

Sexuality & Gender

Bernard Bell

PBCC Young Adults • 2016.01.06

Statement

In Christ, and filled with his Spirit, we are called to holy living in all aspects of our lives. We affirm that the proper arena for sexual intimacy is marriage between one man and one woman.

What the Bible says about Sexuality

Creation: God's original intent

Gen 1-2 presents two complementary accounts of God's creation of the first humans:

1. Gen 1: When God created the human Adam אָדָם he differentiated him into male זָכָר *zakar* and female נְקֵבָה *neqebah* (1:27), physiological terms concerning plumbing, i.e. what today would be called “sex.” This differentiation is required in order to fulfill the subsequent command, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth” (1:28).
2. Gen 2: When God formed the one and built the other, Adam recognized that God had differentiated the human into man אִישׁ *ish* and woman אִשָּׁה *ishah*, masculine and feminine forms of the same (2:23). These terms perhaps correspond to what today would be called “gender.” This differentiation is the basis for marriage, wherein a man leaves his parents and cleaves to his wife (terms later used of covenant fidelity), establishing a new social unit of family in which is fulfilled the multiplication of 1:28. In this relationship, the man “knew” his wife, as God intended.

The Fall

Human relationships were fractured by the Fall. In the realm of sexuality this was evidenced in the behavior of the sons of God with the daughters of men (Gen 6:1), and in the behavior of Ham with Noah (9:20-27); and later in the desire for same-sex gang rape in Sodom (19:5) and Gibeah (Judg 19:22).

Israel

God redeemed Israel from harsh servitude, made a covenant with them to be his people, and gave them ethics (Torah). There were two general principles:

1. Be holy as Yhwh is holy אֱלֹהֵיכֶם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם (Lev 19:2).
2. Don't do like the Egyptians from whose land you've come, or like the Canaanites whose land you're entering (Lev 18:2; 20:23; cf. Deut 18:9). God called Israel to live differently.

Lev 18 describes the abominable practices of the Canaanites: sex with close relatives (6-18), with a menstruating woman (19), with a neighbor's wife (20), child sacrifice to Molech (21), homosexuality (male, 22), bestiality (male and female, 23).

These practices are variously described as an abomination (תּוֹעֵבָה homosexuality 18:22; 20:13), a perversion (תְּבִילָה bestiality 18:23), a disgrace (בְּזוּתָהּ sex with sister 20:17), depravity (זָנוּת sex with a woman and her daughter or granddaughter 18:17; 20:14). These practices had made both the Canaanites and their land unclean טָמֵא, so that the land would vomit them out. Israel was warned that the same could happen to it (18:26-30)—which it did. Therefore God would later command Israel to total destroy (מָחָה) the Canaanites, the fulfillment of the curse pronounced by Noah on Canaan. This suggests that Ham's misdeed with Noah involved sexual impropriety resulting in the birth of Canaan (Gen 9:25).

Lev 20 specifies the penalty for these Canaanite practices: death (10-21) for sex with neighbor's wife (10), close relative (11-12), homosexuality (13), woman and her mother (14), bestiality (15-16). But other sins also brought the death

Sexuality & Gender

penalty: sabbath-breaking (Exod 31:14; 35:2; Num 15:32-36), rebellious son (Deut 21:18-21), kidnapping for enslavement or sale (Deut 24:7), cursing mother or father (Exod 21:17).

Two of the Ten Commandments prohibited sexual misdeeds:

1. לֹא תִנְאָף you shall not commit adultery (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18).
2. לֹא תִחְמֹד אִשְׁתֵּי רֵעִיךָ you shall not covet your neighbor's wife (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21).

The Torah doesn't explicitly prohibit premarital sex, but it strongly denounces adultery, sex with a married woman. If a man has sex with a non-betrothed woman, he pays the bride-price and she becomes his wife (Exod 22:1). Any subsequent sex with another woman is adultery, punishable by death.

If a man forces himself on a married (betrothal is tantamount to married) woman in a town, the woman is assumed complicit and both are killed, if in the countryside the woman is presumed innocent and is spared.

But this Torah was for Israel only, as redeemed community, as new humanity, though certainly indicative of his design for all humanity.

New Testament: The Church Age

Like Israel, Christians are redeemed in order to live life differently. We are not to behave like the pagans.

The NT Epistles include many lists of practices (vice lists) that we are to put away. These include various sexual sins: sexual immorality (πορνεία, πόρνος), sensuality, homosexuality (ἀρσενοκοίτης, μαλακός the dominant and passive partners). It is clear that Christians are not to engage in such activities; it is not God's intention for the new humanity. But there are numerous other items on this list also: enmity, strife, jealousy, envy, anger, rivalry, dissension, division, etc. We are able to turn from this former behavior only because we are in Christ and filled with his Spirit.

Homosexuality

- ἀρσενοκοίτης 2x: 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10. "a male who engages in sexual activity w. a pers. of his own sex, pederast, of one who assumes the dominant role in same-sex activity, opp. μαλακός" (BDAG)
- μαλακός soft [clothing] 3x: Matt 11:8bis; pp Luke 7:25 (soft clothing); person, 1 Cor 6:9. "pert. to being passive in a same-sex relationship, effeminate esp. of catamites, of men and boys who are sodomized by other males in such a relationship, opp. ἀρσενοκοίτης" (BDAG).
- Rom 1:18-32. In judgment upon people who refused to worship God, but instead worshiped images like humans or animals, God gave them up (3x):
 - in the lusts (ἐπιθυμία) of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves (24)
 - to dishonorable passions: female and male homosexuality (26-27)
 - to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done: a lengthy vice list (28)

The Metaphor of Marriage

God uses the metaphor of marriage to describe his relationship to his people:

- OT: God took Israel as his bride (Ezek 16; Hos 2:14-20, etc.)
- NT: the Church is the bride being prepared for Christ the bridegroom and the wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev 19:7,9; 21:2).

Caution: though the Bible condemns homosexuality and other sexual immorality, a study of the Biblical words and terms is of limited value, because sexuality today is quite different.

Human Relationships

God has made humans relational creatures, able to give and receive love. Human relationships have been impacted by two major trends: sexualization and individualization.

Sexualization of Love

Greek distinguishes several different types of love (cf. C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*).

1. Affection (στοργή *storgē*): the love of parents for children, hopefully reciprocated; i.e., familial love. The sexualization of this relationship is viewed as abhorrent: incest, sexual abuse of a child by a parent. But brother-sister marriages were not uncommon among Egyptian Pharaohs, and marriage between cousins is common in the Arab world; but neither is sexualized.
2. Friendship (φιλία *philia*): between two people, usually same-sex, who find they share a common interest. Non-sexual same-sex friendship has been important through most of history. Alas, same-sex friendship has been sexualized; e.g. Jonathan and David. This is a great loss. The church should encourage such friendship.
3. Eros (ἔρως *eros*): Gk Eros, Roman Cupid was the god of love, desire. Passionate, erotic love between a man and a woman. Traditionally viewed with great circumspection by the church as volatile (e.g. Amnon and Tamar), potentially dangerous, producing flaming infatuation. Today erotic love is embraced and celebrated by heterosexuals (hook-up culture) and homosexuals (homoerotic sex). The only appropriate arena for *eros* is marriage characterized by *agapē*; it should not be embraced until set in the context of *agapē*.
4. Charity (ἀγάπη *agapē*): self-giving love that acts for the good of the other party. Sex is not necessary: this love can be given within sexual marriage or non-sexual friendship.

Affection, friendship, eros are natural loves. They happen to us somewhat automatically: we are born into a family, we discover friends, and we fall in love. Ideally these loves are reciprocal: the family members, friends and lovers love one another. Lack of reciprocity strains the relationship. These loves are valuable and an important part of being human beings in relationship to one another. Charity (*agapē*) is not a natural love; it doesn't begin in ourselves. We don't find it in our family bonds, or in our shared interests, or in our passions and chemistry. It begins in God.

Individualization

Post-Enlightenment Western society has been increasingly individualistic. The pace of this trend is rapidly accelerating. Members of the selfie-generation are encouraged to find themselves; if they don't like what they find, they can reinvent themselves:

“For you graduates, the process of discovering yourself, of inventing yourself, of reinventing yourself is about to begin in earnest.” (Tim Cook, commencement address, George Washington Univ., 2015.05.17)

This self-reinvention has rapidly progressed to the trans-gender stage. People are only acting on the many cues from society. For such behavior they are receiving great affirmation, which is what they crave.

Sexualization and individualization have come together: sexual self-expression is now seen as essential to healthy personhood. Sex has been exalted, but at the same time trivialized.

But this individualization also affects marriage and the church.

Traditionally marriage has been as much about the marriage of two families as of two individuals (cf. Tevye's tension in *Fiddler on the Roof*). Marriage now is promoted as self-fulfillment, which is counter to *agapē* love.

Identity

1. Sexual Identity

Our sexuality is only part of who we are as humans, but modern secular society has prioritized it by adopting a sexual identity framework based upon sexual attraction: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and an expanding alphabet soup: LGBTQ... But the very idea of heterosexual and homosexual is a recent social construct. Previously identity was related to sex (male, female) or gender (boy, girl; man, woman), but not sexuality. The very language of

Sexuality & Gender

heterosexual and homosexual reduces us to our sexual attraction, which is *eros*, sometimes spilling over into *philia*. Same-sex intercourse has been practiced for millennia, but until recently those who did so never defined themselves as homosexuals, characterized by their sexual attraction to those of the same sex. Sexual desire is not fully understood (nature vs. nurture). What is clear is that defining one's identity by sexual desire is a reduction of personhood.

Unfortunately the Church has subconsciously adopted this sexual identity framework in a heterosexual-homosexual polarity, with unfortunate consequences.

- Reduction of identity to sexuality; alarm of parents that their children might be gay.
- Homosexuality is bad, heterosexuality is good. Those with homosexual feelings need to become heterosexual, by conversion therapy if necessary (now discredited). Message: heterosexuality is godliness, the solution.
- Downplay heterosexual sins over homosexual sins.
- Exaltation of sex (within marriage). But sex is not the most important thing in marriage; *agapē* love and friendship is.
- Idolatry of the Christian marriage and family. Singles don't fit. Places excessive weight upon marriage.
- Neglect and suspicion of same-sex friendships.

2. Biblical Identity

The Bible offers a different identity polarity:

Sexual identity framework
homosexual <-----> heterosexual

Biblical identity framework
in Adam <-----> in Christ
in the flesh <-----> in the Spirit

- Marriage and sex are not a necessary part of this new identity in Christ, Spirit-filled. Singleness and celibacy are viable options.
- Family: not the nuclear family but the church.
- Goal: being transformed by the Spirit to become more like Christ.
- Saved sinners. We were all formerly in Adam, living in the flesh.

Countering with Community

Many people are desperately lonely, especially in this social media age.

How can the church embrace into community those who are easily left out of our nuclear-marriage-centric church culture? The single, the widowed, those who struggle with same-sex attraction?

Yes, we should call all Christ-followers to a high sexual ethic, both married and unmarried. But for those outside the community of marriage we need to wrestle with how to provide community. This includes encouraging genuine non-sexual same-sex friendships. How do we enable "a well-supported and relationally rich celibate life"?

Books

Of the many books I've read on sexuality these have been the most thought-provoking:

Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Brazos, 2015).
Vicar of St Paul's Symond's St (Anglican), Auckland, NZ.

Jenell Williams Paris, *The End of Sexual Identity: Why Sex is Too Important to Define Who We Are* (IVP, 2011). Prof. of Anthropology, Messiah College, PA.

Ed Shaw, *Same Sex Attraction and the Church: The Surprising Plausibility of the Celibate Life* (IVP, 2015). Pastor, Emmanuel City Centre (Church of England), Bristol, UK.