writings we find a number of situations in which Christian communities were struggling with many of the same issues we are today.



SEXUALITY THROUGHOUT HISTORY

This is not a new problem exclusive to our post-Christian Western context. Rather, a cursory reading of the biblical narrative reveals God's people throughout history have had to wrestle through and against the stories their surrounding cultures told about sex. One such example is the new Christians in first-century Corinth who adopted a similar ethic to today for their sexuality, and it nearly destroyed their church.

Corinth was an important city in the Greco-Roman world, a bustling center of commerce and culture that scholars have compared to New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas combined! Corinth had a reputation for sexual promiscuity, and the church Paul planted reflected this reality, reportedly engaging in sexual activity that made the unbelieving Corinthians around them blush. Cultural influence on sexual norms and ethics can be powerful and persuasive—even for those in the church.

So how did the Apostle Paul address the issues in this local church? What informed his view of human sexuality? Paul's understanding of sex was rooted in the Genesis creation account. He pointed the Corinthian church away from the prevailing "spirit of the age" and to the authoritative word of God. They had a wrong view of their freedom as Christians and needed a right perspective on God's design for human flourishing as sexual beings.

Paul's approach is a good example for us today. Though centuries removed from the Corinthian church, we face similar cultural challenges. Like these ancient Christians, we do not need a fresh new word on the topic, but rather a fresh application of unchanging truths around which we can build a sound, liveable, God-glorifying perspective of sexuality.

SEXUALITY IN SCRIPTURE

Before we dive into the Bible itself, it is worth mentioning some key convictions that we hold concerning its place in our lives. Most importantly, we believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, perfect in its original form (2 Timothy 3:16). Biblical interpretation is hard work that is subject to human error, but we believe the Bible can be trusted as the ultimate authority for all matters in life and faith.² Consequently, we are convinced that God's word, rightly understood, provides us with the truest perspective on sexuality and human flourishing.

We also believe the Bible is a story about what God is doing in the world. The account of Scripture displays God's redemptive activity through time and eternity, a narrative that can be divided into four major chapters: *creation*, *fall*, *redemption*, and *new creation*. This framework helps us put phrases, verses, passages, and books in their appropriate place as the story unfolds. This is critical for understanding God's design.

Instead of looking first to specific verses related to sex, we will follow the contours of the biblical narrative, watching God's design for sexuality and human flourishing unfold in Scripture. This way we will gain a clearer understanding of how we can live the life God designed us to live.

² See EFCA Statement of Faith, Article 2. <http://go.efca.org/resources/document/efca-statement-faith>.



CREATION: DESIGN

*We were created as sexual beings with a purpose in mind. Though the creation account of Genesis is brief, it is the cornerstone for understanding the whole story of the Bible. It is in this account that we understand that God created all things to reflect his glorious image, including humans and their sexuality. This is where we learn of God's **design** for human sexuality.*

Image-Bearers

The first two chapters of Genesis present parallel accounts of God's creation of humanity. Genesis 1 offers a brief sketch of God's creative activity as a whole. Humanity is located within the rest of the created order as the crown jewel of all God made and is said to be "very good" (Genesis 1:31).

As part of our unique createdness as human beings, we bear God's image (Genesis 1:26). Like reflections in a mirror, our purpose is to portray God's creative and redemptive activity in the world he has made, even in our sexuality. God created humanity in his own image, male and female. Since God's character includes both *male and female* attributes (Genesis 1:27), we bear God's image in our sexual differentiation. Maleness and femaleness are not incidental to our nature, but essential.

Genesis 2 gives more texture to these differences. We're told that God made man from the dust of the ground and breathed life into his lungs. The man was given a beautiful garden in Eden to maintain and enjoy—a job tailor-made for him (Genesis 2:1–17).

We are also told that it wasn't enough. It was not good for the man to be alone; he needed another human being to truly bear God's image. He needed an ally and partner to fulfill God's mandate to be fruitful and multiply. He needed someone less like the animals and more like himself.

And yet, he needed someone very different from himself: the man needed a woman. So God made a woman, a "complementary-ally,"³ not from the dust of the ground but from the man's own being.⁴ Man and woman are similar yet distinct, equal yet different. In God's good design, masculinity and femininity are not just psychologically or socially constructed realities—they're immutably tied to biology. Fitted together, man and woman beautifully display the unity, diversity, and equality intrinsic to God's design for human sexuality.

Indeed, this harmony between sameness and distinctness is actually a reflection of the Godhead. Father, Son, and Spirit are the same yet distinct. Each person of the Godhead is fully and equally God, yet they are different. So also masculine and feminine distinctiveness is part of what God declared from the beginning to be "very good," reflecting his nature as the triune God.

³ For more on the language of complementary-ally, see paper, *Exploring God's Design for Male and Female Flourishing in the Church*.

⁴ For the sake of clarity, this does not mean that Eve's image-bearing is derived from Adam. Genesis 1:27 is clear: God created both male and female in his image.



Marriage

After God created the woman, he brought her to the man and joined them together in the very first wedding (Genesis 2:24). Marriage is the most intimate of all human relationships. Of all the human relationships possible (e.g., parent-child, friend-friend, etc.), God chose marriage (husband-wife) to be the first and most foundational in his story of redemption. A man and a woman must “leave” all others and “cleave”⁵ to their mate, a faithful embrace that is paramount to all other human relationships. It is a sacrificial commitment that supremely values the good of the relationship over each individual’s needs.

This commitment is at the heart of covenant, a concept that is increasingly absent from our cultural framework for relationships. Today, marriage is commonly viewed as a contract built upon individual happiness and fulfillment, the quest for a compatible soulmate that will provide lasting satisfaction and passionate romance. In the Bible, marriage is not just a bilateral contract agreed upon between two human beings, but a sacred bond that is horizontal *and* vertical in nature, where vows are made with one another and with God. Covenant involves both intimate love and binding commitment, the necessary ingredients for a faithful, lasting marriage. In the garden of Eden, marriage was as it was intended to be—one man and one woman living in covenantal relationship with God and one another.

Sex

Marriage, by God’s design, includes sex. As sexual beings, we were created by God with something specific in mind. Ultimately, sex is about the glory of God, as are all created things (Colossians 1:16). In keeping with this comprehensive purpose, there are subordinate intentions for the gift of sex that carry out this design.

As hinted at already, sex is intended for the **consummation** of the marriage covenant. God brought Adam and Eve together and gave them to each other to be “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). Marriage begins with a public promise of exclusive commitment and is ratified by sex as the physical expression of the union of marriage.

God’s blessing of the new couple also included the command toward **procreation**. After God brought Adam and Eve together in marriage, he commanded them to bear fruit and multiply (Genesis 1:28). Procreation ensures that the earth continues to be populated with those who bear God’s image, filling the earth with his glory.

Sex in the context of marriage is also intended for **joy**.⁶ Sexual pleasure is a good gift from God, experienced most fully in the selfless giving of each spouse to the other. While physical pleasure is certainly part of God’s design, the greatest joy is found in pleasing one’s spouse. Within the marriage covenant, mutual sexual pleasure comes as a wonderful result of selfless love between husband and wife.

5 The historical and social consequences of “leaving and cleaving” in the ancient world are staggering. Comprehending these significant implications should deepen our understanding of the sacrificial nature of marital commitment. See *The Meaning of Marriage* by Tim Keller, 126–7.

6 Pleasure is often thought to be a selfish, carnal product of the fall, but this is not biblical; one simply cannot come to such conclusions after reading, for example, the Song of Solomon. cf. Proverbs 5:18–23; Ecclesiastes 9:9; 1 Corinthians 7:5.



Scripture testifies to the goodness of God's creation of humans as male and female, and the creation account displays the beauty of intimate union of a man and a woman in covenantal marriage. God's good design is carried throughout the biblical witness into the New Testament. In fact when Jesus teaches on marriage and divorce, he roots his teaching in the joining together of man and woman at the beginning of Genesis, saying "what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6). Jesus fixes his teaching on God's design found at the beginning of the Bible. Sex is a good gift from God, and like all other areas of life, our sexuality is to be submitted to God's creative purposes. As God designed it, the created order was said to be "very good," leading God to rest in the beauty and joy of his work.

FALL: DISTORTION

The garden, once solely characterized by unity, fellowship, and intimate love, was shattered by self-seeking, shame, and struggle for power. The deadly intrusion of sin through humanity's rebellion tainted every part of God's good creation, including human sexuality. In Genesis 3, we come face-to-face with the heartbreaking distortion of God's design for sexuality.

Self-Seeking

God placed Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden with all the pleasures they could imagine (Genesis 2:8–9, 16). They possessed all they needed for a full, satisfying life together. There was just one simple rule for life in the garden: don't eat from one tree. That's it. The rest of the garden was theirs to enjoy and to keep.

But it wasn't enough—or so they were told. The crafty serpent persuaded them to take the fruit from the forbidden tree. He dismissed God's prohibition (and its consequences) and promised God-like knowledge and power. He told the most terrible lie ever told: you can be like God (Genesis 3:1–5). Within that false promise is the root of all idolatry: to abandon our place as creatures and make something else our god, be it ourselves, others around us, or some other created thing. And this is what Adam and Eve did.

They believed the lie. They were *already* like God, created in his image to display his glory, but their disobedience betrayed that trust. The whole of God's creation was thrown into disorder because of their failure to carry out their task as image-bearers. The world was no longer the way it was supposed to be.

All the brokenness in this story and in our world is the result of this idolatrous exchange. Idolatry is at the heart of all sin, and its self-seeking inclinations are disastrous for our sexuality. In the garden of Genesis 3, we learn that sin distorts sexuality both through the experience of shame and the struggle for power.



Shame

Shame is a powerful feeling. It's an awareness of the gap between what I am and what I *ought to be*. It's fear of exposure, fear of judgment, fear of failure—a terrible feeling that leads to dangerous emotional and relational isolation.

While familiar to us, this sense of shame was foreign to Adam and Eve in the garden. Who they were and who they *ought to be* were one and the same. But everything changed when they exchanged God's truth for the serpent's lie. The trust that allowed for the full exposure of vulnerable intimacy had been broken. In an instant, Adam and Eve were self-conscious about their naked bodies and felt the need to hide from one another and from God (Genesis 3:7).⁷

Like Adam and Eve, we were never meant to experience the isolation that shame inflicts. We work hard to cover our imperfections. We feel shame about how our bodies look, searching for worth in how well we reflect the magazine cover instead of our Maker. We know that if others heard our thoughts or felt our desires, we would never find the acceptance we crave. Shame's self-focus stands in the way of the vulnerable, sacrificial love that is required for the intimacy for which we were made.

Power

Adam and Eve's disobedience also led them to finger-pointing and blame-shifting as neither wanted to own the consequences of their rebellion. Now, rather than having a harmonious relationship with God and each other, a struggle for power would define the relationship between men and women, each in a unique way.

God spelled out sin's consequences in Genesis 3. The serpent was cursed above all living things, and as God's enemy in the world, his eventual defeat would be certain and final. The woman will now suffer pain in childbearing. The man will now struggle to provide food from the ground, the very soil of his existence. Instead of harmony between humanity and the physical world, there is now pain, suffering, and death (Genesis 3:14–19).

But sin would affect more than just their physicality; Adam and Eve's relationship would be strained by sin, too. There would now be an ongoing struggle for power in their relationship. Instead of a relationship characterized by mutual upbuilding through service and sacrifice, there will be a constant struggle for power.

This struggle for power is no stranger to us today. Men seeking to assert power over women in a domineering way, regretfully, is the story of most societies. Power struggles in marriages and intimate relationships between men and women is often the norm, regardless of our attempts to build a just and equal society.

⁷ Some explanations for sexual shame point primarily to repressive thinking, intolerance, social constraints, or the lack of freedom for sexual expression on our own terms. Indeed, these realities are commonly internalized as shame and drive people into relational isolation or to exaggerated public displays of sexual promiscuity. We believe the remedy is not found in abandoning design, but rather in coming into alignment with it. Freedom and acceptance are ultimately found in the cross of Christ.



Beyond the Garden

What began in Eden marked human existence from that day forth: God's design for sexuality was stripped of its foundational covenant-keeping love and turned inward, leading to both the experience of shame and struggles for power. The idolatrous exchange in the garden—trading the Creator for created things—is at the core of our sexual brokenness.

One way this idolatry continues to surface is in the disordering of our affections,⁸ often referred to as “lust” by the writers of the New Testament (Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–5). More than mere sexual attraction, lust is an act of the will that seeks exclusively to fulfill one's own sexual desires. It is a serious condition of the heart that Jesus equates to adultery (Matthew 5:28).

In Romans 1, Paul provides clear theological reflection on how our distorted sexual affections and behavior are a demonstration of idolatry. Paul paints a picture of humanity abandoning God as the rightful ruler and creator, and instead turning to themselves as the supreme authority for life and conduct. The language of “exchange” is used three times in vv. 22–27, echoing the rebellion in the garden and extending it to all instances of sin, most notably sexual misconduct of any kind (vv. 24–25).

He illustrates such distortions by pointing to same-sex sexual behavior as an expression of this idolatrous exchange. While certainly part of a broader category of misconduct,⁹ same-sex sexual behavior is a specific example of the disordering of God's design for sex between one man and one woman in covenant marriage.

This shows that homosexual behavior is sinful, but should not be subject to greater disapproval or more severe judgment than heterosexual misconduct, or even non-sexual sins like pride or gluttony. Even so, we must be clear concerning its prohibition in Scripture, especially given the pressures the church faces to make accommodation in belief and practice. It is a mark of the universal fallenness in which we all share, and Paul correlates it with idolatry of the highest order.¹⁰

Indeed, we all experience sexual brokenness in some form or another. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul exhorted the church to flee *all* sexual immorality, as it destroys the body and robs God of the glory that is due him in the sexual union of a husband and wife (1 Corinthians 6:18–20). It is God's will for us to abstain from any form of sexual activity outside of marriage (1 Thessalonians 4:3) so that we can preserve the honor of this exclusive union and its physical expression in sex.

But sexual distortion can also creep into the marriage bed. There is no room for sexual pressure or abuse in marriage since the two now become one, mutually serving the other. By the same logic, Paul teaches against sexual abstinence in marriage, since lack of sexual fulfillment may hinder the fight against temptation (1 Corinthians 7:4–5). Abstinence in marriage is only appropriate when mutually agreed upon for a temporary season.

⁸ Job 31:1; Psalm 119:9–10, 37; Proverbs 4:23; Matthew 5:28; Mark 7:20–23; Galatians 5:19; James 1:14–15; 1 Peter 2:11; 1 John 2:16.

⁹ cf. Romans 1:28–32.

¹⁰ Sprinkle, Preston M., *Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?: 21 Conversations from a Historically Christian View*. First ed. Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2023. pp. 87–132.



In Our World

Echoing the witness of Scripture, the distortion of sexuality is easily observable in the world around us, which includes the church. As an institution, marriage has been redefined by the social acceptance of cohabitation, the normalization of no-fault divorce, and the legalization of same-sex unions. These have contributed to the deterioration of the family as God designed it. Gender confusion is also a complex issue, as many men and women have lost the biblical distinctiveness of humanity created in God's image as male and female.

We have allowed sex to become a profitable commodity in our society, promoting an even further, and, sometimes lethal, distortion of our God-given sexuality. Media is increasingly more sexually explicit and widely available, and we're unphased by commercials or advertisements that promise sexual promiscuity in exchange for product consumption. The boundaries of television, film, and literature are constantly stretched to boost the bottom line, and the adult entertainment industry is one of the most lucrative in business. As native technology users, our impressionable children and adolescents are at greatest risk, with 24/7 access to explicit pornographic material that is eroding sexual intimacy and at times bringing an end to the marriage itself.

Tragically, there are also thousands of victims of sex trafficking in the US who are literally losing their lives for the profit of others.

In short, the idolatry of Genesis 3 continues to play out in the distortion of our design for human sexuality. Our relationships, desires, behaviors, societies, and churches are all affected; we feel it in the world around us. It is difficult not to despair in the face of such brokenness, or to give in to these distortions that so powerfully pull at us all. And indeed, if the story ended here, the situation would be hopeless, and at most, this compelling picture of Eden would be a cute fairy tale to tell children before they actually encounter the world. But God in his mercy decided to write another chapter.

REDEMPTION: DEVOTION

Our use of God's gift of sex is not as it should be, but needs to be redeemed and healed. Scripture reveals to us the form of that redemption, and there are glimpses of God's plan before we leave the garden. It is in this chapter of the biblical story that we see our sexuality redeemed for devotion to God.

Covered

Adam and Eve heard the verdict from God and were expelled from the garden to begin life outside of Eden (Genesis 3:23–24). But before the man and woman could take a step toward their new world, God atoned for their sin by killing an animal, providing the skins as covering for their nakedness (Genesis 3:21). The shame and guilt of sin would need to be dealt with if humanity could be in relationship with God, and he makes the way possible.

Throughout the Old Testament, God provided a cover for sins in the form of the levitical sacrificial system, where offerings would be given to atone for the sin and guilt of God's people. This religious system was insufficient to fully remove sin (Hebrews 10:1–4). There had to be a better way, a lasting solution that would close the gap between their current relationship with God and the one for which they were made.



There is a better Way. God has made redemption possible through the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ.¹¹ He wrote himself into humanity's story and did for us what we couldn't do for ourselves: take away sin and bring life out of death. Where Adam and Eve were disobedient to God's word, Jesus was perfectly submissive, living life exactly as God intended it. By faith, his life, death, and resurrection can be ours. There is hope of reclaiming God's design for life in the world, even when it comes to our sexuality.

Washed

If anyone needed this good news, it was the floundering church in Corinth mentioned earlier. This was a city enslaved to the kinds of sin—including sexual brokenness—that characterized those outside the kingdom of God.

*Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: No sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, or males who have sex with males, no thieves, greedy people, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom. **And some of you used to be like this.** But you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

1 Corinthians 6:9–11

The Corinthians *were* outside God's kingdom before the blood of Jesus washed away their sin. He took it to the cross, the ultimate symbol of shame and guilt in the first century. The cross of Christ is now the symbol of freedom and hope for all Christians, the place where God's love, justice, mercy, and grace come together for our good and God's glory. This is the heart of the gospel message.

Justified

Redemption from sexual brokenness is rooted in a profound, hopeful truth: The Christian has been remade (Galatians 2:20). We have new life in Christ. We are no longer bound to our distorted desires, guilty before a holy God. We are slaves to Christ, declared “not guilty” in his perfection (Romans 6:17–18). Our identity is now rooted in the person and work of Jesus (Romans 6:5–11).

This has massive implications for our sexuality. We are no longer defined primarily by our sexual brokenness, but by new life in a risen Redeemer. We are pure and blameless before God, secure in the perfect obedience of Christ and sealed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We need not be defined by past failures or present struggles, but can find our identity in Christ's victory at the cross. Victims of sexual abuse need not be overcome by shame, but can find comfort in the innocence of their Savior.

Our identity is no longer the sum of our desires, actions, biological inclinations, or social standing. We have been renamed by God in Christ. If the Christian faith says anything, it proclaims that our identities can be changed through the gospel of grace. The goal of the Christian life is not healthy heterosexuality, but complete union with Jesus.

¹¹ Romans 3:24; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14; 1 Peter 1:18–19



Sanctified

Still, the battle for faithful devotion remains. The cross has secured victory over sin and death, but the war against sin rages on because we live in the “already–not yet” reality of God’s kingdom on earth. We are a redeemed people, set apart for God’s purposes, but not yet perfect and complete (Hebrews 10:14). The Corinthian church was “exhibit A” for this paradox of the faith community.

For those bound in sexual sin, freedom is possible. God accepts all who cry to him in confession and repentance, turning away from sin and toward him in faith. Grace is available for the wife that has been unfaithful, the teen ashamed of his porn addiction, and the man struggling with same-sex behavior. Freedom from sin is possible. Yet, this freedom does not come without effort. It comes as our loves and desires are re-ordered, practicing the spiritual disciplines in the context of loving relationships in the family of God.

For those wounded by sexual sin, healing is possible. Restoration may seem quite far off in the distance for the victim of sexual assault, abuse, addiction, or abandonment. But there is hope in the cleansing work of Christ’s blood to redeem feelings of brokenness and shame. This journey toward healing may include the safety of an ongoing counseling relationship and other trusted advocates, but restored joy and wholeness in Jesus are possible, even on the path toward full redemption.

Sacrifice

The paradox of the gospel lies in the fact that it is through our sacrifice and suffering that we find the deepest joy and freedom in God’s kingdom. Jesus lived a life completely submitted to his Father’s will, seeking to serve others rather than to be served. This is the life he calls us to and has enabled us to live (Philippians 2:5–11). In this life we will find the fullest satisfaction, even in the midst of our sexual brokenness.

One way Paul describes this gospel message is by pointing to covenant marriage as a picture of Jesus’ sacrificial love for his bride, the church. God’s redemption of human sexuality is beautifully displayed in rightly ordered marriage, where it is imperative that both husbands and wives each give up their own desires to sacrificially love and respect one another (Ephesians 5:22–33). By Jesus’ sacrifice, the curse of sin in Genesis 3 can be reversed, replacing the struggle for power with harmony, as husbands and wives embrace God’s design for marriage through the acceptance of the gospel.

However, marriage is not the only picture of the gospel, and therefore neither is it inevitable for all Christians.¹² The gospel also brings life and meaning to those outside of marriage. The gospel is portrayed in the celibate life, when single or same-sex attracted Christians prioritize their identity in Christ over their sexual desires. While these desires may not go away, the celibate life can be a powerful witness to Jesus’ call to follow him above all else. In many ways, single and same-sex attracted Christians are uniquely gifted to serve God’s church as they demonstrate the sufficiency of Christ in their faithful obedience.

While devotion to Christ always involves sacrifice, we should never suffer alone. For single or same-sex attracted Christians, sacrifice often includes feelings of confusion, betrayal, loneliness, and questioning God’s presence or goodness.

¹² In fact, the church has often made marriage and the family the objects of idolatry rather than pictures of the gospel.



The local church ought to be a place where these feelings can be named and known, both in the context of marriage and singleness. There should be an awareness that all of us, married and single, are sexual beings who struggle to embrace and embody God's good design. We desperately need the family of God to be a place where we all belong to one another as full-fledged members, esteemed in our differences. It has not always been so, but the unique witness and faith of single and same-sex attracted Christians in the church should be unleashed, not muted. These brothers and sisters have much to teach us about faith, hope, and love.

The gospel of Jesus Christ offers hope for redemption from distorted sexuality and makes new life possible. For Christians and their sexuality, this life includes deep, loving, non-sexual companionship for those who are not married, as well as faithful commitment within the sexual union of monogamous marriage. Marriage acts as a sign of God's covenantal love with humanity and the union between Christ and his church, which declares the reality that will be brought to completion when Christ returns.

NEW CREATION: DELIVERANCE

The empty tomb gives us a window into the final chapter of God's redemptive story as the foundation of Christian hope. The drama of Scripture concludes with a promise of deliverance from the curse of our rebellion, where the created order is restored and all things are made new.

Resurrected

Jesus' bodily resurrection changes everything. If Jesus hadn't been raised from the dead, then sin and death would still reign. There would be no freedom from sin or healing from its effects if Jesus remained in the tomb. Indeed, the hope of a changed life today is rooted in the historical reality of the resurrection.

But Jesus' bodily resurrection does even more. It is also the basis of our hope for full redemption at Christ's future return, offering a foretaste of what believers will receive in the new creation: new bodies made for glory. The grace that made redemption possible covers our shame, washes away guilt, sanctifies us for God, and justifies us by faith. This grace is also our hope of glory.

Restored

Furthermore, all of the created order awaits this hope, when Jesus' return brings restoration of all things (Romans 8:18–24). Sin will finally be eradicated, realigning all relationships with the design set forth in the garden. Humanity's protective and productive relationship with the physical world will be fully restored, with no more pain or suffering in work. Our fellowship with God will be perfectly intimate, no longer characterized by idolatry or guilt, but by whole-hearted worship and gratitude.

Human relationships will be what they once were in the garden. There will be no tears, heartache, or pain, but only the sweet fellowship of the redeemed sharing together in the glory of the Lord (Revelation 21:4)! Our distorted affections will be made right. Dysfunction, loneliness, unfaithfulness, lust, power struggles—all such sin and its disastrous consequences will be done away with for good. The Enemy at the heart of this mess will finally be destroyed.



But full restoration also includes judgment for sin. God's desire is for all people to turn to him in repentance and faith, but not all will choose this path. Those who do not choose God will face his judgment: eternal separation from their Maker. We were never meant for life apart from our Creator, but those who choose to worship the created over Creator—continuing the idolatry of Genesis 3—will experience this eternal death.

Renewed

The book of Revelation paints a picture of a new heaven and earth where all of creation is restored. It also gives us a surprising window into the future of marriage when God's kingdom is fully established. The church is prepared as a bride (Revelation 19:6–10), and there will be great rejoicing at the final and perfect reconciliation between Jesus and his beloved. This is the moment which the whole Bible is leading up to, that blessed day when Jesus and his bride enjoy perfect intimacy.

Consequently, marriage in the new creation will be between God and his bride alone since the human metaphor is no longer needed; it will exist in its fullness (Matthew 22:29–30). This future reality should help us for the present, granting us a healthy framework for understanding human sexuality and its purposeful expression today. In the new creation, our sexuality is transposed to reflect the intimacy of Christ and his bride, the church.

We have been renamed in Jesus, granted a new identity that is found in him as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. We are part of a community wed to Christ, whether married or single, awaiting the consummation of a covenantal love that has been pursuing broken and sinful humanity from the beginning. In this future reality where God's people are reunited with their Creator, the intimacy and relationship that we broke in the garden will be finally restored, forever.



HOW DO WE LIVE OUT GOD'S DESIGN?

God has made this life possible by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He has also given us the Holy Spirit, whose power and presence is the source for faithful obedience in the fight against sin. And we have also been given the body of Christ, a new family, for support and encouragement along the journey of faith. These gifts of God are our only hope for integrity and wholeness in a world where sexual norms and ethics are constantly changing.

BY THE GRACE OF GOD

One of the beautiful realities of the Christian faith is that the gospel of grace places us all on level footing before a holy God. None of us stand before God on our own merit. We stand on the righteousness of Christ, and not our own. The Christian life is a work of grace from beginning to end, and this includes our growth in sexual integrity. Our freedom from sexual sin and healing of its consequences is a gradual work of righteousness. It is one part of our larger spiritual formation whereby God transforms our hearts, motives, desires, and dreams, all by his grace.

Transformation

“Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2). This work is not just external, only involving our behavior. Rather, it is a transformation of the inner self. God is just as concerned with the state of our hearts and minds as he is with our conduct. Indeed, we were designed for wholeness of character and conduct, a seamless knitting together of head, heart, and hands.

By grace through faith, God grants his people a new heart that is capable of the integral life (Ezekiel 36:26). Our freedom from sexual sin is grounded in this foundational truth. If this isn't our starting place for living out God's design for sexuality, we will veer into a dangerous legalism that is not pleasing to God. Christian maturity, including sexual healing and wholeness, is a work of God.

Effort

But growth in grace is really a cooperative effort. God is at work in our hearts to change us, but we must be diligent to reject the patterns of this world and work hard at faithful obedience. As Dallas Willard has put it, “Grace is opposed to earning, not to effort.”¹³ The notion that God has done it all and we are mere consumers of his grace will most certainly lead to spiritual stagnation, apathy, and even license. If sexual sin is going to be combated in fruitful and effective ways, grace and effort must work hand in hand.

¹³ *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship*, 34.



Progress

The measuring stick for growth in the Christian life is not perfection, but progress. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus provided the perfection needed to pay for sin. We will not be perfect this side of Christ's return, but that doesn't mean there shouldn't be noticeable maturity in faith and obedience—even if our starting points and our growth rates are different.

THROUGH THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Fortunately, we're not left to fight in our own strength. God's grace gives us a new heart, but we still battle with sin because our distorted desires remain. God has filled us with his Spirit—the Spirit of truth—as a Helper for the journey of faith (John 14:16–17). When we walk by God's Spirit, we have the necessary power to say “no” to sexual sin and “yes” to godly living (Galatians 5:16–26).

Revealing Sin

The Spirit helps us live out God's design for sexuality. One of his primary tasks in the world is to reveal sin and convict the world of the need for salvation from judgment. “When he comes, he will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment...” (John 16:8). We often aren't growing in maturity because we are blinded to the sinfulness of our desires and deeds (1 Corinthians 3). The Spirit names our sin and convinces us of our guilt, which should lead us to confession and repentance.

Producing Fruit

The Holy Spirit not only reveals our sin and helps us fight it, but he produces in us the fruit that is in keeping with those that have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:22–24). We know that these attributes are integral to our sexuality as God designed it—love, faithfulness, and self-control, in particular—and the Spirit is at work in the hearts of God's children to produce such fruit.



WITH THE HELP OF COMMUNITY

This walk with the Spirit, essential to living out God's good design, was never meant to be done alone. When it comes to sexual sin, freedom and healing are impossible apart from the love, support, and encouragement of a faith community. In fact, the forgiveness accomplished by Christ at the cross is often experienced most powerfully when appropriated by the church—the hands and feet of Jesus.

Compassion

If the church is going to help one another grow into maturity, it must do so with loving compassion. The sensitive nature of sexual brokenness makes vulnerability very difficult, so we must be quick to create an open environment that allows for honest sharing. While we are committed to proclaiming the truth of Scripture, it must be communicated in the love of Christ and the safety of a trusted community.

Confession

One way this sharing takes place is through confession of sin. Confession is at the heart of the gospel of grace and is the first step toward repentance and faithful obedience. Only when we see our sin as offensive to a holy God can we really understand the forgiveness that we have in the blood of Jesus.

Regular confession of sin provides the power for freedom and healing from sexual sin. The burden of guilt and the shackles of shame can be lifted—not completely, but powerfully—through the practice of regular confession of sin. Whether it's a close friend, family member, or someone in your church community, it should be a trusted brother or sister in Christ who is committed to your spiritual vitality. This could also be accomplished in a pastoral or professional counseling relationship.

Commitment

Confession of sin should lead to repentance, which is a turning from sin toward God. The faith community must be committed to encouraging one another toward the obedience of faith that Christ's death and resurrection has made possible. But living out God's design for sexuality must be a commitment that we make, for ourselves and for one another, in the way of grace and truth.

SUMMARY

We are convinced that Scripture provides us with God's design for flourishing human sexuality. Like the Corinthian church of the first century, we must stay tethered to the bedrock truths of Scripture, empowered by the gospel of grace to live out God's design in a world with ever-changing sexual norms. Indeed, brokenness is in, through, and all around us, but Jesus' death and resurrection makes a better way possible. We wait with hopeful anticipation for the day when Christ's return sets all things right again, and our sexuality finally accomplishes perfectly what it now reflects so dimly: the glory of God and the good of his people.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

For those interested in further exploration, we hope you find these resources helpful. Each book includes the publisher's summary to give you an idea of the book's purpose and content.

If there is a book that interests you, please feel free to ask your pastor if they can provide a copy. The Christ Community pastoral staff wants to help however we can. If you have questions about a book or article that you've come across, connect with one of us.

BIBLICAL SEXUALITY

BOOKS

Understanding Sexual Identity, Mark Yarhouse

Today's youth struggle with difficult questions of sexual identity. How can a youth worker offer wise care and counsel on such a controversial and confusing subject? Mark Yarhouse, Director of the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity, equips youth ministers so they can faithfully navigate the topic of sexual identity in a way that is honest, compassionate, and accessible.

Redeeming Sex, Debra Hirsch

Nothing has exposed the gap between the church and the broader society quite like the cultural argument over sexuality. Relationships, identities, orientations, and even seemingly straightforward concepts such as gender have cut battle lines between the church and the world. In the fog of war and the cloud of conflict, it's increasingly hard to see our way clearly.

There is hope, however. Debra Hirsch has seen it firsthand—in meaningful lifelong relationships with LGBT friends and neighbors, in Christian fellowships and in movements that have held a concern for people created in God's image and a high view of the Bible's teaching on sexuality in constructive tension. When you consider the world from the perspective of God's kingdom mission, it turns out the smoke clears and a redemptive imagination takes root.

Start Talking to Your Kids about Sex, Julia Sadusky

This is one of the few resources focused on these issues. It is organized in a question-and-answer format, making it easy for you to begin with the topic that's most pertinent at the time. It will help you identify barriers to these conversations with a child. You'll be able to draw from concrete scripts addressing everything from responding to questions about genitalia, exploratory play, sexual abuse, and technology use. With each chapter, the content will help you grow in courage and practical knowledge.

ONLINE RESOURCES

The Gospel and Sex, Tim Keller



COMMON QUESTIONS & OUR RESPONSES

Scripture provides us with a clear design for human sexuality that is helpful for navigating the ever-changing sexual norms and ethics of our day.

A GUIDING FRAMEWORK

Our lives are messy and complicated, and difficult questions still remain. While God's design in Scripture is clear, that does not mean we find on its pages the concrete answers for all our concerns.

We certainly do not claim to have all the answers but hope to provide direction for those who are eager to follow Jesus. It's not our aim to be definitive where Scripture is not, but rather to offer humble responses we trust are graced with spiritual wisdom, tethered to the Scriptures, and relevant for a variety of experiences.

On the following pages you will find **questions and responses** as well as **resources** for each topic provided by our pastoral team on various topics related to sexuality today. If you have questions that you do not find listed here, or you would like to discuss one of these responses in greater depth, please don't hesitate to contact a Christ Community pastor and schedule a time for dialogue.

While we hope you find this resource useful, we know that it's not exhaustive. We want to keep the lines of communication open for discussion.

There are also **resources** listed for further engagement. We have tried to gather some of the best work on various topics (books, articles, blogs, etc.), as many will want to continue their exploration. Please do not interpret inclusion on these lists as a wholesale endorsement of authors and/or their positions. We want to provide thoughtful conversation partners for further engagement and hope this is a good start.

QUESTION AND RESPONSES WITH RESOURCES

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CHURCH CARE

» What safety measures are in place to protect our children from sexual misconduct?

We take the safety of our children very seriously and have measures in place to protect them from various kinds of harm, both sexual and otherwise.

In addition to physical boundaries in place at each of our campuses, we require anyone regularly working with children to engage in a thorough application process, including a criminal background and reference check. We also ensure that each volunteer and staff person working with children has completed Child Protection Training and adheres to the Child/Youth Protection Policy. This document seeks to clearly define sexual abuse, incident reporting, supervision procedures, and other important guidelines that serve to protect our children and nurture their growth. Every staff person is also required to go through Sexual Harassment Training.

All staff members have access to Red Flag Reporting. Red Flag Reporting is a place for anonymous reporting of unethical behavior, safety concerns, or theft, and creates space for a formal investigation.

While we have worked hard to create a safe place for our children, we understand that we live in a broken world that is cruel and unpredictable. We will continue to strive toward sound policies and procedures that will make Christ Community a place for human flourishing, especially for the most vulnerable among us. If you have more questions on these topics, please seek out a pastor or one of our staff members.

» What would the church do if a leader or staff person was found in sexual sin?

In the case of any sexual misconduct, whether by a volunteer or staff person, Christ Community will proceed, by God's grace, with discernment and integrity. There may be times in a faith community when various kinds of discipline is the most loving course of action for all (1 Corinthians 5:1–13). The elder leadership, along with the pastoral staff, value your support and prayers for wisdom as they seek to steward those God has entrusted to their care.

If you have questions about our employment policies or abuse investigation and reporting procedures, contact the Multisite Office. Our human resources team will gladly discuss any questions you have.

» Is the church required to perform same-sex weddings?

The United States' constitutional commitment to religious freedom includes the broad understanding of separation between church and state. Title VII ensures local churches, as religious organizations (a protected class), to be free from government interference or mandated to answer this question. While some religious organizations will choose to perform same-sex wedding ceremonies, Christ Community will not, based on our biblical and moral conviction that God's design for marriage embraces only a one man and one woman union.



COHABITATION

» Is living together a good test for future compatibility?

Living together before marriage is likely not a good indicator for future success in marriage. You may have been told that living together for a time before marriage will give a good insight into whether or not marriage will work for a couple.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this is severely misguided advice.

Why is that the case? As the common argument goes, “You wouldn’t buy a car without test driving it first, right?” Many want to simulate marriage with their partner before entering into such a huge, life-altering commitment. The problem with this common analogy is that marriage is not a purchase or even the ratification of a “natural fit;” marriage is a choice. It’s a decision to forsake all others and elevate one’s spouse above oneself every day for a lifetime. Cohabitation as a “test drive” for marriage reveals the deeper myth that some external force determines the success or failure of a marriage. Marriage is successful when both spouses choose for it to be so.

Even more, the covenant commitment that is absent for the cohabiting couple is actually the very foundation needed for an enduring marriage, making the “test drive” incomplete, at best, and predisposed to failure, at worst. We have seen God’s design for marriage in Scripture, and at the heart of the relationship is covenant. Without the loving promises of future commitment, all relationships stand on shaky ground. Cohabitation conditions our hearts to relate apart from this kind of sacrificial commitment.

The surest way to divorce-proof your marriage is to center it on the person and work of Jesus Christ. When a couple reflects Christ’s interaction with the church, through forgiveness, submission, and self-sacrificial love (Ephesians 5:22–33), they will find themselves equipped for a marriage that lasts a lifetime.

» Is it okay to live together if we commit to sexual purity?

If a couple is truly committed to sexual purity and yet chooses to live together, they are making a terribly unwise decision. A commitment to such a grand thing as sexual purity in the context of a pre-marriage relationship ought to be met with every measure to enable its success. A mark of Christian maturity is a full realization of one’s predisposition to sin and how destructive that sin is. Joseph had a good grasp on both, which led him to run from sexual temptation—at great cost to himself (Genesis 39).

More than likely, something is going on beneath the surface of this question. If you find yourself or someone you know asking this question, consider what might be under the waterline. Is there a need for attachment? What fulfillment is being sought in the shared living space? Searching for these needs in cohabitation will only lead to a profound letdown, in addition to the likely broken commitment to sexual purity.

¹⁴ Research over the past several decades has actually demonstrated the opposite. Marriages that were preceded by cohabitation have been shown to be as much as 33% more likely to end in divorce. Recent studies claim different results, namely that marital success is more dependent on when individuals marry (linking positive results to couples married later in life) than whether or not they lived together before marriage. This same research does not claim that cohabitation improves a couple’s odds for marriage, though, and actually outlines significant downsides (inability to leave a bad relationship, issues related to child-rearing, etc.). We have ample reasons to distrust such an arrangement before marriage.



Some are faced with this question pragmatically. Perhaps individuals live in separate cities, and one is moving to the area of the other shortly before their wedding. Do they really need to live apart for those months? Maybe the couple's financial reality presents cohabitation as the most sensible way to live near each other. In response, this couple should ask themselves how far they're willing to go for the sake of their future marriage.

Given both the statistics and the heightened temptation to step outside of God's design, we strongly discourage living together before marriage.

» **If the Bible doesn't specifically condemn cohabitation, why can't we live together?**

The Bible, though unchanging in its truth and relevance, is nonetheless a culturally situated book. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, its authors took the character of God, revealed in the Law and the person of Jesus Christ, and applied it to contemporary issues. Paul's conversation on whether or not a Christian should eat food sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8, 10) was an extremely important teaching for his letter's audience, if not directly applicable to most who will read this paper.

Cohabitation is a similar topic, in that this paper's cultural situation demands a biblical response. But none of the cultural norms with which Scripture deals included cohabitation as a normal living arrangement for several reasons: First, they lived in a communal society where it was never about two individuals or their convenience, rather it was about the family and the broader community flourishing. Second, they lived in an honor/shame society and realized living together would compromise their honor as well as bring shame to the broader family. Third, marriage and weddings carried a greater weight and significance in their community, which were more sacred and communal turning points in the lives of people not only before the couple, but before the community and God. Simply put, because of their cultural norms, living together wasn't even a viable possibility for them to consider. Therefore, it is unreasonable to expect Scripture to answer it directly.

What we can know from Scripture is God's design for marriage and sexuality (as outlined in the theological reflection above). From here, we can extrapolate God's design for cohabitation. The Bible's silence on this specific topic does not therefore make it unimportant. The contrary is true: It is immensely important that we seek to deal with cohabitation inside of God's grander design for marriage and sexuality. Our pastors would welcome a conversation if you have more questions about cohabitation—please contact any one of them to set a time for a discussion.



DIVORCE

» What does the Bible say about divorce?

Before approaching the topic of divorce, let's be reminded of the foundation for marriage. The first chapter of the Four Chapter Story establishes that marriage is first and foremost part of God's good creation (see page 6). In the first marriage in Genesis 2, God brings together Adam and Eve, and in that act he establishes his continuing design for marriage: It is between one man and one woman, and the man and woman become "one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). In other words, marriage is a covenant: It is a sacred relationship between a man and a woman and with God. The marriage covenant is not simply a contract, instead it is a binding, lasting, intimate commitment of love that is both horizontal and vertical. Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, Scripture uniformly harkens back to God's design for marriage in Genesis 2.

Jesus' teaching on divorce in each of the gospel accounts (Mark 10:2–12; Matthew 5:31–32; Matthew 19:3–12; Luke 16:18) is clear in affirming God's design in Genesis 2. In short, Jesus states that divorce is a violation of God's design for marriage. Jesus' words in the gospels prohibiting divorce are established, supported, and consistent with the entire witness of Scripture. In Malachi 2:14–16, marriage is described as a covenant that is symbolic between God and his people. God hates divorce because faithfulness to the marital covenant and faithfulness to the covenant with God and his people are held in unison. Likewise, in Ephesians 5:25, marriage is also given as a symbol between Christ and his Church. Divorce dissolves the unity and fidelity of the marital covenant, which in a mysterious way is a covenant that intimately reflects the covenant love expressed by Christ to his bride (a covenant to which Jesus has always been and will always be faithful).

With that said, there are two exceptions to the prohibition against divorce within the New Testament. The Scriptures reveal circumstances where divorce may be permissible. In Matthew 19:3–12, Jesus offers one admissible reason for divorce: sexual immorality. Sexual immorality (Greek *pornea*) is rightly understood to be a variety of sexually immoral behaviors. This could include such things as sexual infidelity and addiction to pornography.

In 1 Corinthians 7:15, Paul cites "separation," or "abandonment," as grounds for divorce. While Paul does convey physical separation in 1 Corinthians 7:15, his word choice is not limited to physical separation alone. One does not have to be a physical distance away from their spouse to abandon their spouse; abandonment may include extreme circumstances such as abuse (emotional, physical, sexual, etc.), addiction, neglect, and possibly others.

While these examples may offer permission for divorce, neither mandate it. Just because divorce is biblically permissible, it does not mean the marriage covenant should be broken. In a fragmented world plagued by sin, divorce happens. But God's clear desire is that couples remain committed to the marriage covenant. Through his redemptive love, God can heal deep wounds, mend broken marital vows, and reconcile individuals to himself and then couples to each other.



Although God's kingdom is marked by reconciliation and redemption, it is possible a marriage could be at a destructive degree such that efforts to keep a couple together may exacerbate the situation and perhaps even amplify harm within the family. In addition to God's command for marital fidelity, he also deeply desires that the vulnerable be cared for and protected. If you find that you are in an abusive relationship, it is vital that you seek help immediately. While God does hate divorce, he also hates abuse.

If you are considering divorce, please seek out a pastor. As much as the section above tries to clarify our biblical perspective on divorce, each relationship comes with its own uniqueness and can only be handled appropriately when taken case by case. When considering such a life altering decision, it's important to seek pastoral counsel. If you and your spouse are not already seeing a counselor, your pastor can direct you to a marriage counselor or individual counseling and provide financial assistance for those sessions if needed. After reaching out to a pastor and marriage counselor, entering into a period of separation may offer a time of respite and a place of safety to recover mental and emotional stability. Also, separation can be a time to work on personal issues with the long-term hope of reconciliation.



GENDER

» What does the Bible say about being male and female?

The Bible says quite a bit about being male and female, a topic that we discuss at length in our paper *Exploring God's Design for Male and Female Flourishing in the Church*.

We begin by contending that maleness and femaleness are not incidental but essential to our humanness:

God in his infinite creativity and glorious love of unity and diversity did not just create generic, undifferentiated humanity. He created an embodied pair—male and female—irreducibly human and beautifully distinct. Created in God's own image, women and men together reflect the joyful unity and diversity of God's own triune life. As image-bearers, men and women are irrevocably equal in their ontology, humanity, dignity, and worth. Together women and men are created for interdependent union, not independent autonomy. Each one offers unique contributions to God's mission.

The above paragraph contains a variety of themes related to male and female that we spend the rest of the paper exploring across the span of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

We are often guilty of reducing our maleness and femaleness to various stereotypical gender roles, but we would do well to reject such narrow thinking. Certainly the “nurturing” of our social situation has played a role in forming various gender role expectations, but this changes over time. For example, in the early 20th century, pink was recommended as a masculine color while blue was recommended as a feminine color. In other words, it was the complete opposite of current cultural thinking.

Reducing our maleness and femaleness to mere gender roles also runs the risk of keeping us from properly emphasizing that males and females are *more alike than different*. Yes, there are real differences between men and women (as Preston Sprinkle¹⁵ writes, “Our interpretations of sex and sexed bodies might be socially constructed, but sex itself is not socially constructed.”¹⁶), but a human experience is still a *human* experience, as opposed to a squirrel, seagull, squid, or spider experience.

Finally, broadening and deepening our thinking biblically about what it means to be male and female will better ground and prepare us to respond with thoughtful nuance to a variety of situations. For instance, we can take a deep breath and relax when our son or daughter engages in imaginative play that is stereotypically of the other gender (this curiosity is very normal, especially up into early elementary school, and we know that we shouldn't make too much of gender roles stereotypes anyway). And we can grow in our ability to love transgender people well, remembering that as human beings, we are all more alike than different, and there are some

15 Preston Sprinkle is Founder and President of The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender, a collaboration of Christian pastors, leaders, and theologians who aspire to be the Church's most trusted source of theologically sound teaching and practical guidance on questions related to sexuality and gender.

16 Sprinkle, *Embodied*, page 37.



people who legitimately experience a deep incongruence between their biological sex and their gender identity (see the next question for a definition of terms).

If you are struggling with any issue regarding gender, please reach out to one of our pastors.

» **Can you help me understand some of the terminology in this conversation?**

Clear definitions are helpful—words matter! However, people matter more. In fact, the goal of growing in our understanding of key terminology should always be to increase our effectiveness in living out the law of Jesus Christ: love. In other words, let us never forget that these terms describe the experiences of actual *people*—divine image-bearers who are loved by God.

Mark Yarhouse¹⁷ has compiled simple and helpful definitions in his book *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. Included here is a sampling, but refer to Yarhouse, pages 16–21 for more.

Biological sex: As male or female (typically with reference to chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, and internal reproductive anatomy and external genitalia).

Gender: The psychological, social and cultural aspects of being male and female.

Gender identity: How you experience yourself (or think of yourself) as male or female, including how masculine or feminine a person feels.

Gender dysphoria: The experience of distress associated with the incongruence wherein one's psychological and emotional gender identity does not match one's biological sex.

Transgender: An umbrella term for the many ways in which people might experience and/or present or express their gender identities differently from people whose gender identity is congruent with their birth sex.

Genderqueer: An umbrella term for ways in which people experience their gender identity outside of or in between a male-female binary (e.g., no gender, genderfluid). Some people prefer a gender-neutral pronoun.

Intersex: A term to describe conditions in which a person is born with sex characteristics or anatomy that does not allow clear identification as male or female. The causes of an intersex condition can be chromosomal, gonadal or genital.

¹⁷ Mark A. Yarhouse, Psy.D, is a psychology professor at Wheaton College where he is also the Director of the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute.



» **If someone experiences an incongruence between their biological sex and their internal sense of self, which one determines who they are?**

This question is posed by Preston Sprinkle in his book *Embodied: Transgender Identities, the Church, and What the Bible Has to Say* and in many ways functions as the scaffolding for much of the book's content. After surveying various biblical, scientific, and philosophical material related to the question, Sprinkle humbly suggests—and we would agree—that the God-given biological sex of our bodies determines who we are. He writes:

It's also crucial to understand our gender identity—how we fit (or don't fit) into stereotypical gender roles. But if we are asking an ontological question—who are we?—I don't think gender should override sex when there is incongruence. Part of discipleship is learning to embrace our bodies as important aspects of our identity, learning to see them as gifts from God and part of how we bear his image in the world.¹⁸

However, if and when we are privileged to engage with people who experience this incongruence, we should remember to first *listen to their story with compassion*. Other people's stories are “holy ground,” and we must tread lightly. With compassion, seek to listen to what they have to say, and seek to understand why they have shared this with you. Are they looking for help? Affirmation? Just a listening ear?

If you do have an opportunity to share, *acknowledge the person's struggle with a hopeful realism*. As you understand a bit better why they have shared this with you and what they are hoping to receive, acknowledge the reality of their struggle. Point to the fact that the Bible reveals that God created male and female, and that these distinctions complement and enrich one another, allowing us to reflect God's image.

Also look for an opportunity to empathetically share that when sin entered the world, it introduced brokenness into everything. Nothing was left untouched, including our sense of who we are as men and women. Gender confusion was not God's original design, but it is a very real part of life after the fall. The struggle they face is a result of sin's pervasive impact that touches every part of creation and us as human creatures.

Then point to the hope of Jesus: Because he has entered the world as a human being, he is redeeming and will fully restore us to who we are created to be as human beings according to God's design. There will be struggle in this life—at times even massive disorientation about who we feel we are and who we were made to be. But there is hope. We can be restored. Those in Christ will—in the new heavens and new earth—feel completely at home in their bodies. There will be no more incongruence or confusion.

¹⁸ Sprinkle, *Embodied*, page 157.



» Which pronouns should Christians use for transgender people?

We are convinced that there is not a right answer to this question with committed Christians on both sides of this complex issue. We want to encourage each person to engage in this conversation with grace, patience, and compassion for those who hold other views.

Some argue against using pronouns that don't match a person's biological sex because they believe this action to be a lie, something the Bible clearly forbids. Furthermore in this vein, some contend that this action could "feed a falsehood" in the person's life, thereby causing them harm rather than loving them by telling them the truth.

Others contend that if we use pronouns that don't match a person's biological sex, we would be capitulating to a broader, destructive "radical gender ideology." In support of this argument, Preston Sprinkle writes, "The point about ideology lying behind language is a good one....There's a thin line between language and ideology. And, to be frank, some things going on with language in contemporary culture are not only worrisome but could be destructive."¹⁹

On the other side, some contend for using pronouns that a transgender person identifies with as an act of neighborly hospitality. It's not a lie, the argument goes, because gender identity is real, and matching a person's pronouns to their gender identity is an act of hospitable respect. In support of this argument, Sprinkle writes, "You are not lying if you use 'she' to describe a biological male whose gender identity is female, even if you disagree with this person's choice to identify as female. You're simply using language according to the social flexibility that language has always had."²⁰

Further, while concerns about destructive ideology are relevant, the argument would be that one could resist the pressures of gender ideology activists while still using the pronouns their transgender friend identifies with as an act of love.

Ultimately, we contend that each Christian should thoughtfully consider the arguments on both sides before determining their conscience on the matter, while keeping Romans 14:19 in mind: that we should all "pursue what promotes peace and what builds up one another."

» How do people with an intersex condition fit into this conversation, and how can I love them well?

Mark Yarhouse says that intersex is a term used "to describe conditions in which a person is born with sex characteristics or anatomy that does not allow clear identification as male or female."²¹ One of the key parts of his definition is that the word "conditions" is *plural*, meaning, there are a number of different medical conditions that are classified in the broader category of intersex. This alone should encourage us to exercise caution when discussing the category of intersex and cause us to pursue greater specificity. "What intersex condition are you referring to?" is a useful question.

¹⁹ Ibid., 205.

²⁰ Ibid., 203.

²¹ Yarhouse, *Understanding Gender Dysphoria*, page 21.



Further, we must resist the urge to leverage intersex conditions in service of any particular argument within the broader conversation about transgender people. This is, after all, because intersex conditions impact *real people*—divine image-bearers who God loves dearly. Therefore, one way we can love them well is to dignify them with the full humanity they deserve, resisting the urge to weaponize them in order to win an argument.

It is important to note that the vast majority of people “with an intersex condition are unambiguously male or female in their chromosomes and external genitalia.”²² This does, however, leave a select group of people who have rarer intersex conditions that do result in ambiguity in their biological sex. Regarding this group of people, Preston Sprinkle concludes,

...that such people — beautiful people created in God’s image and worthy of respect, value, and admiration — are a blend of the two biological sexes rather than a third sex. It may sound like I’m splitting hairs, but I think this is more than semantics. When the Bible and science talk about humans as sexed creatures, they recognize two categories of sex: male and female. Though some intersex people embody traits from both categories, there are still only two categories of sex.²³

Another way we can love people with an intersex condition well is to refrain from making assumptions about how their condition will (or will not) connect them to the broader transgender conversation and community. In fact, let’s commit to not making *any* assumptions, and instead seek to listen well to both their specific story related to their intersex condition as well as their broader life story. This commitment to listening well will hopefully set us up to show them the love of Jesus, who is eager to meet them right where they are.

RESOURCES ON GENDER

BOOKS

Embodied, Preston Sprinkle

Preston Sprinkle draws on Scripture, as well as real-life stories of individuals struggling with gender dysphoria, to help you understand the complexities and emotions of this highly relevant topic. This book fills the great need for Christians to speak into the confusing and emotionally charged questions surrounding the transgender conversation.

When Children Come Out, Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets

When a child comes out as LGBTQ+, Christian parents often find themselves navigating unfamiliar, unsettling terrain. Mark Yarhouse and Olya Zaporozhets, therapists and researchers with decades of experience, have written this book to provide perspective, insight, and the chance to learn from others who’ve shared a similar journey. Using data from studies of Christian parents of LGBTQ+ children, they deliver research-based insights and faithful wisdom that is accessible for parents, their friends, and church leaders.

²² Sprinkle, *Embodied*, page 119.

²³ *Ibid.*, 121.



Yarhouse and Zaporozhets reframe the focus away from “culture war” questions that are not helpful to families in favor of practical counsel for maintaining and deepening relationships. Parents and the church leaders who care for them will benefit from understanding key developmental considerations among teenagers and emerging adults who are navigating questions around sexual and gender identity and faith.

Love Thy Body, Nancy Pearcy

To counter the hostility toward the human body and biological facts of life driving many of today’s headline stories. Many people absorb pre-packaged media mantras on watershed moral issues without being aware of their hurtful, real-world implications. Consider:

Transgenderism: Activists detach gender from biology. Kids down to kindergarten are being taught their body is irrelevant to their authentic self. Is this affirming—or does it demean the body?

Homosexuality: Advocates disconnect sexuality from being biologically male or female. Is this liberating—or does it denigrate who we really are?

Abortion: Supporters admit that pre-born babies are human, but deny that they are persons worthy of legal protection. Does this lead to equality for women—or does it threaten the intrinsic dignity of all humans?

Hookup Culture: On campus, in Hollywood, and in the boardroom, the sexual revolution was supposed to liberate us for recreational sex. But has it really led to schizoid sex and bodies without meaning?

Emerging Gender Identities, Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky

This book offers a measured Christian response to the diverse gender identities that are being embraced by an increasing number of adolescents. Mark Yarhouse and Julia Sadusky offer an honest, scientifically informed, compassionate, and nuanced treatment for all readers who care about or work with gender-diverse youth: pastors, church leaders, parents, family members, youth workers, and counselors.

Yarhouse and Sadusky help readers distinguish between current mental health concerns, such as gender dysphoria, and the emerging gender identities that some young people turn to for a sense of identity and community. Based on the authors’ significant clinical and ministry experience, this book casts a vision for practically engaging and ministering to teens navigating diverse gender-identity concerns. It also equips readers to critically engage gender theory based on a Christian view of sex and gender.



HOMOSEXUALITY

» Does the Bible prohibit loving, monogamous relationships between same-sex partners?

There are a variety of conversations around biblical prohibitions of same-sex relationships. Many of these questions center themselves around one primary question: Does the Bible clearly prohibit consensual, loving, and committed same-sex relationships?

This question is often raised because there has been a shift toward the claim that God blesses same-sex relationships and marriages. This claim finds its roots in the assertion that same-sex prohibition passages in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, are not talking about consensual, loving, and committed same-sex relationships. That consensual same-sex relationships did not exist in the ancient world, and the biblical writers could not have been addressing this type of loving relationship. And that the biblical writers were not speaking against those with a homosexual orientation that were seeking a lifelong committed relationship, but instead were addressing same-sex relationships of different power dynamics and social status. Thus, they condemned and prohibited non-consensual sexual exploitation and abuse consisting of rape, pederasty (older men with younger boys), prostitution, master and slave relationships, and more.

Another common objection to the church's historical teaching on same-sex activity is that the biblical writers did not understand sexual orientation the way we do today. Therefore, the understanding that God does not desire any human to be alone (Genesis 2:18) and that it is better to marry than to burn with desire (1 Corinthians 7:9) suggests it is cruel to suggest, only to some, a life of celibacy and deny them the beauty of a loving marriage.

The biblical evidence and extra biblical evidence do not substantiate either of these shifts. To begin with, whenever the Bible speaks of homosexual acts, it only speaks negatively. There is a uniform voice across the Bible: The only place where sexual activity can flourish is in the context of covenant marriage between a man and a woman. Even more, when Paul writes on homosexuality in Romans 1, Paul does not use the common Greek terms used to describe pederastic relationships, language concerning slaves and slave masters, or language around active and passive partners. All of these relationships have common Greek terms he could have used, and instead, he used generic terms for men and women. Paul does not have any type of exploitation or abusive relationship in view.

Paul writes in Romans 1, "Their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. The men in the same way also left natural relations with women and were inflamed in their lust for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the appropriate penalty of their error." Paul's chosen language includes both men and women and also uses language of mutuality: "*for one another...with other men...their error.*" This kind of mutuality would not make sense in the context of an abusive sexual relationship.



The extra biblical evidence also supports the understanding that Paul had a category for adult, consensual same-sex relationships that fall under Paul's prohibition. There are examples of third-century poetry where two women are adults engaging in consensual sex. There are many works of art from the Greek era that show adult women of the same age and status engaging in homoerotic behavior. There are also several references in ancient writings to same-sex female relationships that sometimes are described with marital language around the time of the New Testament. Equally, there are novels from the first and second centuries that describe male same-sex relationships between two consenting equals. These novels, like many of ours today, would have been a reflection on life as it was then.

Preston Sprinkle writes, "...it would be historically inaccurate to say that Paul must be thinking of non consensual relationships since these were the only ones he could have known about when he wrote Romans 1." He continues,

On three occasions, Paul mentions same-sex relations (Rom. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:9–10), and on every occasion, he prohibits them. The language he uses contains no clear reference to pederasty, abuse, or non consensual relationships. Even if we take the ancient background literature at face value, we can't historically say that Paul couldn't have known about consensual same-sex sexual relationships and therefore couldn't be prohibiting them. The evidence just isn't there...there's nothing in the language of the prohibitions that limits them to non consensual relationships.

If Paul is clear in his prohibition on same-sex relationships, what about the lack of prohibition from Jesus in the Gospels on this topic? Some view this silence from Jesus as an endorsement to lifelong committed same-sex relationships. Arguments from silence lack the ability to fully persuade a shift in the biblical definition of marriage and sexual relationships. In fact, one could more reasonably argue that the lack of explicit teaching from Jesus communicated his agreement with the Old Testament's understanding of marriage and its sexual ethic. Jesus could have redefined the nature of marriage and sexual relationships, but he did not. Actually, he did the opposite: He affirmed Genesis 2 as God's design for marriage (Matthew 19:1–19). Not only that, but in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus not only affirmed the Torah's sexual ethic, but actually deepened it and raised the stakes.²⁴

From the beginning of the Old Testament through the end of the New Testament, there is a consistent and coherent sexual ethic that excludes consensual, loving, and committed same-sex relationships and homosexual behavior in all forms. It is our conviction that it is impossible to remain faithful to the biblical text and historic Christian teaching while simultaneously affirming the place for consensual, loving, and committed same sex relationships and homosexual behavior. If you have more questions about our position, please connect with your pastor. We would love to start a conversation.

²⁴ Robert Gagnon covers this in greater depth in his book, *The Bible and Homosexual Practice*, 380–395.



» Can someone be same-sex attracted and a Christian?

Yes, someone can be same-sex attracted and a Christian. Sexual identity is not a marker of whether or not someone is justified in Christ (Romans 1:30). While different sins do carry different weight in our lives, we must be careful not to elevate one sin over another when evaluating one's culpability in the eyes of God; only God is able to judge concerning matters of the heart (1 Corinthians 4:1–5). As Wesley Hill has so beautifully written, “The dynamics of human sinfulness and divine mercy and grace are the same for all of us, regardless of the particular temptations or weaknesses we face.”²⁵

This question is ultimately about identity, and it's worth backing up to understand some key distinctions related to same-sex identification. In his book *Homosexuality and the Christian*, Mark Yarhouse makes a helpful “three-tier” distinction between same-sex *attraction*, homosexual *orientation*, and gay *identity*.²⁶ One might find it helpful to conceptualize these terms on a spectrum, with *attraction*, *orientation*, *identity*, *relationships*, and *behavior* on different points along it. Such distinctions help guard against labels and nurture a listening posture that is eager to hear and understand individual stories.

Attraction isn't something that is chosen²⁷ and is primarily descriptive in nature. This is true for heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual attraction alike. Sometimes these patterns of attraction are “strong enough, durable enough, and persistent enough” that someone claims a homosexual *orientation*.²⁸ One may also be attracted to the opposite sex, in which case they might claim a bisexual orientation.

Orientation is a way of describing the nature of one's attractions, whether in amount or persistence, and is usually a private matter.

Identity, on the other hand, is more prescriptive in nature and is typically more public.²⁹ Gay identity may involve an expression of social and political solidarity with others who share similar experiences, and thus go beyond simple recognition of personal attraction or orientation. In cases of such solidarity, gay identity can lead to a rejection of biblical teaching, either in doctrine or in practice, but this is not necessarily the case.³⁰ Many gay and lesbian Christians are committed to a celibate lifestyle.

Same-sex *relationships* (public) and homoerotic *behavior* (private) are, in the eyes of many, the natural outworking of a same-sex identity. Such corresponding behavior might cause some to question whether or not someone could be a “gay Christian,” as they are conscious decisions to reject God's design for human sexuality. Still, we do well to tread lightly when evaluating one's position in Christ. Gay identification does not necessitate homoerotic behavior.

25 Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 19.

26 Yarhouse, 41–48.

27 For more conversation about what may contribute to same-sex attraction, see Yarhouse, 57–80.

28 Ibid., 41.

29 Ibid., 42. These distinctions, including gay identity, are couched in a broader treatment of sexual identity, which we commend to you as context that would enrich and extend this discussion.

30 Wesley Hill is a great example of a Christian who is same-sex attracted and embraces God's design for human sexuality.



When it comes to sexual practice, we uphold the biblical design for sex between one man and one woman in the context of covenant marriage. For someone who experiences same-sex attraction, claims a homosexual orientation, or announces a gay identity, adherence to the Christian sexual ethic is possible through celibacy or, in some cases, heterosexual marriage.

Again, we maintain that someone can be same-sex attracted and find their identity in the person of Christ. To summarize this position, we turn again to Wesley Hill as someone who embodies such an experience. He writes,

...being gay isn't the most important thing about my or any other gay person's identity. I am a *Christian* before I am anything else. My homosexuality is part of my makeup, a facet of my personality. One day, I believe, whether in this life or in the resurrection, it will fade away. But my identity as a Christian – someone incorporated into Christ's body by his Spirit – will remain.³¹

If you would like to talk about anything related to your experience as a same-sex attracted Christian, please don't hesitate to reach out to your pastor and/or a professional counselor. We love you and want to serve you however we can, realizing there is much we can learn.

» **What are the relational choices for Christians who have a homosexual orientation or who are attracted to those of the same sex?**

An excellent resource concerning this question is Wesley Hill's *Washed and Waiting*. Wesley is a gay Christian who does a marvelous job of unpacking the relational struggles of someone with a homosexual orientation who has committed to a life of celibacy as they follow Jesus. Leaning heavily on his contributions, we point to four relational avenues for the homosexual Christian:

The local church. This is one area where we, as the church, need much repentance. A common experience for same-sex attracted persons in the church is that they have a hard time opening up about their attraction. And, in many cases, after a same-sex person is vulnerable enough to share their attraction, their fear of condemnation and judgment is met with exactly that: fear and condemnation. Not only does this make for a silent struggle that is plagued by loneliness and isolation, but it also means their voices often are not truly heard.

We are committed to the local church being a place where same-sex attracted persons are unconditionally welcomed, heard, and loved. We desire to listen to their stories, seek to understand their feelings, and learn from their experiences. Loneliness is a common struggle for all Christians, whether homosexual or heterosexual, who find themselves called to a life of celibacy. The gospel makes it clear that all Christians are adopted into the family of God; this truth has important implications for how the local church should engage unmarried people.

The church should be a relational space where those with same-sex attraction are able to find acceptance, prayer, encouragement, and the love of family. No one should ever feel they have to hide; in fact, everyone in the body of Christ should discover the ways they are uniquely gifted to serve others. The church should be looking for ways to unleash the gifts of all its members.

³¹ Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting*, 22.



Spiritual friendship. Wesley Hill, who we have cited before in this section, intentionally lives with other housemates, creating a place of community in his home. Moreover, he rightly speaks to the importance of depth in our friendships. This is a relational need not just for homosexual persons, but for all people. The local church should work to nurture a community where people are known.

Celibacy. Because our convictions regarding sexual ethics are both rooted in the teaching of the Bible and the historical teaching of the church, our call to those who have enduring same-sex attraction would be to lead a celibate lifestyle. At the same time, we want to point out that wherever the Bible contains passages prohibiting homosexual behavior, soon after come words of marvelous grace. Here's one example:

Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's kingdom? Do not be deceived: No sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, or males who have sex with males, no thieves, greedy people, drunkards, verbally abusive people, or swindlers will inherit God's kingdom. And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9–11).

Like marriage, celibacy will always be filled with temptation, and the gospel will always extend more than enough grace for struggles and failures.

Mixed-orientation marriage. On occasion, same-sex attracted Christians intentionally enter into marriage with a Christian whose orientation is solely or primarily heterosexual. In other cases, a same-sex attracted man has married a same-sex attracted woman.³² Biblical marriage is between one man and one woman, and as long as this is the arrangement, with full disclosure and thoughtful prayer from both parties, such a marriage is within God's design.

Honesty concerning sexual attraction and orientation is crucial; each partner should be knowledgeable before entering a marriage relationship. While this option is certainly not the best for all, it is a possible way forward for same-sex attracted Christians committed to God's design for sex and marriage. Homoerotic behavior is always prohibited, regardless of sexual attraction or orientation.

» **How should Christians approach the legalization of same-sex unions as marriage?**

Like other important questions regarding social change and shifting cultural paradigms, the legalization of same-sex marriage requires a biblically informed, thoughtful, and gracious response.

The concept and language of same-sex marriage goes against both the teaching of Scripture on God's design for marriage and the historic position of the church. As covered above, the boundaries of the biblical definition of marriage are confined to a man and a woman entering into a covenant of marriage. The legalization of same-sex unions as marriage is, by definition, different from marriage as understood in the Bible and the historic position of the church. Thus, not all that is deemed lawful by any government is deemed moral by God.

32 We believe mixed-orientation marriage is an option for persons with same-sex attraction, though Christ Community is not promoting it as ideal or compulsory.



As Christians committed to love of God and love of neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40), we are called to love those around us and work for the good of our city (Jeremiah 29:7). Thus, a faithful Christian presence holds tightly to biblical truth and equally holds tightly to serving and loving our neighbors, even those with whom we disagree. In that serving posture, we trust our God to distinguish between our love of our neighbor and any moral condoning of their lifestyles and choices. Same-sex marriage is predominately seen as a moral good in the United States, and yet, as Christians committed to a biblically-grounded moral framework, we have good reason to disagree. Even still, we should do so with a loving and serving posture, seeking to winsomely represent Christ to a world in need of him.

» **I received a wedding invitation to a same-sex wedding. How do I respond to the invitation? Should I attend the wedding?**

Before responding to this question, it's first worth asking, "What is a wedding? What is marriage?" The answers to those questions may seem obvious, but unpacking them helps us thoughtfully engage and think about same-sex weddings and ceremonies.

We have already discussed God's design for marriage; biblical marriage is between one man and one woman, designed by God from the beginning of creation as a gift to men and women. Marriage has a design and a Designer.

A wedding, then, is a ceremony where God joins two into one (Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:31). A wedding is also a communal celebration of this gift of marriage, whereby the family and community that surround the couple celebrate their union and encourage them in their new life together.

A Christian committed to a biblical view of marriage will undoubtedly feel a tension between their relational love and care for a same-sex person or couple and their commitment to a traditional sexual ethic. Some Christians may see attending a same-sex wedding as condoning and celebrating a ceremony that goes against God's design, and thus choose to refrain from attending the ceremony. Still, others may see attending a ceremony as an opportunity to love and maintain a relationship with a same-sex person or couple and to share in their joy even in the midst of painful disagreement about what it means to follow Jesus and live into God's good design.

Ultimately, one's attendance at a same-sex wedding is a matter of conscience. If you choose to attend, and yet desire to communicate that this is not an endorsement of the marriage, we encourage you to communicate out of kindness ahead of time what your attendance means. Your intentionality there is an effort to not set false expectations and to care for your relationship with the same-sex couple in the long run. If you choose to abstain from attending, communicate as charitably as you can with love. In a matter with such relational significance, please seek wise counsel from others as you prayerfully and thoughtfully make this decision.



» Are persons in same-sex sexual relationships allowed to become members of our church?

As a church that desires to be a caring family, same-sex attracted people are welcomed and encouraged to worship on Sundays as part of our family. We are all people in need of God's grace because of our sexual brokenness, and Jesus invited people of all backgrounds, struggles, and sin to be near him and with him (Mark 9:10).

Church membership at Christ Community is both an affirmation of the beliefs of the church and a commitment to following Jesus as a way of life, within the boundaries of those beliefs. When the church and a member candidate are not aligned on areas of conviction or lifestyle, it can lead to unnecessary relational hurt, as well as spiritual and theological confusion. Our membership process is designed to care for member candidates by clarifying those beliefs and commitments. Membership should not be pursued if one disagrees by conviction on the church's position and if a person's life displays a consistent pattern of behavior outside the bounds of Scripture.³³ Membership can be and is encouraged to be pursued by same-sex attracted Christians who are living into celibacy and other biblically faithful forms of relationship.

During the membership process at Christ Community, member candidates willingly submit themselves to the beliefs of the church, as well as the support, guidance, and correction of pastoral and elder leadership, affirming that the Christian faith is more than just an individual decision to follow Jesus; it is lived out in the body of Christ. In any case of known, willful, unrepentant behavior that is inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture, be it related to sexual sin or otherwise, we discourage candidates from continuing the membership process in order to work toward the obedience of faith required of Jesus followers.

RESOURCES ON HOMOSEXUALITY

BOOKS

Does the Bible Support Same-Sex Marriage?, Preston Sprinkle

Many arguments are made for and against same-sex marriage that end with divisiveness and confusion instead of thoughtful conversation. *New York Times* bestselling author Dr. Preston Sprinkle provides a resource that will encourage respectful and thoughtful conversations around the question "Does the Bible support same-sex marriage?"

Compassion Without Compromise, Adam Barr and Ron Citlau

Truth does not preclude kindness—and a good dose of humility is necessary to love our neighbors. With sensitivity and winsomeness, this book will offer an honest but inviting message to readers: We are all in need of the healing that can only come from the truth of the gospel.

Homosexuality and the Christian, Mark Yarhouse

In a clear and compassionate style, Mark Yarhouse explains the research regarding what causes same-sex attraction and whether or not it can be overcome. He also discusses what Christians can do when someone they know opens up to them about their homosexual attractions.

³³ In accordance with the previous question, membership is not dependent upon sexual attraction or orientation, assuming the candidate is seeking to lean into God's design for sex. Questions such as these highlight the importance of helpful distinctions.



Washed and Waiting, Wesley Hill

“Gay,” “Christian,” and “celibate” don’t often appear in the same sentence. Yet many who sit next to us in the pew at church fit that description, says author Wesley Hill. As a celibate gay Christian, Hill gives us a glimpse of what it looks like to wrestle firsthand with God’s “No” to same-sex relationships.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Exploring Same-Sex Sexual Expression in Romans 1 with Greg Coles (theFormed.life Podcast)

“Dear Justice Kennedy: An Open Letter from the Child of a Loving Gay Parent,” Katy Faust

“Is Christian Teaching on Sexuality Psychologically Harmful?,” Andrew Walker

“Seven Things I Wish My Pastor Knew About My Homosexuality,” Jean Lloyd

spiritualfriendship.org

wesleyhill.tumblr.com



MARITAL SEX

» Are there any sexual activities that are inappropriate for married couples?

Generally speaking, it is safe to deem as inappropriate anything that makes the other spouse uncomfortable. It should be stated up front that there is never room for manipulation, force, or coercion in any relationship. We are to love, serve, and care for others in the same way that Christ loves, serves, and cares for us—especially in marriage. Given that context, and using the framework of God’s story of redemption, we will offer a few guidelines to talk about differing sexual desires in a healthy way.

First, we must remember we are all fallen individuals who come to marriage with sexual brokenness, often including unrealistic or unhealthy expectations regarding sex. The extreme sexualization of our society (impacted especially by increased access to pornography) has created a highly egocentric view of sex, which is shaped more by control, pleasure, and power than intimacy. For some, past experiences or other factors have created fear and disgust with certain sexual practices. In any case, brokenness needs to be shared between spouses and expectations worked through as the couple explores what is appropriate and enjoyable for them.

Second, we must remember that the gospel has freed us to serve the other person rather than to be served. So in marriage—and sex within marriage—we are called to live a life of sacrifice, giving ourselves generously to the other person just as Christ came to serve us, even to death on a cross (Philippians 2:5–11). As a couple engages in sex, it is important to share thoughts, desires, and fears, but it is even more important to listen. Listen carefully to your spouse, and strive to love, please, and care for your partner in this incredibly intimate and beautiful process together. Serving the other—giving rather than demanding—and growing together will bring greater joy and intimacy than any particular sexual activity.

Finally, it is important to note that we live in the “already–not yet.” This means that although there can be incredible healing and freedom for many who came to marriage with deep sexual scars, a degree of sexual brokenness will always remain with us. Couples must be careful not to nurture unrealistic expectations that don’t factor in the vulnerability of this part of marriage or the “creeping in” of egotistical (and unfulfillable) desires. Keep talking, keep sharing, and keep expecting to grow in sexual intimacy together.

» My spouse and I haven’t had sex for months. Is that okay?

The Apostle Paul actually addresses a very similar question in 1 Corinthians 7:1–5. The church is asking him whether couples should simply not engage in sex, and he very explicitly says that this is not only an unhealthy mindset, but a dangerous procedure that could lead to difficult sexual temptation.

From Paul’s teaching, along with other passages in Scripture, current social sciences, and common sense, we know that sex is a vital part of the marriage relationship. Marriage is about intimacy in all areas, including sexual intimacy. Marriage is also, according to Scripture, the only place where true sexual intimacy can be achieved, and, in fact, should be pursued. If a spouse, and therefore



the couple, is not experiencing that kind of intimacy in their relationship, the desire often will continue, but may begin to shift its focus elsewhere. This is what Paul means when he says that Satan tempts us because of our lack of control (1 Corinthians 7:5). Of course, this is no excuse for adultery or any extramarital sexual engagement (e.g., pornography) as an outlet for that desire. Each partner is responsible for managing their sexual desires in a way that is honoring to the Lord and their spouse.

Rather, a lack of sexual intimacy in marriage should be a warning sign that leads spouses to ask, “What has happened to get us to this place?” There is often trauma and/or relational wounds that are affecting sex drive. There can be medical issues, relational issues, or past trauma, for example. This is an opportunity to explore the cause, seek help from pastors, counselors, or doctors if needed, and return to greater flourishing within your marriage.

Throughout this process, couples should press into the relationship, spend time with one another, and take Philippians 2:4 to heart, considering the needs of your spouse above your own. Strive to become an expert on your spouse—learn what they most love and most need and work hard to meet those needs in caring and creative ways. Drop any other unnecessary commitments and ask the Lord to help you rebuild a healthy marriage and recover sexual intimacy or in some cases, create it from scratch. Also pray for self-control that only the Holy Spirit can give during this process.

» **My spouse and I were recently married and want to wait to have children. Does the Bible say anything about birth control?**

In one sense, no, the Bible does not mention specific birth control mechanisms that are so easily accessible to us today. In fact, the global church has wrestled deeply with how to approach these control options since they were invented. Various traditions view this subject differently, and the debates are far from over.

However, there are a few truths that nearly all Bible-believing Christian traditions can agree upon. Scripture upholds a high value for human life, even at conception. With this in mind, a Christian must not justify any kind of birth control method that intervenes in the birth process after conception. These methods are considered “abortive” and must be avoided. Beyond that, most Protestant traditions agree that birth control mechanisms are not unjustified on a scriptural basis, as long as there is agreement between the spouses and a clear conscience before God.

If you are considering using birth control, please consult a physician to make sure there are no health risks for the spouse who will be taking them. If you have questions concerning ethics, please contact a pastor or reference one of the resources provided.



RESOURCES ON MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

BOOKS

The Meaning of Marriage, Timothy and Kathy Keller

Based on the acclaimed sermon series by *New York Times* bestselling author Timothy Keller, this book shows everyone—Christians, skeptics, singles, longtime married couples, and those about to be engaged—the vision of what marriage should be according to the Bible.

Marriage, Paul David Tripp

In this rebranded edition of *What Did You Expect?*, popular author and pastor Paul David Tripp encourages couples to make 6 commitments to one another; commitments such as practicing forgiveness, appreciating differences, and actively working toward a relationship that is built on trust. Through each chapter, Tripp encourages readers to be motivated by grace as they strive to make Jesus Christ the center of their marriages.

The Great Sex Rescue, Sheila Wray Gregoire, Rebecca Gregoire Lindenbach, and Joanna Sawatsky

The Great Sex Rescue pulls back the curtain on what is happening in Christian bedrooms and exposes the problematic teachings that wreck sex for so many couples—and the good teachings that leave others breathless. In the *#MeToo* and *#ChurchToo* era, not only is this book a long overdue corrective to church culture, it is poised to free thousands of couples from repressive and dissatisfying sex lives so that they can experience the kind of intimacy and wholeness God intended.

ONLINE RESOURCES

“Contraception and Reproductive Technologies: Are They OK?” Matt Chandler and Geoff Ashley



PORNOGRAPHY

» I have been a Christian for years, but I still struggle with pornography. Why can't I break free?

In many ways, we could replace the word pornography with any other sin struggle and try to answer the same question. Why can't I break free from gossip? Or deception? Or pride? The unfortunate reality, which many know too well, is that Christians still sin. Our old sin habits die hard and often follow us as we follow Jesus. Jesus' death on the cross and subsequent resurrection save Christians from sin's *penalty*.

However, we are still in the process of being saved from sin's *power*. Thus, we live in what theologians call the "already-not yet" where we anxiously await salvation from sin's *presence*. This daily tension is difficult and frustrating and is especially challenging with regard to habitual sins like pornography. In times of desperation, as you stumble and fall again, look to the cross of Jesus Christ. In doing so, remember that your sins—all of them—have been paid for. This wonderful truth isn't a license to keep sinning, but a call to continue walking forward out of sin, empowered by and in step with the Holy Spirit (Romans 6:1–4; Galatians 5:15–25).

On the other hand, there is something unique about the sin struggle of pornography. While all sin is equal in the sense that it all equally (and rightly) puts us under God's wrath, in another sense, not all sins are created equal. Our modern justice system even makes this point with worsening degrees of punishments for certain crimes. Modern neuroscience has given us a window into why this struggle is unique. Research has shown that pornography essentially functions as a drug, making it very easy for someone to become addicted. The sin struggle of pornography is much like quicksand: It doesn't look dangerous initially, but before you know it, you're sucked in and suffocating.

If you sense that you may be addicted to pornography, please talk to your pastor and/or a professional counselor about steps you can take toward freedom and healing.

» Will marriage satisfy my lust for pornography?

Sex within the covenant of marriage can be immensely satisfying and fulfilling for both men and women. As we have seen, this is part of God's good design. But marriage will not "fix" porn addiction because it is a matter of lust in the heart. The physical satisfaction and relational closeness that is found in marital intimacy certainly helps fulfill passions, but it does not eradicate the issue of lust.

In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul contrasts the "desires of the flesh" (e.g., the desire to view and use pornography) with the "desires of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:16–26), laying out a framework for us to "walk in the Spirit" and "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires." That's what we must do to our lust for pornography—we must kill it, or it will kill us (even if we are happily married).

Pornography cannot exist in a healthy marriage as God designed. The use of pornography is self-serving, while marriage is self-giving. Pornography demands isolation and privacy, while marriage demands openness and intimacy.



Marriage is not designed to satisfy sinful lusts and passions. If we allow lust and sin to reign in our hearts, we will never be satisfied; we will actually be miserable.

If you are a married person struggling with pornography, we encourage you to talk with a pastor. This may be a difficult step, but breaking the secrecy of pornography use will lift the burden of shame and begin to break the chains of isolation. Do this for your spouse and begin the healing process. If your spouse is struggling with porn, please don't suffer in silence, but contact your pastor or a counselor for support and help. The eBook *Porn and Your Husband*³⁴ is a great resource for wives who have been devastated by their husband's pornography use.

» **I am interested in accountability for sexual wholeness. What would accountability look like to help me with sexual purity?**

Pursuing accountability is a way we can own our vulnerability and invite others into our journey toward wholeness. When accountability is paired with thoughtful therapy and pastoral support, healing is available to everyone who is eager for wholeness.

Simultaneously, Christians may turn exclusively to accountability relationships as a solution to a sin problem. When this happens, the accountability relationship, by itself, has a low probability of success in leading to change in the addictive behavior. Instead, healthy accountability relationships should be part of the Christian's journey at every point—when life is going poorly and when it is going well. One good analogy is that successful accountability relationships function as preventative medicine like good hygiene or regular exercise.

It might be helpful to think of a successful accountability relationship like a simple house. The foundation of a successful accountability relationship is meeting together (Hebrews 10:23–25), whether in person or through alternate means of communication like a phone call or an email. The load-bearing pillar of the relationship is confession (James 6:16), being truly honest with one another about our sins and where we stand with God. The outer walls of the relationship are prayer and encouragement, both of which nurture the relationship and help it grow. Finally, all of this is underneath the roof of the gospel—the good news that Jesus came and died on the cross that we might experience the forgiveness of our sins. Like a simple house, a successful accountability relationship will take time to come together. It won't be easy work, but it will be worth it.

» **Is masturbation a sin?**

While the Bible doesn't explicitly name the physical act of masturbation as sinful, this does not fully answer the question. There are several critical questions that may nuance the initial question in helpful ways:

First, *is the act of masturbation tied to sexual lust?* If the answer to this question is “yes,” then it is imperative to avoid masturbation, as the Bible clearly calls sexual lust sinful (Matthew 5:28). While some take the position that it is possible to perform the physical act of masturbation without sexual lust, we would encourage caution before adopting that viewpoint. Only God can see into our hearts and minds (Jeremiah 17:10), so we do not dismiss this view, but we are skeptical about the level of self-control that is necessary for such faithful obedience.

34 Covenant Eyes. *Porn and Your Husband*. Covenant Eyes. <https://learn.covenanteyes.com/porn-and-your-husband/>.



Second, *is your habit of masturbation conditioning you to be selfish?* Even if one is able to perform the physical act of masturbation without succumbing to physical lust, we need to consider more questions related to God's design for sexuality. The Bible teaches that the heart and soul of sexuality is a mutual, sacrificial experience between two people: one husband and one wife. Masturbation necessarily is a sexual encounter outside of that realm, and as such, can condition one to become selfish. Thus, if the answer to this question is "yes," it is wise to avoid masturbation. As Luke Gilkerson says, "your sexuality was meant for bringing you close to another person in love, not close to yourself."

Third, *is masturbation mastering you?* If there is even an inkling of an answer of "yes" to this question, then it is wise to avoid masturbation. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6:12, *"Everything is permissible for me,' but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me,' but I will not be mastered by anything."* We do not want our freedom in Christ to land us in slavery to something else.

Overall, we would encourage caution regarding masturbation, and we appeal to believers to make wise decisions in this arena that fit into God's broader design for human sexuality.

» **How can I help protect my children and teenagers from explicit material?**

We've seen the damage that explicit material (e.g., pornography, violence, and language) can cause on young lives and families, and yet protecting children and teenagers in this digital age is an increasingly difficult challenge.

Most of the explicit content is privately viewed, used, and shared today on computers, phones, and other mobile devices. Parents can begin to protect their children by considering the location of all devices, limiting the amount of time their child spends on a device (as well as the content made available to them), leading by example in one's own use of technology, and loving their children through struggles and failures.

Locate. Location is a huge issue in a time when access to this content is ubiquitous. Consider where your computers are located throughout your home and where your devices go throughout the day. Almost every device sold today has the capability to access the internet through a Wi-Fi connection—even personal gaming systems, which can easily be overlooked. Consider placing home computers in a high-traffic shared space of the home where there is accountability and transparency. It is much easier to protect your children online when you can look over their shoulder. You can also consider having a box or bin where mobile devices live and charge throughout the night and during meal times. While each family will approach this differently, knowing the location of your technology is key to protecting your children from explicit content.

Limit. The internet and video games can be very addictive, especially for children and teenagers. Limiting the time your children spend on the phone or computer will help protect them from addictive and obsessive behaviors, as well as explicit content. Pornographic material is the most



commonly searched-for content on the internet, but it can also be shared with your children by peers. Tragically, explicit material is so widely available that children often stumble onto harmful sites, pictures, or videos. The more someone stays online, the more opportunity there is to stumble onto explicit content. A helpful step would be to set and clearly communicate boundaries for the amount of time your children can spend on the internet, as well as the time of day they can access their computers or devices.

Parents can also protect their children by limiting the content that is available to them (including video games). Limiting content is not a foolproof way to prevent your child from accessing, viewing, or using explicit content, but it is essential to building adequate protection for your family. There are many services that filter content for you and your family—predetermining sites that contain explicit content and then blocking access to those particular sites. For accountability software recommendations, see the resources listed for this section.

Lead. Many parents are not as digitally native as their children. It may take some research, hard work, and discipline to lead your children well in the ever changing dynamics of the digital age. It's helpful to set expectations in the home regarding the use of technology using “we” language rather than only “you” language. For example, a parent could help create a healthy culture in their home by saying “we don’t use phones after 9 PM” or “we keep tablets away from the table at dinner.” If this is communicated, it is important to live by those same expectations. Families can use technology together, and they can also put it away as a family at the appropriate times. Begin to protect your children by protecting yourself from the same explicit content and practicing healthy habits.

Love. Pastors and researchers are reporting some disturbing news regarding explicit content (namely pornography) and our children. On average, children are seeing explicit images and videos for the first time at much younger ages than ever before. Most of the time it is shared by a peer. Pornography, violence, and harsh language, while they seem normative in our broader culture, can be incredibly alluring for teenagers who are curious and fascinated by the elusive nature of such content. The truth is, unless you place your child in a bubble and keep them there, they are going to happen upon content that dishonors God and his design for our flourishing. When our children fail and fall into sin, we must lovingly and graciously lead them to repentance and faith. Here, too, we are modeling the gospel and how God’s grace meets us in our failures to cultivate a child who can come to God with her/his sin.

All of this guidance rests on an essential reality of parenting: relationship. Before we *limit*, *locate*, or *lead*, love must be unlimited, located, and led in the day-to-day realities of an intentional relationship with your child or teen. Responding to crisis and challenge with success within any relationship requires intimacy cultivated in the everyday. So please remember, challenges do not mean the relationship has failed or that you have failed as a parent. This is part of the reason God has invited you into your child or teen’s life, to walk with God and them in seeing his grace and truth. Be encouraged and stay committed.

» What should I do if I suspect my teenager is looking at pornography?

If you suspect your teenager is viewing pornography, take gentle action. Calmly talk with your child while thoroughly checking web histories on all devices, photo albums, and storage devices. Do not wait or try to catch them in the act of viewing porn; this could be harmful for you both.



It is often most effective for dads to talk with sons and for moms to talk with daughters. Single parents have unique challenges, but our pastoral staff and adult leaders would be happy to help in any way we can.

Talking with your teenager if you suspect they are viewing pornography is a loving and important act of parenting. While feelings of disappointment will arise in the parent and shame in the teenager, the stakes are too high to avoid a conversation. Pornography is often likened to drug addiction, as the chemical and psychological effects on the brain are intense. The younger the brain, the greater effect pornography has in shaping the brain and instilling habits. There has to be active intervention. You cannot simply wait it out or pray it away.

Do not assume a teenager is hiding their pornography usage merely because they are devious and rebellious. It's important to understand that many hide their sin because they are embarrassed and ashamed. Teenagers often know that pornography use is wrong, but they just don't know how to stop. That is where a parent comes in. Share with them the consequences and dangers of this kind of destructive behavior, and model for them the superior joy that can be found in Christ. Communicate your never-ending love and your desire for them to flourish.

Lastly, whether you conclude your teenager is using pornography or not, set up healthy boundaries for the family and its use of technology. See the question: "How can I help protect my children and teenagers from explicit material?" for some helpful tips in protecting your family from explicit material.

RESOURCES ON LUST AND PORNOGRAPHY

BOOKS

Redeemed Sexuality, Andrew Boa

Sexual brokenness permeates our culture and has found its way into the church. Even though Christians are called to value and celebrate sexuality as sacred and good, it is often a source of fear, shame, or secret sin. But it doesn't have to be that way. Healthy sexuality concerns what we pursue, not just what we avoid, so *Redeemed Sexuality* invites emerging adults to seek sexual maturity and discipleship in the context of community.

Incorporating peer-to-peer leadership, this field-tested small group curriculum is suitable for use in both men's or women's groups.

Unwanted, Jay Stringer

Many of us feel ashamed and undesirable after years of sexual brokenness and addiction. The guilt and stigma surrounding sexual struggles can paralyze us and keep us from seeking help and healing. Author Jay Stringer approaches these sensitive subjects with gentleness and understanding.

Based on original research from over 3,800 men and women, *Unwanted* is a groundbreaking resource that explores the "why" behind self-destructive sexual choices in order to help readers work towards freedom.



***Wired for Intimacy*, William M. Struthers**

Pornography is powerful. Our contemporary culture has been pornified, and it shapes our assumptions about identity, sexuality, the value of women and the nature of relationships. Countless Christian men struggle with the addictive power of porn. But common spiritual approaches of more prayer and accountability groups are often of limited help.

In this book neuroscientist and researcher William Struthers explains how pornography affects the male brain and what we can do about it. Because we are embodied beings, viewing pornography changes how the brain works, how we form memories and make attachments. By better understanding the biological realities of our sexual development, we can cultivate healthier sexual perspectives and interpersonal relationships.

***The Betrayal Bind*, Michelle Mays**

The Betrayal Bind introduces new language, concepts, and imagery to explore the crucial relational dilemma that betrayed partners face when their significant other is unsafe to connect to, yet connection is the key to healing.

By focusing on how a partner's attachment system functions in the wake of sexual betrayal, *The Betrayal Bind* offers a new, game-changing exploration into an age-old problem and connects the dots from research to the lived experience of betrayed partners.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Pure Desire Ministries is a great resource for men and women who either wrestle with sexual addiction or have been betrayed by those in their life with sexual addiction.

Axis seeks to equip all caring adults with the conversation, discipleship, and culture translation skills needed to reach the next generation for Christ.

Christian Sexuality is a resource that can be purchased for pastors, parents, or schools with amazing insight, biblical teaching, and practical steps to engage the younger generations on the topic of Christian sexuality.

Authentic Intimacy is a unique teaching ministry devoted to teaching on God's design for intimacy and sexuality.

CovenantEyes Ebooks (Free)

XXXChurch

ACCOUNTABILITY SOFTWARE

Accountable2You

CovenantEyes

X3watch



PREMARITAL SEX

» I have been dating my significant other for a long time, and we are very much in love. If we are both ready, why can't we have sex?

Everything that God created was said to be good, including sex. But God intended sex to be enjoyed in a very specific context. Sexual intimacy is designed to be shared between a man and a woman who leave their parents and are committed to each other for a lifetime in marriage (Genesis 2:24). Trusting God's good design keeps us from harm and allows for true flourishing.

Sexual intimacy expresses the whole-person, whole-life commitment of one man and one woman to one another for life. To commit yourself to another person sexually without committing yourself to him or her financially, emotionally, familially, and in every other way is the opposite of true intimacy. Sexual intimacy is meant to be a context where we are fully known and fully loved. Only in the context of the marriage vow when one promises before God and their gathered friends and family to be faithful to their spouse for as long as they both shall live can you have the safety to let someone truly know you and still know that they will love you no matter what. That sort of knowing and loving isn't possible without that kind of commitment.

Sexual intimacy is designed to tell the story of God's unfailing, always faithful love to his people. When we have sex outside the context of a lifelong commitment in marriage, we ultimately fail to tell the truth with our bodies about God's extravagant commitment to his people. In other words, sexual intimacy outside of marriage is wrong not simply because it breaks a rule, but it spoils the picture of God's fidelity to us.

» How far is too far before marriage?

The motive of this question will almost always lead to the same result: going farther than you intended to go, regardless of where you drew the line in the first place. When this is your mindset, what you are really asking is, "How close to sinning can I get without actually sinning?" This makes it too easy to move the line when faced with temptation.

Instead of framing our questions around some arbitrary line—"Is this or that behavior okay for the Christian?"—we should be asking whether or not our behavior honors the Creator's plan for human sexuality. In James 1:25, it says that the person who pursues God's law—his design for how to live—and perseveres in it, will be blessed. In other words, if we choose to pursue God's design for how to live, rather than flirting with temptation and sin, we will experience greater joy as we live out God's plan for our flourishing. If you are struggling in this area, a pastor would welcome a conversation with you.



» **How should we respond to pregnancy outside of marriage?**

Because the unborn child is a human being made in the image of God, elective abortion, though legal, is morally wrong. This baby is a gift from God, even if the circumstances of the pregnancy are not ideal. We must always fight to protect the most vulnerable among us. In addition to keeping the baby, adoption is an option that beautifully reflects gospel love.

Pray for wisdom and direction, and seek counsel from those you trust. If you or a loved one is in this position, please know you are welcome to reach out to a pastor. Pregnancy crisis centers can be a great resource for parents and teenagers alike, and we recommend Advice & Aid Pregnancy Center as a local partner.



SINGLENES

» I have often heard that singleness is a gift, but it doesn't always feel that way. What is meant by this sentiment?

When people refer to singleness as a gift, they usually have in mind one of two biblical passages: Matthew 19:9–12 or 1 Corinthians 7:8.

In Matthew 19, Jesus speaks with the disciples about marriage as a sacred vow that's not to be broken. Understanding the sobriety and difficulty of this charge, the disciples respond to Jesus, saying, "If the relationship of a man with his wife is like this [and divorce is only an exceptional provision], it's better not to marry." Then Jesus replies, "Not everyone can accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given."

In 1 Corinthians 7:7, Paul states that it is not wrong to get married, but he wishes all Christians could stay single so their attention isn't divided between pleasing the Lord and pleasing a spouse: "I wish that all people were as I am. But each of you has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that."

These Scripture passages, along with others, confer upon singleness both a dignity and a provision that God extends toward those who never marry. That said, it's interesting to note that both Matthew 19 and 1 Corinthians 7, while affirming the unique value of the single life, also understand marriage as a natural desire and a blessing from God. These passages point to both the gift of singleness and the gift of marriage.

What seems clear from Scripture in these passages is that God gives to his children his grace for faithful obedience in every station of life. Amid the blessings and challenges, God knows exactly what is needed for our life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). God gives generously so that each of his children might live fully and wholly as he has designed. The gift we receive and celebrate is the gracious work of God in our lives, though it often looks different than we'd imagined. The key is that we are careful to remember that if God is the caller, then the calling is good and has purpose. And because of this, may we never look at our single brothers and sisters as missing something or incomplete in any way.

» If God is all I really need, why do I still yearn for a spouse?

To helpfully answer this question, we'll need to dig a little deeper. What does it mean that you yearn for a spouse?

Do you yearn to know and be known by another? Do you yearn to feel connected? To have the same someone ask about your day or someone to notice when you're sick in bed? Do you yearn for companionship? For physical touch? For company in joy and pain?



Then you yearn as every human, married or single, has yearned since the beginning of time. You yearn as a person created in the image of the triune God, who has eternally existed as three persons in one essence. You yearn as Adam, of whom God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18). You yearn because God made you for himself and for community with others.

Indeed, at times it may be healthy for you to grieve the absence of a spouse in your life, but as you yearn for a spouse, do so with honesty about all you’re longing for and all that God has given.

When we recall God’s design for marriage—to lovingly submit to another for God’s glory—our appreciation for the single life also grows. We see that single sisters and brothers are invited to share in the very same sacrificial essence of marriage, as they submit their deepest desires to God. In this, the body of Christ is united as we proclaim to a watching world the goodness and sufficiency of Christ and his body.

» **Does contentment mean that I should relinquish my desire to marry?**

No. There are appropriate desires that fuel our desire to marry and to experience the formation God may provide in the context of a marriage. There’s no need to relinquish this desire. But there is a clear call to joyfully submit our desires to God’s will, trusting above all his love and wisdom (Matthew 6:10). So while contentment doesn’t mean abandoning a desire for marriage altogether, it does mean abandoning a desire for marriage if it is misguided or becoming an idol.

» **Is it okay to date a non-Christian?**

While it may not necessarily be sinful depending on the situation, it will add complexity, especially if you are dating with an eye toward marriage.

If you desire to follow Jesus’ teaching regarding sex, your relationship with a non-Christian—and their potentially different sexual ethic—will make that a tough road. Living out God’s design for sex is difficult enough when both people are actively following Jesus. With only one, it’s even more difficult. Beyond being on the same page in regard to sexual ethics, a host of other issues often come into play when one person in a relationship is pursuing Jesus and the other is not.

This perspective perhaps assumes an answer to a bigger question: Is it sinful to marry a non-Christian? Paul seems to indicate that marriage to a non-Christian is sinful or at least profoundly unwise when he writes, “Do not be yoked together with those who do not believe” (2 Corinthians 6:14). The image of the yoke illustrates how hard it is to move in one direction if the one you are tied to is actively moving in the other direction. It’s exhausting.

But for the sake of argument, let’s assume it isn’t sinful to marry a non-Christian. It is still difficult to imagine that it could ever be the wise thing to do. Jesus demands everything—our hearts, our minds, our behaviors. He demands our income and our possessions, our children, our goals, our futures. He demands that we see the world as he sees it and that we align everything else accordingly. This is what it means to follow him. Jesus redefines our significance, our security, our satisfaction, our everything.

If you are in this situation and would like to talk about it, seek out a pastor.



» **As a single person, how do I engage with the church?**

First and foremost, you belong. You belong to the body of believers. God always wanted the church to have many different perspectives, and yours is important and valued. Ask the Lord to lead you to places in the church that fit your skills and gifts and to use you so the body can be made stronger by your presence. The church is a place to be known, to be sharpened in your walk with the Lord, and to bless others as you journey through life in community. Don't ever let your singleness give you pause about belonging.

» **How can the church better understand and support brothers and sisters who are single?**

Our church family longs to be a place that values people in every station of life, so we encourage everyone to expand their experience of the family of God. An easy way to begin is by intentionally developing friendships with people in the church who are in a different life situation than you are. If you are single, get to know others who are married. If you are married, befriend single people. In these friendships, love one another as brothers and sisters who are united in the family of God. Be willing to learn from one another, seeking to understand perspectives outside of your own. If we do this, we will better support and advocate for all our sisters and brothers within the body, whether single or married.

If you lead in some way in the church, always be mindful of who the voices in church leadership are, from the classroom to a fellowship event to a Sunday morning. Are both married and single people represented? Are all perspectives considered in your programming, teaching, and hiring, or do all your leaders essentially look the same? Because the body is diverse, we need to highlight God-fearing leaders in many different stations of life to shepherd the body toward godly marriages and godly single living.

As a family in Christ, we are to be there for each other. Our lives do not just overlap on Sundays, but when we form one body, all the members are called to show that we care for and are interested in one another. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). As you develop friendships with single people in the body, no matter if you are married or single yourself, consider how you can invite this brother or sister into your everyday life.

An easy place to begin is by opening your home. Hospitality does not have to be fancy to be meaningful. Set an extra spot at the table or add another player to the board game and invite your friends. Or, challenge yourself to think of something you regularly do that could be done with your friend, like going on a walk, sharing lunch, or completing a home project. No matter the activity, the primary goal is to grow in relationship so we can love and serve our friends better. Ask how your friend could use help or support. Their answer may not be what you expect, but you can only learn after building a foundation of trust and loyalty.

In a family, we can be together and unified, even if we are very different. If you are married, work hard to not let your friend's singleness be the first thing you think about them—that's not how God defines them. They are primarily his child, made in his image. It is imperative that you do not think of a single brother or sister as a project with marriage as the end goal. Avoid making



comments that uncomfortably highlight their singleness, are pushy about dating or settling down, or project pity in some way. The Lord has their singleness in his hands, and your friend is not more valuable married than single. As one would with any healthy relationship, respect them, recognize their gifts, affirm how God is using them, and tell them how much you are impacted by their friendship. Walking alongside single brothers and sisters through relationship joys and hardships they may experience is a tangible way for them to know they already and will always belong to a family—the family of Christ.

RESOURCES ON SINGLENES

BOOKS

Singled Out, Christine Colón and Bonnie Field

Thoughtful and accessible, *Singled Out* is an invaluable voice of realistic encouragement for any single as well as an important tool for church leaders and others concerned with mission and ministry for singles.

Thrive, Lina AbuJamra

In *Thrive*, Lina AbuJamra – who has been single for over 40 years – will show you how you can make a difference with your life right now instead of sitting around waiting for something to happen to you. If you're ready to figure out what God has to say about singleness instead of relying on your own feelings and conclusions, this book is for you.

Rethinking Sexuality, Juli Slattery

Sexual abuse, sex addiction, gender confusion, brokenness, and shame plague today's world, and people are seeking clarity and hope. By contesting long-held cultural paradigms, this book equips you to see how sexuality is rooted in the broader context of God's heart and His work for us on earth. It provides a framework from which to understand the big picture of sexual challenges and wholeness, and helps you recognize that every sexual question is ultimately a spiritual one. It shifts the paradigm from combating sexual problems to confidently proclaiming and modeling the road to sacred sexuality.

ONLINE RESOURCES

"Singled Out," Christina Cleveland

"Really, It's Okay To Be Single," Peter Chin

"Sex and the Single Woman," Fabienne Harford

"Should I Be Content with My Singleness?," Betsy Childs Howard