

Biblical Sexuality & Identity

Human sexuality is a popular topic today. Based in part on the sexual revolution that swept the western world in the 1960s and 1970s, today's cultural acceptance of sexual expression is nearly unlimited.

While the reasons behind this extend well beyond the scope of this writing, it's plain that over the last 50 years the cultural tide has shifted hastily and aggressively against the sexual ethic taught in the pages of Scripture. How are we to respond? And what is a healthy, biblical view of human sexuality?

The ideal picture of sexual expression is painted early in the scriptural narrative—all the way back in Genesis 1. In the creation account, both a male and a female human being are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Each is formed distinctly and with complimentary reproductive organs in accordance with God's design for human procreation. Together, this pair is united as one flesh (Genesis 2:23-24), given dominion over the rest of creation (Genesis 1:28), and ordered to act as God's representatives within it (Genesis 1:26). This ideal picture is shattered, however, by the arrival of sin in Genesis 3. The idyllic becomes dystopian, as both humanity and the rest of creation are subjected to the curse of sin.

As humanity falls further into sin and farther away from God's ideal, a break in the sexual ethic described in Genesis 1 seems inevitable. Sin, we see, finds its way into every area of human existence, distorting what God had made and sabotaging the created order. The first glimpse of this is caught in the wake of sin, as humanity fearfully hides from God on account of their exposed nakedness (compare Genesis 2:25 and Genesis 3:10).

But God Himself comes to the world He created in the form of a human being, Jesus. In so doing, He provides a mechanism for humanity and creation to be restored to right relationship with one another and with Him. Through the atoning work of Jesus, the curse of sin is broken and fallen humanity is given a chance for eternal redemption—by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone!

Jesus, God incarnate, frees humanity from slavery to sin and transforms them through the power of the Holy Spirit to live once more as He intended. No area of life is unaffected, including the area of human sexuality.

Of course, there are many passages which address human sexual desire and expression in Scripture; the full treatment of which is beyond what can be developed here. Suffice to say, however, that the complete biblical record on the subject finds itself in alignment with what was

set in motion in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2. Admittedly, this means the acceptable expression of human sexuality as revealed in Scripture is limited. This is purposeful. While many have attempted to reinterpret the biblical text to either remove or reduce this limitation (there are many reasons for this, but Dr. Tim Keller explains them in 6 broad categories), to do so misses a vital component of sexual expression. Namely, that sexual expression is a beautiful gift given to humanity by God but intended to be enjoyed only within the bounds of a covenantal marriage between one man and one woman. This limitation is an intrinsic part of God's design and a component that speaks to its high value. Jesus affirms this reality when He addresses the question of marriage in Matthew 19:1-11. When given an opportunity to reinterpret the marriage covenant and redefine the parameters for acceptable sexual expression, Jesus chooses instead to re-affirm the design of God as revealed in Genesis 2:24. Thus, any distortion of this framework falls outside the bounds of historical biblical orthodoxy and the teachings of Jesus. This is our view.

Of course, not everyone agrees with this view of human sexuality or the associated limitation of its expression. Those who disagree remain image-bearers of God, meaning they have inherent worth, value, and dignity.

It has always been the duty of the church to honor the image of God in others, even when there is disagreement over matters of biblical interpretation and application; it's regrettable that many with differing views on human sexuality have felt belittled or stigmatized instead. The lesson here is that real damage can be done if disagreement is not handled with care and concern for the human beings involved. This seems especially true in relation to disagreements about human sexuality. In part, this is due to the deeply entrenched connection popular culture has made between human sexuality and identity. More on this to follow in just a moment.

To be certain, maintaining adherence to biblical orthodoxy in relation to human sexuality is a challenge in our day, but it's a challenge we must meet. Those who remain single, either by choice or through life's circumstances, including those who are same-sex attracted, may find this road particularly difficult. The church has an opportunity to create space for belonging and community for these individuals. In fact, part of its call is to operate as an extended spiritual family. In the New Testament, the word used to describe this type of community in the Greek is "oikos." The "family and friends" we find included in the celebrations found in the 3 parables of Luke 15 serve as good examples of this type of community in action. Spiritual family is the call of the church for all our brothers and sisters who are maintaining celibate singlehood within the body of Christ today—treating them as vital members of the community and intentionally sharing life with them. Believers do not need a spouse to be complete, as they have already been made complete in Christ! (Note: Dr. Christopher Yuan writes more about the church and its call to include those who are single in its community in his wonderful book, *Holy Sexuality and The Gospel*.)

To conclude, let's briefly revisit the idea of sexuality and its attachment to identity in popular culture. The world today has sold us a false bill of goods that equates sexual desire and sexual

expression with human identity, but Scripture teaches something better. Our identity is not defined by our sexual desires or expressions, but rather by the Word of God. In it, we read that our true selves are founded on the creative work of God and that redemption is secured for any who repent and believe the good news about Jesus. Part of this good news is that Jesus has come to set us free—not from the biblical limitations of our sexual expression as defined in Scripture, but from the eternal consequences attached to our own sinfulness in this and every other area. This is news worth celebrating indeed!

The call for the church, then, is adherence to the scriptural picture we find for appropriate sexual expression. It is limited, on purpose, to the covenantal marriage relationship between one man and one woman. This may be unpopular, but it remains the picture we find in Scripture, nonetheless.