

A Conversation on Sexuality

The modern American church has debated and agonized over the question of homosexuality for the better part of the last half-century. This paper is an attempt to seek a biblical and theological response to this polarizing dialogue. We have selected five key questions to help contextualize the conversation and to articulate our position as the pastors of First Presbyterian Church. Those questions are as follows:

Why should the church speak into the sexual lives of people at all, regardless of their orientation?

How should the church define marriage?

What does the Bible say about homosexuality, and how much of it is relevant to today's context?

What do we do when Christians disagree on issues of sexuality?

How do we distinguish the role of the church and the role of the state?

Our hope is that through answering these questions we can both express our reading of Scripture, and also begin a conversation with you. We hope that you will read carefully and respond to the below – we look forward to the next part of the discussion.

1. Why should the church speak into the sexual lives of people at all, regardless of their orientation?

Jesus clearly sees sexuality as part and parcel of our spiritual lives. From the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 to the woman caught in adultery in John 8, Jesus intentionally engages his disciples and listeners around the topics of sexuality and marriage. In this, Jesus stands in continuity with the authors of the Old and New Testament in affirming that there is no meaningful distinction between the secular and the sacred, nor between the public and the private practice of faith.

The necessity of a theology around sexual ethics is, to some extent, self-evident. As relational beings, the most important needs we have for divine guidance will center on our relationships with God and each other. Marriage, sex, and child-bearing are clearly immensely important aspects of both our societal and individual relationships. If we hope to be shaped into God's image, we must expect and desire that Jesus would speak clearly into these important, personal, and relational areas of our lives.

Jesus tends to expand upon and significantly deepen the Old Testament guidelines around sexuality and marriage. For example, in Matthew 5 Jesus shifts our understanding of adultery from the physical act to the desire to commit the act. This profoundly transforms sexual ethics in the Kingdom of Heaven. Lust, or the sexual objectification of another person in thought or action, is for Jesus as abhorrent as breaking one's marriage vows through a sexual affair. This represents a dramatic expansion of the standards of Scripture, and is emblematic of Jesus' interpretation of many ethical commandments, especially those regarding sex.

Strikingly, Jesus neither condemns, nor excuses, those who fall short of his expectations. The story of the women caught in adultery in John 8 is a perfect example of this balance. Jesus calls for those without sin to throw the first stone, and the crowd disperses; afterwards, he instructs the woman to "go and sin no more." This mixture of compassion and clearly defined ethics is a critical component of the Christian witness on all issues, especially sexuality. It is incumbent upon the church to faithfully articulate the Kingdom values of Jesus Christ. Yet we must also proclaim Jesus' values using Jesus' posture and tone; we must speak from a position of humility rather than judgment.

2. How should the church define marriage?

Jesus' most comprehensive discussion of marriage occurs in Matthew 19. As he does consistently elsewhere, Jesus dramatically expands an Old Testament teaching about sexuality and marriage. Except for adultery, Jesus rejects completely the concept of divorce. He says:

"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate."

This teaching against elective divorce is so stringent that it causes Jesus' disciples to express disbelief and doubt in the concept of marriage itself.

The disciples said to him, "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry."

Jesus then responds with these words:

"Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others – and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it."

Note here that Jesus again offers a sexual ethic far more limited and restrictive than anything in the Old Testament. His options for the disciples are marriage, between a man and a woman, without possibility of divorce, or complete celibacy (living like a eunuch) for the sake of the Kingdom. Both callings are extremely difficult; some disciples will accept the one, and some the other. Yet Jesus does not offer other paths; difficult though they may be, these are the only acceptable choices for those who seek to follow Christ.

3. What does the Bible say about homosexuality, and how much of it is relevant in today's context?

Although Jesus does not speak to the topic, the Bible is not silent regarding homosexuality. No single passage, however, can address this issue without caveat.

For most of the New Testament era, the concept of homosexuality was vastly different than what we image today. Rather than two loving, committed partners, homosexual behavior in the Greco-Roman world was typically between an affluent or influential older man and a younger, less powerful teenage boy. Several New Testament passages that condemn homosexuality seem to have this behavior in mind.

The Old Testament has several passages that are more clear-cut in their condemnation of homosexual behavior. However, making an important ethical decision rooted primarily in the Old Testament Law is difficult (but not impossible) because so much of the New Testament challenges and at times even alters our reading of the Old Testament Law. Without a clear interpretive framework, we risk a selective reading of the Old Testament that merely affirms our existing beliefs, rather than challenging us to conform to the holiness of God. Establishing such a framework is outside the scope of this paper.

Although some passages, like Romans 1, seem to have a broader and more applicable context, ultimately the most effective means of discerning the Bible's perspective on homosexuality comes not from a negative argument but from a positive one. Jesus' definition of the sexual options for his disciples in Matthew 19 represents the conclusion of millennia of divine revelation on the topic of sexuality. Whereas Jesus is often a liberalizing interpreter of Scripture in regards to issues like the equality of women, he brings the opposite effect to topics like divorce, adultery, and extra-marital sex. The final word on our sexual options comes neither from Moses or Paul but from Jesus himself, who explicitly affirms only marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Jesus roots this description in the story of Genesis and the act of creation. As God "made them male and female," so too God calls "a man ... to be united to his wife."

This heightened restrictiveness raises a variety of critical challenges to our modern understanding of sexuality, three of which we shall mention here. First, Jesus remands all sexual activity outside of the marriage between a man and a

woman as outside of God's desire for us. Simply as a matter of statistics, this affects far more heterosexuals than homosexuals. We must call all Christians to live distinctively in our culture, abstaining both from sex, and living together, before marriage. Second, Jesus profoundly rejects our culture's acceptance of divorce for convenience (again, a heterosexual issue). Third, homosexual behavior remains outside of God's will for our lives, for Jesus clearly defines marriage as between a man and a woman.

For our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, this unilateral rejection of all homosexual behavior understandably feels harsher than the prohibitions against premarital sex, cohabitation and divorce. The obvious objection is that heterosexuals have one possible outlet for their sexual desires, whereas homosexuals are left with none. We are overwhelmingly sympathetic to this legitimate frustration. Two important responses to this pain bear mentioning.

First, although our culture leads us to think and speak in terms of individual rights, this is not the predominate language of Scripture. Instead, throughout the New Testament we see the language of self-denial. To assert that a right is deprived is to locate an ethical core in our self-fulfillment; Jesus calls us to "take up our cross, deny ourselves, and follow him." Any ethics rooted in the self will always be, on some level, incompatible with Christianity.

Second, we must make Jesus' intentions in this conversation clear. Both the call of marriage (one man and one woman, without divorce) and the call of singleness (life-long chastity) are life-giving patterns Jesus gives us. They are not designed to stifle us but to bring us joy. This is not immediately apparent to the disciples in the Matthew 19 passage, and nor is it immediately apparent to us today. Yet when we live into these patterns, we will discover that the gift of celibacy, or fidelity, transforms us and frees us to live in the security of God's powerful love.

Here an important distinction must be made between homosexual orientation and homosexual behavior. Behavior refers to actions (including what Jesus calls "lust," an action of the heart). Orientation refers to our inherent attraction to another. All behavior is a choice, for both hetero- and homosexuals. Orientation, however, appears to almost always be genetic. Just as the vast majority of people do not chose to be straight, so too the vast majority of gays and lesbians do not choose their orientation. Again, as there is nothing sinful about heterosexual attraction (provided that it does not degrade into lust, the mental objectification of another), so too there is nothing sinful about homosexual attraction.

Jesus never suggests that our orientation (as straight or gay) has any bearing on his instructions for us. In other words, our orientation serves as neither a spiritual asset nor a spiritual deficiency. Only our actions contribute to our sanctification.

4. What do we do when Christians disagree on issues of sexuality?

Christians of good intent do and will disagree on these issues. We hope that the church will increasingly learn to have those disagreements in Christ-like ways. Paul encourages us to “speak the truth in love” and “make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” We urgently need to reveal to the world a church that can disagree and still treat one another with love.

The understanding of sexuality and marriage is an overwhelmingly important topic; however, it is not an essential one. This distinction between important and essential must be articulated carefully, because it has overwhelming significance in the life of the church.

Some tenants of our faith are essential – of the essence of the thing. Essentials cannot be removed or changed without fundamentally altering the object they define. Essentials for our faith include the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus, the full divinity and humanity of Jesus, the Trinity, the authority of Scripture, etc.¹ If an individual or church departs from the essentials, they are, by definition, no longer part of the Christian church.

Other doctrines are important, but not essential. Our understandings of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for example, are extremely important; but we would not say the Baptists who disagree with us are non-Christians. Similarly, the full inclusion of women in the life of the church is very important to us, but we would not exclude the 1.4 billion Roman Catholics from salvation because they do not ordain female priests.

The issues of sexuality and marriage here defined are important, but not essential. Disagreements about these issues may be grounds for divisions into different denominations, but not different faiths. Put another way; we do not believe that these issues are a litmus test for the Christian faith. They are hugely important as we consider the life of faith and joy Christ calls us into, but they are not grounds for exclusion from the Kingdom of Heaven.

5. How do we distinguish the role of the church and the role of the state?

On this issue, as on so many others, the church has dangerously conflated Christ’s teachings with the laws of our secular government. It is our opinion that the state should not be vested with the authority to decide who can and cannot marry, either in support of, or in opposition to, any standard we might hold for our church.

This benefits the church far more than it benefits the state or the culture. As author and theologian Tony Campolo often says, “Mixing church and state is a lot

¹ For a more complete listing of the essentials of the faith, see our R.A.I.S.E. documents on the church’s website.

like mixing ice cream and cow manure. It doesn't affect the cow manure much, but it sure ruins the ice cream."

The church should not coercively mandate the standards of the Kingdom of Heaven in the laws of nation-states. Rather, Christ calls us to live out our Kingdom's values boldly amidst the kingdoms of this world. We are most effective in our Christian witness when we are most distinct from our culture.

Inevitably, there will be some places where our faith compels us to political action; however, even in those situations, we must lead with our Christian witness first. Sadly, the rates of pre-marital sex, cohabitation and divorce in the church are roughly the same as those outside of the church. As the church cannot seem to adhere to Christ's commands herself, we can hardly expect, much less mandate, those same guidelines for non-Christians. We must "first take the plank out of our own eye; then we will see clearly to take the speck from our brother's eye."

Continuing the Conversation ...

If you are interested in speaking more around these issues, our pastoral team would be delighted to speak with you. Please contact any of our pastors, so we can continue the conversation!