

A Biblical Overview of Sexuality

This document provides a brief overview of what the Bible teaches on the subject of sexuality. It was used as the basis for discussion among the elders of Westlake Lausanne. It is not all we would have to say on these issues, but presents a summary of our views.

Creation

At creation, God created humanity in his image, and he created humanity as male and female (Gen 1:27). This binary pair is the last in a number of binaries in Genesis 1: light and dark, day and night, land and seas, sun and moon, sea creatures and birds, man and woman.

The woman is created for man as ‘a helper fit for him’ (Gen 2:18). ‘Fit for’ means, corresponding to, complementary to, *like-but-not-like*. Men and women, then, form a complementary pair, both made in God’s image.

Marriage is a one flesh union between just such a complementary pair (Gen 2:24-25). In this union, the first couple were ‘naked and unashamed’. This refers to more than sex, but it is not less than sex. Biblically, marriage is a unique relationship where sex is one part of a deep intimacy. In addition, because Genesis teaches us clearly that God is our creator, it also teaches us that God imagined, created, and blessed sex, each and every component of it: physical, emotional, psychological.

Sexual shame, on the other hand, is a product of the Fall (Gen 3:7). Following the Fall, the man and the woman cover themselves, and become self-aware of their nakedness. This is the beginning of sexual shame. Because sex is part of God’s good creation it should not surprise us that Satan distorts sex in this way. He does it by enslaving people through sex, by separating it from God and making it into a god, and by repressing it - by covering it with shame, even within a marriage, where there should be no shame.

Marriage, Adultery and God’s Relationship with His People

The Ten Commandments prohibit sexual relationships outside of the marriage covenant: ‘You shall not commit adultery’ (Ex 20:14). Marriage, and sex within marriage, is to be exclusive and jealous.

This sexual fidelity is one of the dominant pictures of God’s relationship with his people. Jeremiah 31:32 tells us that God’s covenant with his people is like a marriage covenant - they will have no other God, no other husband but him. On the other hand, adultery is used as a strong, even shocking picture of the people of God’s unfaithfulness to him (Jer 3:8-9; 5:7; 13:27; Ezek 16:38; 25:37; Hos 2:2; 4:13; Rev 2:22; 14:8).

Sex, therefore, points us to something far greater than sex: the jealous, passionate love of God for us. In this sense, sex points us to something higher. Ultimately, it is telling us about our union with God. This is what Paul means in Ephesians 5:31-32 when he makes a link between marriage and Christ’s relationship with the church. However, God did not look at marriage, and sexual union in marriage, and think, ‘I can model my relationship with my people on that.’ Rather, he gives marriage, and sex within marriage, as a picture of his relationship with his people - of his intense, jealous love for his people.

It is not surprising, then, to see the New Testament describing Christ as the ultimate fulfilment of God as husband. John the Baptist describes Christ as the Bridegroom - (John 3:28-30), a title Jesus repeatedly uses for himself (Matt 9:15, 25:1-10; Mark 2:19-20; Luke 5:34-5). Paul describes the church as the virgin betrothed to Christ the husband (2 Cor 11:2). And, in Revelation, the New Jerusalem is the bride coming down from heaven, adorned for her husband (Rev 19:7, 21:2, 21:9, 22:17).

This is why sexual activity outside of marriage is not just sinful, and deviations from one man/one woman are not just 'contrary to nature' (Rom 1:26), but a distortion and corruption of God's intent for sex: that it display his relationship with his people. Only a like/unlike pair, in covenant relationship can do this.

The Corruption of Sex

Leviticus 18 and 20 and Deuteronomy 22 set out forbidden sexual practices. These may be summarised as any sexual intercourse outside of marriage. However, note that Leviticus 18 begins with the declaration that 'I am the LORD your God' (in fact, it is stated 3 times: Lev 18:1, 4, 5). In other words, our sexual behaviour is to be viewed in the light of our unique and exclusive relationship with God, because that is what sex is ultimately about (see above).

So, what sex *is* permissible in view of this? Only sex within a marriage between a man and a woman. (In addition, there is the clear statement that God's people are not to behave as other people do - in the case of Israel, the Egyptians or Canaanites (Lev 18:3).)

Forbidden sexual relations:

- incest (Lev 18:6-14; 20:11, 17; 19-2)
- sex with 'in-laws' (Lev 18:15-16; 20:12)
- sex with a mother and her daughter; sisters (Lev 18:17-18; 20:14)
- sex during a woman's period (Lev 18:19; 20:18;)
- adultery (Lev 18:20; 20:10; Deut 22:22)
- homosexual sex (Lev 18:22; 20:13)
- bestiality (Lev 18:23; 20:15-16)
- fornication/sex before marriage/rape (Deut 22:13-21, 23-28)

The punishments for breaking these commandments are severe and include exile, being cut off from God's people and presence, and death. As we see below, sexual sin is viewed just as seriously in the New Testament.

Sodom and Gomorrah are given as examples of God's judgment against sexual immorality - and in particular homosexual sin (Gen 19). Their sin was not just sexual in nature: 'Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy' (Ezekiel 16:49). However, it is their sexual sin - 'sexual immorality' and the pursuit of 'unnatural desire' - that is held up as a warning to us in the New Testament: 'just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire' (Jude 7).

In Romans 1, Paul describes same-sex sex as a result of God giving people up to their lusts. Same-sex sex is described as ‘dishonourable passion’, relations that are ‘contrary to nature’, and ‘shameless acts’ (Rom 1:24-27).

In addition, sexual immorality, hetero- or homo-, is stated as behaviour that excludes someone from the kingdom of God:

‘Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality [active or passive male partners], nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.’ 1 Cor 6:9–10

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Eph 5:5-6

As a result, ‘sexual immorality... must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints’ and it is ‘shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret.’ (Eph 5:3, 12).

The church, then, has a responsibility to be clear about those sexual behaviours that put people at risk of damnation (1 Cor 5:1-13, Eph 5:3-12). Indeed, Paul says we must beware anyone trying to water down God’s standards (Eph 5:6).

There is no justification in suggesting that Jesus never mentioned homosexuality or other sexual sins. Firstly, he did not need to - everyone in the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day would have condemned homosexuality. For Jesus to have given any other impression would have required him to say so directly, but he does not. However, in addition, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus *heightens* the command against adultery - and adultery is the headline sin under which all other sexual sins are gathered in the Law; he did not diminish it. And he urged drastic measures to ensure we are not enslaved to sexual sin (Matt 5:27-30), so serious are the consequences of it.

Of note, until the last few decades, this has been the consistent and unified position of the Church - Eastern and Western, Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Protestant: no sex outside of marriage; no marriage other than male/female. The church has never countenanced anything else. It is only in recent times, when the practice of the surrounding culture has changed, that some have attempted to defend what the church has always regarded as sin, and this despite the fact that in Leviticus 18 God specifically warns his people against accepting the practices of the nations around them or the cultures they find themselves in.

Hope for our Sexuality

Thankfully, the Bible does not only condemn sexual sin, it also offers forgiveness and hope for those who have sinned, and for those with same-sex attractions. In Christ, we can experience redemption from our past sexual sin. Having listed hetero- and homo-sexual sins as among those that will prevent people from inheriting the kingdom of God, Paul writes, ‘And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified...’ (1 Cor 6:11). There is huge hope here for sexual sinners (which is all of us): no one need be excluded from the kingdom of God.

In addition, we are told that sex between a Christian husband and wife is what we might call a 'glad duty'. We no longer have sole authority over our own bodies, rather we share that with our spouse. Our bodies are for the delight and pleasure of our spouse, in mutual self-giving (1 Cor 7:3-5).

As an example of this attitude, the *Song of Songs* is a book given over to the joy of sex and desire between a man and a woman. The fact that it is in the Bible tells us that God rejoices in sex as its Creator. As a book, it tells us that there is a holy way to pursue desire and enjoy sex. But again, sex and physical desire point us to something even greater and more intimate. In their commentary on *Song of Songs*, Longman and Allender state: *'the nature of desire is that it not only moves the body, but it awakens the heart to something unfathomably deeper than mere physical pleasure. It calls the heart in the midst of one of the most immanent experiences of life - sex- to desire something no less wild, holy, and beautiful: the transcendent delight of God.'*¹

Application

We are sexual beings, living in a pornified culture. Every sexual boundary is being crossed - and in many cases celebrated. Pride is taken in what we should rightly be ashamed of. Sexual desire is self-focused and self-absorbed.

We all struggle with sexual thoughts and/or behaviours that are contrary to God's love and holiness. The enemy seeks to drive a wedge between sex, holiness and discipleship.

As a result, there are two common (and wrong) attitudes to sex:

Sex is gross: sex can be seen as a taboo subject in churches; or, as a necessary evil for the sake of procreation. Desire is wrong and to be repressed. Given this, if sex is talked about at all within churches, our conversation can tend to be about what we *shouldn't* do - the 'do nots', rather than seeing sex as a God-given gift, for our pleasure, to be integrated into our discipleship.

Sex is great: this is the second wrong attitude. While sex *is* great, it does not follow that I should have sex with as many people as I can, and it doesn't matter whether that is with someone of the opposite or same sex. It's about fulfilling your pleasure. Your body is yours, you can do with it as you want. However, as a result, sex, sexuality and sensuality can be enslaving. Rather than being something we 'do', sex can become something we 'are'. Our identity is tied up in our sexual desires or practices in ways that are un-Christian. As Christians, our identity is to be found in Christ, not sex.

In contrast, the Biblical view of sex outdoes either of these:

Sex is glorious: it is so glorious that it should only happen within the marriage of a man and a woman, because of what it symbolises. Sex is about pleasure. It is about the exclusive, intense, loyal, jealous love of one for another, that cannot be put into words, that is so much more than physical acts. And in sex we experience something beyond the physical, that points us to something greater and more glorious - our union with God in Christ. Holiness is not running away from the physical. Holiness, sex and sexual passion are not antithetical. Sex is not our god - but it points us to Him. Our conversation about sex within the Christian community should reflect this.

¹ Longman, Allender, 55